

School Transportation News

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STN Online Survey

Do you think there are harmful diesel fumes inside the school bus?

1) Yes 2) No

Respond at: www.stnonline.com

Sweeping Education Bill Includes Funds for School Transportation

WASHINGTON, D.C. – President Bush signed into law Jan. 8 the most far-reaching education bill in decades, including provisions that, for the first time, mandate federal funds for school transportation.

The groundbreaking change in transportation funding occurs in provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act that provide for public school choice and homeless children education.

The act requires school districts to use up to 5 percent of their Title I money to transport students in failing schools who choose to attend other district schools.

An additional 10 percent of a district's Title I money is to be used for transportation for students eligible for tutoring and supplemental education services.

Also, using Title X funds, districts are required to provide, or arrange for, transportation of homeless children and youth, said Heather Valentine, spokeswoman for the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, where the legislation originated.

Widely viewed as the most significant

See EDUCATION BILL, p. 32

No Child Left Behind Act

- Title I (5 percent) funds transportation for public school choice
- Title I (10 percent) funds transportation for supplemental services
- Title X funds transportation of homeless children

2003 White House Budget

- Proposed \$2,500 tax credit for transportation to public or private school See page 32

N.J. Survey Focuses on Driver Shortages

WESTFIELD, N.J. – School bus driver shortages could become increasingly severe lest school districts take preventative action, according to what may be the most comprehensive study ever on school bus driver availability.

Transportation Advisory Services, a nationally recognized consulting firm, made extensive recommendations for balancing driver supply and demand and reversing critical driver shortages in a 11/2-year school transportation study

of a New Jersey's 21 counties that was released in January.

Retained by the state's Union County Educational Services Commission, TAS conducted surveys, and in many cases personal interviews, of more than 1,100 drivers, 187 school districts and 36 contractors.

Perhaps most telling, the research showed the state's driving force is aging – and there are no trends that it's getting younger. In fact, 54 percent of drivers are 51 or older and 69 percent have driven for six years or more.

"I was surprised when you look at the issue of retention and you look at age dis-

See N.J. SURVEY, p. 26

N.J. SURVEY, from p. 1

tribution," said Mark Walsh, who conducted the survey for TAS. "It is certainly an issue that needs to be dealt with. If you look at drivers with experience with the population as a whole, there's no question we're on the back end of drivers. The numbers didn't show an influx of new drivers."

The study's size and scope evolved over time, eventually becoming what Walsh believes is the largest ever on the subject. The project started with a goal of evaluating driver shortage issues in a few regions of New Jersey. But as results came in, Walsh decided to blanket the state with a second survey. The response was tremendous, he said, enabling the study to have a margin of error of an "extremely low" 3 percent.

"It's taken on a life of its own," Walsh said. "I don't think anyone could have foreseen the scope. When we started it was a much more narrow focus. Then we decided to go out and survey anyone who would communicate with us. ... The issue itself has been

looked at as a portion of other studies, but nobody has ever looked at it from this large of a standpoint. Nobody has."

And while the study focused on New Jersey, it has nation-wide applications, Walsh said, as districts grapple with how to attract and retain drivers.

"The issues and recommendations are not restricted to New Jersey," he said. "The issues transcend geographic boundaries. It is very appropriate throughout country."

TAS recommended a two-tiered pay system to attract new drivers based on survey results that showed 37 percent and 40 percent of drivers cited pay and benefits, respectively, as motivating factors to work as drivers. The two-tiered system would allow drivers to choose a higher hourly rate with no benefits or a lower hourly rate with benefits, thereby satisfying those who approach driving as a part-time job and those who seek benefits of full-time employment.

"This approach would allow the prospective employer to be responsive

to the factors that motivate the potential employee," stated the report, which also recommended reducing delays and costs of obtaining of Commercial Driver's License.

Not surprisingly, increased compensation also was recommended for retaining drivers. TAS suggested attendance and performance incentive programs and multi-year contracts offering greater job security could be used to improve driver satisfaction.

One of the most common responses to driver dissatisfaction had to do with student discipline, Walsh said. Student discipline was a "major issue" for drivers, which surprised Walsh.

"One comment that was much more prevalent than I expected dealt with discipline — student discipline and lack of support from administrations for student discipline," he said.

According to the report, drivers were concerned about liability, personal safety risk and an apparent lack of effective student discipline and enforcement. They also complained about a perceived lack of support from administrations when parents made challenges to the discipline process.

"One of things we found is in some instances school administrations were doing a very good job with discipline but weren't giving proper feedback to drivers," Walsh said. "So drivers thought their discipline write-up was going into some black hole. But really the administration had dealt with it, but just didn't communicate that."

To manage the discipline issue, TAS recommended formalizing discipline policy, additional training, behavioral management, consistent administration support and better communication.

On the other side of the ledger, TAS said to decrease the demand for drivers, districts should analyze bus routes, searching for those that can be elimi-

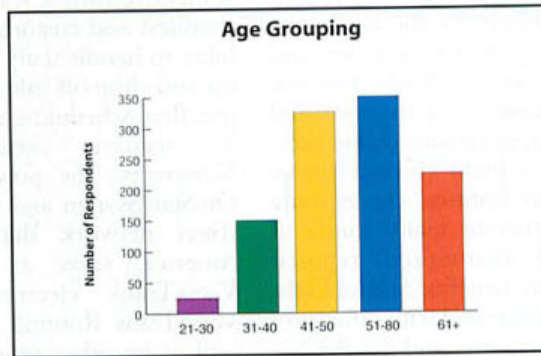
nated or combined with others. The report noted less than half of state districts use any type of computerized routing software, which make routing analysis much more efficient. Furthermore, a decrease of one bus would pay for a routing software program, TAS said.

Also suggested to reduce the need for drivers was staggering school start times, sharing services and increasing bus capacity.

As the report notes, the recommendations are just that. But Walsh hopes the report's ideas will spur districts across the country to creative solutions for driver shortages.

"We're looking at the recommendations almost as a checklist," Walsh said. "If just one item creates a thought process that leads to increasing the supply of drivers than it's been a worthwhile effort. If people want to disagree with some small item in the report, that's fine, but we would like them to look at it and realize the intent is to increase supply."

The study is available at www.TransportationConsultants.com/NJreport.



Transportation Advisory Services surveyed 1,100 school bus drivers and found nearly 600, 54 percent, were age 51 or older.

21% of the driver force is 61 years of age or older...efforts must be made to replace these drivers in the very near future.

Source: TAS