

New Jersey Survey Finds Aging Drivers, Recruiting Challenges

An aging driver population reveals that many drivers in the state will need to be replaced in the near future. Meanwhile, respondents indicate that school districts, on average, provide higher pay and benefits than contractors.

By **Joey Campbell, Assistant Editor**

To find potential solutions for a shortage of qualified school bus drivers, the state of New Jersey funded a study to evaluate the status of bus drivers in the state's 21 counties. Initiated by several education commissions and conducted by Transportation Advisory Services (800/233-3251) in Palm Coast, Fla., the survey was sent to every operator in the state — both school district and contractor — and garnered 1,103 responses. After nearly two years of work, the study has been completed and the results and recommendations have been published.

Of the state's estimated 22,000 school bus drivers, 221 contractor and 882 school district surveys were returned, providing a margin of error in the results of plus or minus 3 percent. Female responses represent 71 percent of the surveys, while male responses represent 29 percent.

Age and experience

Nearly 85 percent of survey respondents are 41 years of age or older, with more than one-half age 51 or older. With the average driver so near retirement, strong efforts will likely need to be made to replace drivers in the near future.

It's also interesting to note that 71 percent of school district-employed drivers and 59 percent of contracted drivers have been school bus drivers for 6 years or longer. This could indicate a higher turnover rate in contractor operations than in school districts. Given the fact that the majority of the driver force is 51 years old or older and only 14 percent of respondents report that they have been

driving from 0 to 2 years, it's apparent that efforts to recruit new drivers have been largely unsuccessful.

Driver motivation

Forty percent of school district respondents state that one of the reasons they chose to drive a school bus was the pay. In contrast, only 24 percent of drivers for contractor fleets state that pay was a motivating factor. More notably, 48 percent of school district drivers cite benefits as a reason for taking the job, compared to only 7 percent of contracted drivers.

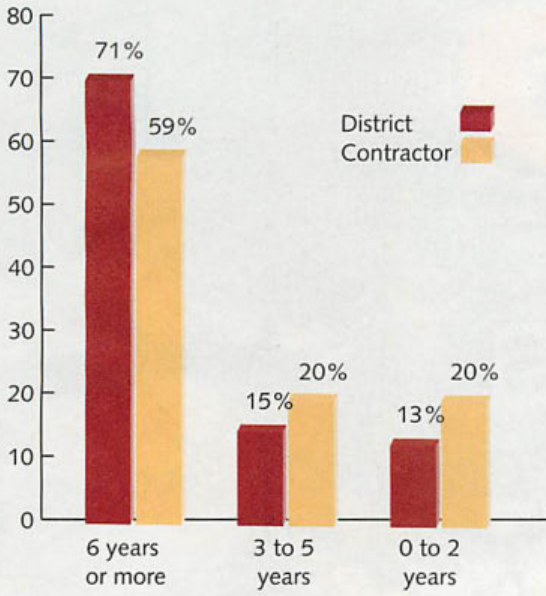
In addition, the average hourly pay of contracted drivers is only \$11.70, whereas the average rate in school districts is \$15.33. The disparities in pay and benefits between the two groups indicate that contractors may have to hike transportation contract rates to increase driver compensation and stay competitive.

Training and incentives

A disturbingly high number of respondents — 28 percent of school district drivers and 40 percent of contracted drivers — state that they received no training in the past year. When asked what employers could do to improve retention and hiring rates, at the top of the list for both school district and contractor-employed drivers was increased pay. Contractor-employed drivers also emphasized the need for increased benefits.

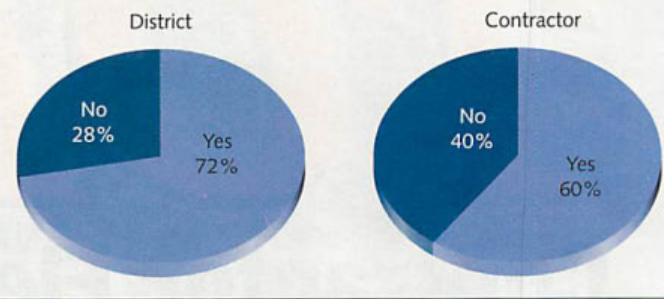
To access the New Jersey driver study in its entirety, go to www.TransportationConsultants.com/NJreport/index.html.

How many years have you been driving school buses?



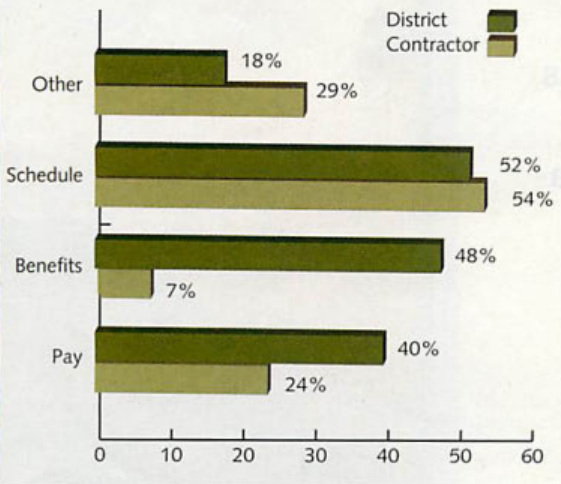
More than two-thirds of respondents working for school districts have been driving school buses for six years or longer while just under three-fifths of contractor-employed respondents report the same.

Have you received training in the past 12 months?



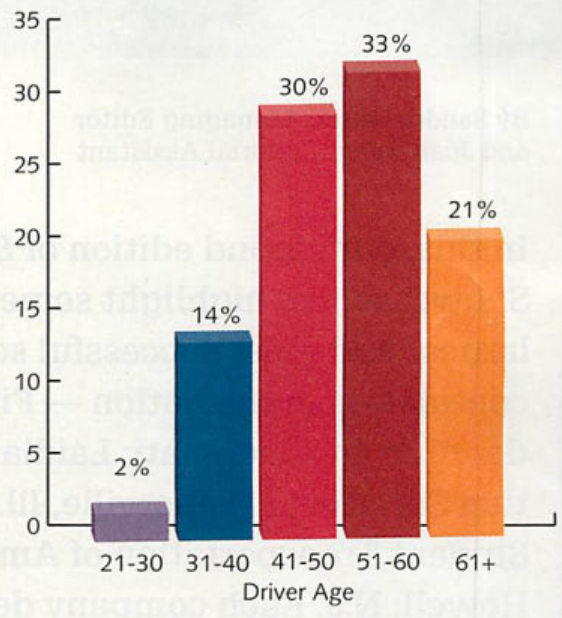
An alarming number of respondents report not receiving any training in the past year, with more than a quarter of school district drivers and two-fifths of their contractor counterparts answering no to the question.

What factors made you choose to drive a school bus?



In one of the survey's most glaring disparities, 48 percent of school district drivers indicate that benefits were a consideration in choosing to drive, while only 7 percent of contracted drivers state benefits as a reason. The most dominant factor in respondents' motivation to drive is schedule, with more than half of both school district and contracted drivers reporting this as a reason they chose to drive. Most respondents selected more than one category on this question.

Breakdown of respondents



54 percent of respondents to the New Jersey bus driver survey are 51 years old or older. Employees of school districts account for approximately 80 percent of responses, while about 20 percent represent contractor fleets. The survey reflects a predominance of women in the driver force with a response ratio of 71 percent female to 29 percent male.