How My District Overcame Our Dire Bus Driver Shortage

Now, we are applying the lessons to support staff in classrooms and cafeterias

By Mervin B. Daugherty — November 10, 2022  

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Mervin B. Daugherty is the superintendent of the Chesterfield County public schools, the largest district in central Virginia and among the 70 largest in the nation. Before joining Chesterfield in 2018, he served as the superintendent of the Red Clay Consolidated school district in Delaware.
Hiring school bus drivers has been tough for years, then the pandemic made it even harder. But the school system I lead cracked the code and achieved 100 percent staffing in transportation this past spring. Now, we have begun to use the techniques that worked in transportation to improve hiring in other areas.

My district, the Chesterfield County public schools in Virginia, educates more than 64,000 students and transports at least 70 percent of them nearly 9 million miles each year. (Chesterfield County is a suburb of Richmond, with urban characteristics near the city, vast suburban neighborhoods, and significant rural areas in the south and west.)

Like most school divisions in the United States, we have suffered over the past several years from a lack of bus drivers and staff to meet transportation needs. We employ more than 500 drivers—or I should say we attempt to employ that many drivers—to cover 1,250 routes in the morning and again in the afternoon. This does not include field trips, after-school events, and weekend activities.

During the summer of 2021, we experienced an extreme shortage of bus drivers: 150 fewer than we needed. Like most school systems, we held job fairs and advertised throughout the region and state. We also increased the availability of driver-training sessions, starting new cohorts of candidates as often as every Monday. (All new school bus drivers require some training, even if they already possess a commercial driver’s license with all endorsements. Many candidates need a full four weeks to earn their learner’s permit and, subsequently, their commercial driver’s license.)

But when schools opened in mid-August, the district still had a severe shortage of drivers. Our first solution was to ask parents (via this video message) to drive their children to and from school. Our hardworking bus drivers took on double runs at assigned schools, bringing some students to school early in the morning and taking them home late in the afternoon. We opened our schools earlier each morning to accommodate early arrivals and used county police officers for traffic control.

This was only a temporary solution, so we met with county government officials for help resolving this problem. In Virginia, the county government controls local funding for school divisions. We did not have the funding needed to move forward with our long-term solution: increasing driver salaries by $3 per hour to make starting pay more than $20 per hour and offering $3,000 bonuses. Under this proposal, the raises and bonuses would be implemented immediately—and for all drivers and transportation staff, current and new. The bonus would be paid in six installments throughout the school year to encourage drivers to stay the full period.
County officials approved the funding for immediate implementation. This supplemental appropriation was a big lift for the county and the school system that happened quickly after the pain of operating with too few drivers became apparent during the first week of school.

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By the end of August 2021, we announced the plan to our community. We made it very clear that, while we believed the plan would work, the driver shortage would not be resolved immediately because finding and training drivers takes time. To help everyone better understand the process, we committed to ongoing transportation updates via weekly newsletters to staff, families, and the greater community.

We expanded our job advertising. Previous advertising was in local newspapers and on school websites. Revamped advertising included radio and social media packages, newspapers, digital flyers promoted to PTAs and the parent community, enhanced use of the school district’s social media platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn, and job boards like Indeed. We also contacted anyone who had applied for a position in transportation over the past several years.

The process to become a school bus driver is extremely challenging; at each step in hiring, some potential drivers are eliminated. Applicants must complete application paperwork and an interview, undergo background and driving-record checks, pass medical and drug screenings, and when classroom work is completed, pass the commercial driver’s license test and take behind-the-wheel training.

To streamline the process, we changed our recruiting practices and procedures with job fairs, where we handled fingerprinting, background checks, Department of Motor Vehicles checks, applications, and interviews on site. We moved away from panel interviews and in some cases interviewed by phone. Taking care of these hiring aspects all at once cut down on phone tag and simplified the process for applicants and for recruiters. We also consolidated applicants’ medical appointments into one trip for a medical exam, drug screening, and a TB test.
As soon as applicants pass their background checks and screenings, we now begin paying their full salary for several weeks while they train to drive a school bus.

By the middle of the 2021-22 school year, the district was operating transportation in the mid-90 percent staffing range and running normal services to all schools. During one period in the spring, the school system’s transportation department was 100 percent staffed! We announced this good news in a video message.

While I wish I could say that 100 percent achievement was permanent, it was not (even though we hired 263 drivers in the past 13 months).

But we absolutely proved that we can achieve 100 percent staffing and we are working to climb that mountain again.

Using our formula for hiring bus drivers, we have adopted similar procedures for hiring custodians, cafeteria workers, and classroom assistants:

- We improved pay in each of these areas and provided bonuses throughout the year.
- We created a cafeteria worker career plan in which there is a clear progression from part-time food-service associate to manager-in-training, assistant manager, and manager, and we added benefits to more food-service job roles.

The improved approach is working. Our custodial vacancies, for example, have been reduced by more than two-thirds.

One thing we learned through this experience is same-old thinking will not do. Success comes from reshaping the way jobs are filled and, even more important, the quality of the jobs themselves.
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