The driver shortage

### The starting point needs to be what transportation provides to students and parents which is really time. Parents can be assured their child/ren arrive safely and on time. Students know they will be able to participate in every chosen academic and extra-curricular activity, therefore providing the greatest equal opportunity to every student. All schools have been able to have a starting time and dismissal time with expectations of the student arriving in time and getting home in a timely manner, providing a secure timeframe for education.

### School buses do require time to cover the distance for traveling over the routes, stopping to load or unload students are impacted by many uncontrollable factors like weather, traffic tie-ups, student emergencies and road construction. Reading this list makes one wonder how any buses arrive according to schedule, but it is due to the professionalism of the entire transportation staff and being flexible to assist each other. The drivers spend time inspecting the buses, secretaries spend time communicating with staff and parents, mechanics spend time maintaining the buses and the managers spend time overseeing the complete operation.

### I can’t think of a better use of time than being part of this critical support service for the schools, parents and community. The driver shortage limits time available, there are less drivers to cover the same time and distance, forcing managers to reallocate staff: mechanics, secretaries and management are now behind the wheel so there is less time for parents’ calls of concerns, future route planning is reduced, and mechanics are spending more hours outside their regular work hours to maintain the fleet. Training for staff also takes time and school bus drivers have mandated training requirements, whether a veteran or newly hired. This training is very important to maintain the high-level safety school buses are renowned for.

### Managers also must find time to recruit drivers and plan for changes. Both are demanding and a service failure point. Don’t throw in the towel or become disheartened, let’s look at options that are having a positive effect on hiring new drivers, or for that matter any support personnel:

### Public school operations are complicated, to help draw applicants, conversations with community members will need to take place. When schools are advertising open positions, understand the readers or listeners may not fully grasp the job so plan on going the extra mile to start to communicate those interested.

### Training and support must be forefront in all communication to entice applicants to sign on, this lowers their anxiety to perform the duties.

### Consider shift work instead of job position duties. For example, someone would start at 4:00 a.m. with building duties, then drive a bus for the morning route and finish their eight-hour shift with building and grounds tasks. The next shift would start 1:00 or 2:00 p.m. by driving an afternoon route then finishing their shift with building duties.

### Consider stipends for personnel who bring in applicants.

### Try using mentors to assist new hires with normal routines and someone to be available for support – beyond the trainer or supervisor.

### Ask the athletic, academic, band boosters and the PTA to pass along your district’s needs – don’t think everyone in your community knows or understands the situation.

### Implement positive changes in duties for the “newbies” by having them start on well-functioning bus routes and pay stipends to drivers willing AND able to handle the most challenging routes or building tasks, we know these exist.

### Purchase buses with more driver amenities such as a heated driver seat, power rooftop vent fans, white roofs, tinted windows, driver assist features like auto braking, lane departure warnings and good camera systems all of which can retain drivers.

### Create a line in the budget for loss ratio, if a driver retires or leaves for a better job, what does it cost the district in funds and lost time. This will create data to use for comparing increased benefit costs.

### The decision makers, boards and upper school administrators will need to remove obstacles to enable transportation managers to perform their tasks, this is management in a new decade, instead of management ordering what needs to be accomplished.

### How can a district “stretch” the staff to cover more work? One way is to provide more time on routes by adjusting the public bell schedule of its buildings. The route time is the actual time buses spend boarding students, driving, unloading students, and traveling empty to start a new route, tier or run. Another method is to examine options (legal types) of transporting students, especially when there is a low number requiring transportation. District can even choose to utilize taxicabs when needed. Networking with surrounding districts to combine students on each other’s buses is legal.

### This is a good time to pull out your negotiated agreement (CBA) and start identifying areas in the CBA that limits the flexibility. Increasing bus route efficiency which means each bus performs more work, i.e. more routes, means changing the starting time and dismissal times of schools that will impact the entire staffs’ workday. Removing or addressing a negotiated start time may need to be established on the time the students arrive and dismissal times.

### The driver shortage will end, sooner for some and later for the districts that can’t change their practices. I guess time will tell……