



*A bold voice for transportation workers*

## **RAISING THE BAR ON SCHOOL BUS TRANSPORTATION SAFETY**

School bus drivers are entrusted with driving our nation's children to and from school and extracurricular events, accounting for the transport of more than 25 million students daily. These dedicated men and women are not mere chauffeurs – they play an important role in our educational system, provide a familiar face and sense of security for families and their children, and deliver the safest form of transportation for school aged children.

But too often school bus drivers are asked to perform their multiple responsibilities without basic safety and workplace protections. Adequate training and support from local officials can be lacking. And pay and benefits that drivers need to support their own families can be decimated when bus transportation services are outsourced.

To combat these challenges, this fast-changing sector of our transportation system needs greater oversight by federal and state regulators to ensure the highest level of safety and to support our nation's dedicated school bus drivers. To advance this dialogue, in December 2013, TTD brought together our affiliated unions with allies, experts and federal officials to discuss reforms and better practices that are needed to bolster this sector. We were pleased that the Administrator of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, Anne Ferro, was able to kick-off our discussion with the observation that school transportation services are a rung on the ladder of opportunity and with the pledge to work with us to improve school bus safety. With these remarks as a starting point, we renewed our commitment and strategy for advocating on behalf of this workforce by focusing on four pressing issues:

### **Challenges Posed by Unscrupulous Private Contractors**

The livelihood of school bus drivers is threatened when unscrupulous private companies convince school districts that they can provide comparable services at reduced costs. Too often these savings do not materialize, and when they do, they are at the expense of drivers and other front-line workers and of course the passengers they transport. While these companies may purport to maintain driver wages and benefits, they put in place schemes that reduce employees' income by shortening driving hours or reducing pay for training time. Evidence also shows that these companies hire new drivers at lower wages and offer benefit plans that are unobtainable, among a list of other tricks they employ that undermine drivers.

School bus drivers deserve better. These are skilled workers performing an important service for our communities, and their jobs should not be threatened by the lowest bidder. We must insist on improving oversight of private contractors that seek to outsource drivers' jobs on the cheap or force them to work under difficult conditions for little pay.

### **Support Needed to Improve Safety on School Buses**

The nature of the school bus environment often requires drivers to address behavior problems occurring on their bus. However, drivers often are not provided training on how to handle these issues and may lack school district support for addressing and responding to these incidents.

As the lone authority figure on a school bus, drivers must receive training tailored to their environment that helps them spot problem behaviors and prevent or respond to outbursts occurring on their vehicles. In addition, these drivers must be trained on the school's proper protocol for reporting incidents to ensure behavior issues and repeat offenders are addressed. Bus drivers and their unions must be included in the development of training programs so that their firsthand experiences shape and benefit the program.

But even empowered with the finest of training regimes, school bus drivers will be hesitant to act for fear of reprimand or losing their job if they lack the confidence that school officials will support their use of disciplinary action when necessary. To encourage drivers to deploy their training, administrators must consistently support bus drivers' authority to address problem behavior.

Additionally, school bus drivers should have the ability to communicate directly with their school staff and administrators when they believe doing so would improve a situation. Too often this line of communication is broken or non-existent, especially for employees of private contractors.

### **Overcrowded School Buses**

Some school bus drivers are required to transport more students than their buses can reasonably carry. When the cramped space of a bus becomes even more limited as a result of overcrowded seats, students' safety may be jeopardized.

Currently, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has standards in place to help ensure the safety of passengers by setting requirements for occupant protection through seat design specifications. However, if students are not within the confines of a seat when an accident occurs, they may not benefit from these protections.

The bus drivers represented by TTD unions know firsthand that students do not always fit in a seat. Sometimes their bodies hang off the edges, and sometimes students are forced to stand in the aisles. In addition to the dangers posed by traffic accidents, this cramped space can also exacerbate the behavior problems noted above, aggravating flared tempers or harming innocent students when violence erupts.

Because federal regulations currently do not specify the number of individuals that can sit on a seat, bus manufacturers determine the maximum seating capacity and school transportation providers often discern how many students can sit in each seat. We think this is a mistake. Instead of allowing a basic safety standard to be determined and often ignored by private sector providers or by financially stressed school districts, federal regulators must be able to establish school bus capacity standards to ensure the safety of all students. Transportation labor will work with U.S. Department of Transportation officials and pursue any needed legislation to ensure that

regulators have the tools and authority needed to address overcrowding on our nation's school buses.

### **Fair Treatment under Future Obstructive Sleep Apnea Regulations**

School bus drivers are required to meet a tall list of standards to obtain and maintain their jobs. These hurdles continue to grow. For instance, some school districts now require their drivers to undergo further medical review if they demonstrate risk factors associated with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA).

No one wants to ensure the safe transport of students more than the individuals entrusted with the responsibility of driving them. Transportation labor agrees that school bus drivers should meet certain standards to ensure they are able to drive students safely. However, federal and state regulators and local school districts setting these standards must take into consideration the nature of the work: school bus drivers generally work split shifts, one in the morning and a second in the afternoon when transporting students to school and back. While some may also drive students on field trips or extracurricular events, school bus drivers are not driving for extended periods of time.

Regulators must also consider the benefits of regulating OSA in a population that drives just a few hours during the day and the costs to these workers who may lose time worked to undergo testing and who may be forced to pay out-of-pocket for OSA services.

As federal regulators begin a rulemaking to address OSA, we urge them to ensure that the nature of school bus drivers' work is taken into consideration and to ensure that this workforce is treated fairly.

We convened the school bus summit to help empower school bus drivers and their leaders. Going forward, we will continue to build this partnership and seek new allies as we advance new initiatives in support of drivers and shine a spotlight on the problems associated with shoddy private contracting. We know that the problems confronting this workforce are not easily addressed, requiring leadership and a collaborative effort with federal and state officials, allies and our affiliated unions to improve these conditions. Transportation labor is committed to this effort on behalf of the nation's school bus drivers and passengers.

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