

For the second day in a row, Washington Township Schools has experienced a high volume of driver absences. Compounded with our existing labor shortage, these absences have put our bussing system in a critical situation.

On Tuesday, September 6, 11 bus drivers (12% of our current drivers) called off work for all or part of the day. Today, September 7, 27 bus drivers (28% of our current drivers) called off work. Combined with the 18 unfilled driver positions, these absences have impacted the District's transportation efforts.

Despite these absences, over the last two days, the majority of bus drivers have been present and hard at work to support the needs of our students and school staff. These drivers have gone above and beyond to take on additional uncovered routes due to the unanticipated absences. For that, we are greatly appreciative and plan to reward these drivers and transportation staff accordingly with additional compensation.

Unfortunately, we have been made aware of rumors that multiple drivers may call off work tomorrow as well. While we have no confirmation about these rumors, we wanted to make sure families are aware. We plan to keep all families updated with morning communications if needed but wanted to call your attention to this rumor today for ample family planning time. We have no plans to institute unplanned eLearning days as a result of bus driver absences.

It is also important that you understand what has already happened and future plans for the Transportation Department to mitigate the concerns. The following FAQ provides detailed information on some of the most frequent questions we are receiving, and we encourage you to review areas of interest.

**Q: What can parents/guardians do to help with the current concerns?**

**A:** Parents and guardians can review and share our current openings in Transportation with people you know and in your neighborhoods. Additionally, we want to make sure that the bus drivers who are working exceptionally hard to support getting students to/from school daily feel appreciated. Anything you can do to support this for your driver is welcomed.

For those families who have been able to provide transportation during this most recent school bus challenge, we greatly appreciate your patience and support in navigating arrival and dismissal at school. We also appreciate our school staff as we know they have had to make immediate adjustments to accommodate the additional transportation-related challenges.

**Q: Are the absences by bus drivers coordinated and why are they doing this to families, students and schools?**

**A:** There are daily absences in all schools and departments District wide, and these days are allowed by employee protocols through Human Resources. For that reason, we do know that some of the absences in Transportation in recent days are under normal circumstances. We are also aware that certain bus drivers are encouraging other bus drivers to use leave days in a coordinated effort. This impacts both our families and our students getting to/from school in a timely manner. Since coordinating this leave effort, the District has been in communication with all transportation staff, including drivers, but the drivers involved have not responded or reached out to leadership in any form stating why they are doing this.

**Q: How is WT showing appreciation to the Transportation staff and bus drivers who are showing up to work?**

**A:** The District values the feedback and input from its drivers and is committed to rewarding the exemplary commitment of drivers as they support the needs of our students.

In August the District conducted a focus group, which was paid time, as well as offered a feedback form for all staff in Transportation to have a voice and share suggestions. Roughly half of the bus drivers who have been absent attended the meetings. The District has responded by reviewing current practices and replacing the Transportation Director. Furthermore, in August, additional focus group meetings were scheduled for next week and into the future to gather additional feedback from drivers. The new Transportation Director continues to review practices with this feedback.

In addition to hearing from drivers, the District certainly recognizes the staff who have shown up for work as well as the additional workload they are taking on covering for absences. For this reason, we are giving substantial additional compensation to those Transportation staff members as appreciation and recognition for their efforts while we continue to work through transportation complexities.

**Q: Why does WT allow bus drivers to take off work before and after holidays?**

**A:** The District does not allow bus drivers to take paid time off for certain dates, including before and after Labor Day weekend, unless they are using illness leave.

**Q: What formal opportunities for feedback and having a voice have staff in Transportation had and are planned for the future?**

**A:** Last week a focus group for staff members in Transportation was held with an outside consultant. Any staff members who chose to participate were paid for their attendance. We had 50 staff sign-up to participate and 29 in attendance. Additionally, an open-ended feedback form was shared with all staff in Transportation last week for optional completion. We have received a small handful of completed forms thus far and will continue to collect submissions. All information is being reviewed, and action plans were being put in place starting last week to respond to the key theme areas.

Additionally, as shared last week with Transportation staff, several listening session opportunities have been scheduled in September for any Transportation staff to attend. These start next week with District Leadership, including Dr. Woodson, in attendance as well as the new Director of Transportation. These opportunities are optional, but highly encouraged and staff attending will be paid for their attendance.

**Q: Are students who are late to school from bus transportation penalized or counted tardy?**

**A:** No students who ride the bus will be counted tardy per our Student Handbook.

**Q: How are academics being impacted by the transportation challenges?**

**A:** Students on late buses in the morning are missing instruction. Schools have implemented a variety of strategies to mitigate lost instructional time. For example, to minimize or eliminate the impact on instruction, NC is moving homeroom to the first part of the day, Middle Schools begin their day with an advisory period, and the elementary morning meeting is at the beginning of the day for almost every grade level in each elementary school.

**Q: Does the District offer bus drivers competitive wages?**

**A:** In the last three school years (2019-2022) transportation staff hourly rates have increased by 10% and staff have been eligible for almost \$4,000 in additional bonuses beyond their hourly rates. Additionally, in 2020 the school board insurance contribution for transportation staff working at least 25 hours per week was increased (reducing transportation staff insurance costs). In 2021, based on driver feedback, we removed a first year step on the hourly rate chart to increase the pay for first year bus drivers, began granting years of experience on the hourly rate chart to newly hired bus drivers, moved the mid day run rate to the bus driver regular rate, increased the field trip rate for bus drivers, and added a milestone bonus for drivers for those with 5 or more years in the Township. The District annually conducts a market analysis to ensure it remains competitive with our wages.

**Q: How short staffed is the Transportation Department and where can the community access information about the openings?**

**A:** The WT Transportation Department currently has openings for 18 Bus Drivers, 10 Bus Assistants, 1 Dispatcher, 1 Receptionist, 1 Assistant Garage Supervisor and 1 Vehicle Technician Specialist. Openings can be accessed at the [WT Website](#). Bus driver starting pay is \$25.65 per hour and completed details can be found and shared from the [Driver Recruitment Flyer](#).

**Q: What was done prior to the start of the year to foster a successful start of the year with bus routes?**

**A:** Months of action planning took place prior to the start of the year. Unfortunately, as discovered over the last six weeks, inaccurate progress reports were shared and aspects of the action planning simply were not executed causing the routing concerns experienced during the first days of school. For example, the use of routing consultant expertise was put in place in 2021, but the routing experts were only partially accessed and not used to their full scope of work. For this reason, Transportation staff have been meeting with the routing consultants daily for the past several weeks to fix the routing concerns. Many of these route fixes were to be implemented Sept. 6th but unfortunately with the large number of driver absences those fixes have not yet not been fully implemented.

**Q: Are the current routing concerns due to the change in school hours?**

**A:** Even if our school hours remained the same as they were last year, a comprehensive overhaul of our routes was planned and needed for efficiency. Regardless of the school hours, a large-scale routing system overhaul would have been implemented per the plan and per what was shared at public school board meetings prior to the vote on school hours last year.

**Q: Who can I contact if I have Transportation questions?**

**A:** Complete transportation details and contact information can be found on the [Transportation Area of our Website](#).

**Q: Will bus services beyond the school day continue to be impacted?**

**A:** Yes, until our bus driver attendance improves and we are able to hire more drivers, bus service for after school late buses and athletic/extracurricular buses will continue to be impacted.

**Q: What are the key areas of feedback from Transportation staff thus far and what has been the District's response?**

**A: Feedback Area from Transportation Staff:** More Transportation Department Meetings Needed

District Response:

- Unfortunately the former Transportation Director reduced the traditional, all-day Transportation meeting scheduled annually for July to only a few hours. As a result, not enough time was provided for ample planning.
- The District announced on September 6 that the eLearning day already on the calendar for September 21 will be used as a paid day for Transportation meetings and training in response to driver feedback.
- The new Director of Transportation, Ms. Palacios, is scheduling regular and additional meetings during the school year.

**Feedback Area from Transportation Staff:** Route Inefficiencies Causing Frustration

District Response:

- Strategic time has been spent with exterior routing experts over the past two weeks resulting in routing improvements that were supposed to be implemented Sept. 6.
- The driver shortage, as experienced by school districts around the state, has resulted in our delay in implementing these routing improvements.
- Additional work through September has already been planned to continue with the routing consultants.
- Driver feedback on route concerns will continue to be received and addressed through the appropriate protocols.

**Feedback Area from Transportation Staff:** Lack of Adequate Communication within the Transportation Department

District Response:

- Several areas of improvement involving communications have been recognized in August and additional opportunities have been provided recently for Transportation staff including the focus group, feedback form and listening session.
- The new Director of Transportation is aware of the communication areas in need of improvement and hopes to gain concrete ideas from upcoming feedback opportunities.

**Feedback Area from Transportation Staff: Compensation Review Requested**

District Response:

- The Board approved a comprehensive overhaul to transportation compensation in 2021, based on driver and transportation staff feedback, that resulted in record high raises for all staff in the Transportation Department as well as the following new benefits:
  - Increased board contribution for transportation staff health insurance (reducing staff cost)
  - Increased driver scale and starting driver rate
  - Granted years of experience to new hired drivers
  - Moved mid day run rate to regular driving rate
  - Increased field trip pay rate
  - Added a milestone bonus for those with 5+ years in WT
- Annually, the District reviews all employee compensation and offers public recommendations late fall for School Board approval. This annual process will continue to be conducted this year and will incorporate staff feedback.

**Feedback Area from Transportation Staff: Understaffed**

District Response:

- The bus driver shortage is a problem plaguing school districts [around the state and country](#).
- The District offers a \$1,000 referral bonus to current WT staff for bus drivers and other transportation vacancies.
- The Human Resources department has implemented a wide range of unique and new recruitment efforts in the past two years.

**Feedback Area from Transportation Staff: Student Behavior**

District Response:

- Student misbehavior on buses is a concern by some drivers and parent/guardian support is needed to support this concern area. The Student Handbook will guide corrective responses to student behavior concerns on buses.
- Additionally, we have bus aides on some buses to support students while the bus driver is navigating safe driving.