



Public Schools of North Carolina
State Board of Education
Department of Public Instruction

Report to the North Carolina General Assembly

School Bus Driver Compensation and
Employment Study

SB 257 (SL 2017-57)

Date Due: April 1, 2018

Report # 72

DPI Chronological Schedule, 2017-2018

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SCHOOL BUS DRIVER COMPENSATION AND EMPLOYMENT STUDY:

SL 2017-57 - SECTION 8.10

The Department of Public Instruction shall study the compensation of school bus drivers in the public schools and the challenges of recruiting and retaining school bus drivers. No later than April 1, 2018, the Department shall submit to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee and the Fiscal Research Division a report containing, at a minimum, all of the following information:

1. Q1: A detailed explanation of how school bus drivers are compensated and employed in the public schools, including, at a minimum, the following information:
 - a. Average driving experience of school bus drivers.
 - b. Rates of retention of school bus drivers in local school administrative units.
 - c. Average term of service for school bus drivers.
 - d. Average hours worked by school bus drivers, per week.
 - e. Career paths for school bus drivers within a local school administrative unit.
 - f. Percentage of school bus drivers who work in the local school administrative unit in another capacity.

Q2: The challenges of recruiting and retaining school bus drivers faced by local school administrative units.

Q3: Recommendations, including input from local school administrators, on improving the process of recruiting and retaining school bus drivers.

Executive Summary

In 2017 the General Assembly directed the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to produce a report for the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee and the Fiscal Research Division on school bus driver compensation and employment. Local education agencies across North Carolina face shortages when trying to recruit and retain enough high-quality school bus drivers. Drivers are the essential first step to ensuring that each child has a successful school day, but they often suffer low wages, short hours, split shifts, and limited benefits, especially in rural and low-wealth areas of the state.

In May 2016, the Bureau of Labor Statistics listed North Carolina with the 42nd lowest mean wage for school and special client bus drivers among the 50 U.S. States and D.C. The budget bill for 2017 will likely have improved that positioning, but more is necessary. As the economy has improved in recent years, driving a school bus has become a less attractive option.

DPI and North Carolina State University's Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) conducted a study to compare conditions in local education agencies (LEAs) across the state, using existing DPI and federal data and a new survey instrument.

- Average hourly wage reported to DPI by LEAs: **\$14.13**
- Yearly wages for a common full-time driver (7 hrs): **\$18,298 (185 days / 1,295 hours)**
- Yearly wages for a half-time driver (4 hrs): **\$10,456 (185 days / 740 hours)**
- **31.9%** of drivers are **full-time drivers: 73%** of those are **in the largest 6 LEAs**
- **34.8%** are full time because they **work another position in the LEA** (At their option or because the LEA requires non-certified staff to drive school buses)
- Average time to finish DMV school bus driver training: **54 days** (Some report months longer)
- Average out-of-pocket costs before potential employment: **\$260**

Applicants are lost due to medical and driving record requirements, license training and testing requirements, and the overall length of time it takes from application to hiring. For the few that make it through the process, many are not provided sufficient training in the skills needed to manage a busload of children.

- **One fifth of over 16 thousand regular route drivers has been on the job less than two years**
- **DMV reports certifying 5,049 new school/activity bus drivers in 2017)**
- **On average, 9% of school bus drivers require substitute drivers each day**

For many LEAs, every day they must be recruiting and training drivers just to keep up. To combat this some LEAs started requiring most non-certified staff to have a license to drive a school bus. This requirement provides essential drivers but can negatively impact recruitment of qualified candidates to other positions as other staff don't necessarily have the skills or desire to drive a school bus.

Recommended potential solutions fell largely into 4 categories:

- Increase Hourly Compensation
- Increase Hours and Benefits Availability
- Speed the Recruitment Process
- Increased Job Satisfaction/Training

Introduction

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the school bus is the safest mode of school transportation (NHTSA, 2018). Yet, school districts across the nation and throughout North Carolina face numerous challenges in recruiting and retaining high-quality school bus drivers. In North Carolina, three quarters of a million students rely on school buses to get them to school in a safe and timely manner, prepared to start their school day and ready to learn. To meet school bus driver staff shortages, local education agencies (LEAs) may consider a variety of techniques. These include: eliminating school bus routes, increasing passenger loads on existing routes, combining bus stops, narrowing the geographical areas from which buses pick up students, and using part-time drivers employed elsewhere in the LEA - from teaching assistants to principals. These decisions can result in longer school travel distances and ride times, which may lead some students to choose less safe modes of school travel.

Shortage of School Bus Drivers: A National Problem

The difficulties in school bus driver recruitment and retention are issues shared by schools across the country. A *School Bus Fleet* survey (2015) found that 94% of school districts in the United States had shortages of school bus drivers, with 30% reporting severe or desperate shortages (DeNiciso, 2015). A follow-up survey in 2017 found that each participating LEA had some degree of daily driver shortages, with 19% stating mild (1-5% short), 54% stating moderate (6-10% short), 22% stating severe (11-15% short) and 5% stating desperate (over 15% short) (Schlosser, July 2017). As an example of how these shortages impact education directly, the first two days of school in Muncie, Indiana were canceled in the Fall of 2017 due to a shortage of qualified drivers, an issue that was only resolved when drivers were brought in from Michigan temporarily (Schlosser, August 2017).

Factors Associated with Driver Shortage

School district transportation professionals provide key insight into some of the reasons for these school bus driver shortages, which vary by community and context. In order for an LEA to successfully put a new driver into a school bus, they have to clear several obstacles. First, and perhaps foremost, there has to be a *population* of job seekers from which to draw upon for employment. In regions where the economy is improving, LEAs may find themselves competing for a decreasing pool of candidates. As a result, in some areas, school bus drivers may account for a greater proportion of jobs than in others. For instance, in the Goldsboro (NC) area school bus drivers make up over 10 of every 1,000 jobs, while in Wilmington (NC) barely 1 of every 1,000 jobs are driving school buses (*Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016*).

In addition to identifying a qualified pool of job seekers, school districts must *market* open positions to potential school bus drivers. As shortages become more acute, LEAs have developed innovative techniques to try to encourage qualified candidates to apply, including staging open “test drives” of school buses, targeting truck drivers, providing recruitment bonuses to current drivers who identify candidates, blanketing towns with yard signs, holding job fairs, and utilizing free publicity (McMahon, 2017; Mastros, 2018).

Third, while having a certain number of candidates for the positions may have been sufficient in the past, successful LEAs are now finding they need to *recruit* the best candidates, that is, to convince the most qualified job seekers to take the job. Examples of issues that stop qualified candidates from

becoming employees include long windows of time between application and hiring and between hiring and working, as well as new drivers having to spend their own money to meet all the necessary certifications (Leach, 2017).

Fourth, a key issue that affects both recruitment of high-quality candidates and retention of employed drivers is the matter of *compensation*. Nationwide, the hourly mean wage for a school or special client bus driver is \$14.96 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). While this base rate may attract some candidates, the nature of driving a school bus means that many drivers have difficulty working enough hours during the week or year to meet their financial needs. Sometimes drivers are able to find matching jobs within the LEA, but it can be very difficult to find a second job that works around the morning/afternoon school bus driver schedule if an LEA does not offer a matching hourly position.

North Carolina Background Statistics

Using 2016 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 515,020 national “school or special client” bus drivers had an hourly mean wage of \$14.96 and an hourly median wage of \$14.50 (Note: these numbers are used to compare between states; updated wages will be discussed below). North Carolina’s pool of 16,600 school bus drivers (ranked ninth among the 50 states and the District of Columbia) had the 42nd* lowest hourly mean wage (\$12.55) and the 41st* lowest hourly median wage (\$12.68). North Carolina was near the middle (27th) for employment per 1,000 jobs (3.923); to compare, West Virginia had the highest at 7.750 school or special client bus jobs per 1,000 jobs and Washington, D.C. had the least at 1.753.

North Carolina has a variety of school districts and regions, each with unique contexts and operational situations. These factors are reflected in driver compensation packages. In addition to detailed LEA-level school bus driver compensation information discussed below, the Bureau of Labor Statistics divides the state into 19 areas, as shown in *Table 1*. Of particular note are the hourly mean and median wages, which range from \$11.08/\$11.18 in Burlington to \$14.15/\$14.01 in Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton.

The annual wages assume 2,080 hours or 52-weeks at 40-hours a week. A half-time school bus driver likely works only 740 hours per year (4 hours/day and 185 school days), which is approximately one third of the yearly salary listed. Even many full-time drivers, 7 hr/day being a common number in large LEAs, only have wages totaling 62% of the listed annual wages.

The school year also leaves an employment gap for most drivers during the summer though a limited number can receive work driving students to and from summer remediation programs.

***Note:** For the 2017-18 school year a significant raise was provided to school bus drivers by the legislature which will likely have improved the ranking somewhat depending on the actions of other states.

Table 1: Hourly and Annual Wages for School and Special Client Bus Drivers by Area

Area Name	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage ¹	Annual (740 hrs) 4hr/day ²	Annual (1295 hrs) 7 hr/day ³	Employment per 1,000 jobs
Asheville, NC (0011700)	\$13.07	\$27,180	\$9,669.81	\$16,922.16	3.60
Burlington, NC (0015500)	\$11.08	\$23,050	\$8,200.48	\$14,350.84	1.16
Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC (0016740)	\$12.96	\$26,950	\$9,587.98	\$16,778.97	2.64
Durham-Chapel Hill, NC (0020500)	\$11.78	\$24,500	\$8,716.35	\$15,253.61	2.00
Fayetteville, NC (0022180)	\$12.04	\$25,030	\$8,904.90	\$15,583.58	5.65
Goldsboro, NC (0024140)	\$13.35	\$27,760	\$9,876.15	\$17,283.27	10.42
Greensboro-High Point, NC (0024660)	\$12.26	\$25,500	\$9,072.12	\$15,876.20	5.25
Greenville, NC(0024780)	\$13.07	\$27,180	\$9,669.81	\$16,922.16	6.12
Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton, NC (0025860)	\$14.15	\$29,440	\$10,473.85	\$18,329.23	4.66
Jacksonville, NC (0027340)	\$12.22	\$25,420	\$9,043.65	\$15,826.39	-
New Bern, NC (0035100)	\$12.54	\$26,090	\$9,282.02	\$16,243.53	7.40
Raleigh, NC (0039580)	\$12.99	\$27,010	\$9,609.33	\$16,816.32	2.54
Rocky Mount, NC (0040580)	\$12.55	\$26,110	\$9,289.13	\$16,255.99	4.68
Wilmington, NC (0048900)	\$12.23	\$25,440	\$9,050.77	\$15,838.85	1.05
Winston-Salem, NC (0049180)	\$12.81	\$26,640	\$9,477.69	\$16,585.96	4.720
Non-Metropolitan Areas					
Mountain North Carolina Non-Metropolitan Area (3700004)	\$11.49	\$23,890	\$8,499.33	\$14,873.82	4.44
Northeast Coastal North Carolina Non-Metropolitan Area (3700002)	\$11.97	\$24,900	\$8,858.65	\$15,502.64	5.27
Piedmont North Carolina Non-Metropolitan Area (3700003)	\$11.88	\$24,710	\$8,791.06	\$15,384.35	5.98
Southeast Coastal North Carolina Non-Metropolitan Area (3700001)	\$11.83	\$24,620	\$8,759.04	\$15,328.32	6.81

Data Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics (2016).

¹ The Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates bus driver annual wages by multiplying the hourly rate by 2,080 hours (52 weeks 40 hours a week)

² Annual Wage adjusted to hours of a school bus driver working 20 hours per week (half-time 185 days)

³Annual Wage adjusted to hours of a school bus driver working 35 hours per week (full-time 185 days)

Design of School Bus Driver Compensation and Employment Study

The *School Bus Driver Compensation and Employment Study* consists of three components, overseen by North Carolina State University's Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE). The first component is an on-line survey distributed to the 112 transportation directors of the 115 North Carolina Local Education Agencies (LEAs). [Note: some transportation directors are hired to manage multiple LEAs.] Of the 112 school transportation directors, 102 responded for a response rate of 91%. The survey responses informed the design of the second study component, in-depth phone interviews with school transportation directors from a variety of LEAs across the state. The interviews provided a more in-depth exploration of issues relevant to school bus driver hiring and retention. Third, existing school travel data sources were incorporated into the study, including data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) and the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

When designing the survey, NC DPI and ITRE hypothesized that certain characteristics of the LEAs, such as size and economic health, may impact how individual LEAs manage school bus routing and scheduling, which may in turn impact efforts to recruit and retain high-quality school bus drivers. As appropriate, this analysis separates LEA survey and interview response information based on county and LEA characteristics and presents this information when there are differences among county or LEAs from the larger state-level data set.

There are some areas where the survey can be seen to be an imperfect measure; it is only as accurate as the reporting of the information. For example, when asked about dual employment and recruitment and retention, 48% reported a license was not required for teacher assistants on the recruitment question, meanwhile 45% reported the license was not required for teacher assistants on the retention question. Also, some LEAs reported different data on the survey questions in winter 2018 than some other similar data reported in fall of 2017 on the *TD-2R Bus Driver Salary and Route Times Report*. This could be because of changes since the fall, or imperfect reporting on either the survey or TD-2R report.

LEA Size by Number of School Bus Drivers

As a first step, LEAs were coded by the number of regular-route school bus drivers. The range for LEA school bus fleet and driver pool size is substantial, from 1,095 school bus drivers in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to 7 school bus drivers in Elkin City Schools. Recognizing that different sized school districts are likely to have different issues and different types of resources to deal with those issues, the state's LEA population was divided into five groups by the number of school bus drivers in the LEA, as shown in the *Table 2*. While the groups are bottom heavy, it was decided that large LEAs might have important differences from medium sized LEAs; when appropriate, such analyses are included.

Table 2: LEA Categories by School Bus Drivers Employed

Number of School Bus Drivers in LEA	Number of LEAs
Over 400+	3
300-399	4
200-299	9
100-199	22
0-99	64

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

County Economic Tier Designation

Every year the North Carolina Department of Commerce ranks all 100 counties based on economic well-being. Tier 1 counties include the 40 most economically distressed counties, Tier 2 counties includes the next 40 counties in ranking, and Tier 3 counties are the 20 least distressed counties. These county economic tiers are used by state agencies to encourage economic activity in the most distressed areas and are calculated using average unemployment rates, median household incomes, percentage population growth, and adjusted property tax base per capita. With such a high response rate, study participation representation closely mirrors the state percentages, as presented in *Table 3*. [Note: there are 115 LEAS in the 100 North Carolina counties.]

Table 3: LEA Categories by NC County Economic Tier Designation

Economic Tier	Number of LEAs in Survey	Average Number of Drivers in LEA
Tier One	38	48
Tier Two	40	132
Tier Three	23	219

Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018); North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2018 County Tier Designations

It should be noted that LEA size (the number of school bus drivers) is closely related to Economic Tier; all counties with less than 12,000 residents are automatically Tier 1 and any with less than 50,000 are automatically Tier 2. Therefore, in this report the two variables are often correlated, as 46 of the 80 Tier 1 and Tier 2 counties have under 50,000 residents.

Tiered Routing

Tiered routing is a school bus management strategy where a single bus operates on more than one regular route during a single morning or afternoon shift. Of the responding LEAs, 61% use some variation of this school bus routing strategy, which can enhance efficiency of a school bus fleet. Tiered routing could serve the same school, dropping off one set of students before picking up another, but more often involves multiple schools that have staggered start and dismissal times. For instance, a bus may pick up a set of elementary students from a neighborhood to drop them off for a 7:30 AM bell time and then go back out to pick up a set of high school students for a 9:00 AM bell time.

Tiered routing allows an LEA to save on capital and technician costs by having to purchase and maintain fewer buses. This can also make it easier to recruit bus drivers as the driver hours increase to levels where they are eligible for LEA-supported benefits. Increased hours and benefits can often make the school bus driving position a more attractive job.

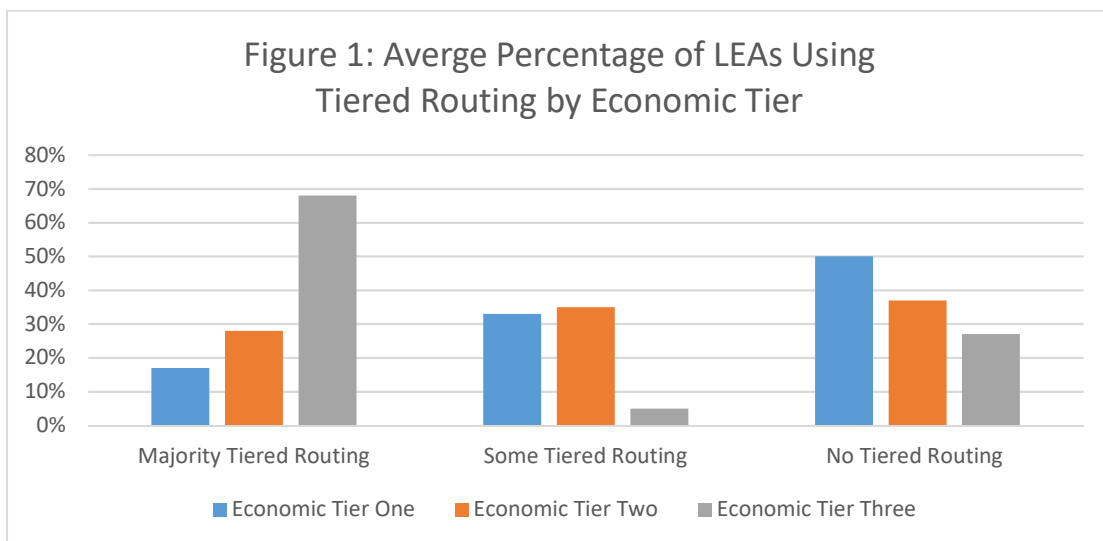
While most LEAs try to incorporate some level of tiered routing into their master plan, some LEAs are unable to due to size and geography. Small LEAs might have so few schools that they don't have the flexibility to remake their schedules. In rural districts, routes are generally longer and it may not be feasible to run a second route; in over one third of LEAs in North Carolina the longest 5% of student ride times averaged over an hour and a half (TIMS, 2017).

The majority of respondents (61%) in the school bus driver survey administered to transportation directors use tiered-routing to various degrees. Tiered routing is more frequent in larger, economically robust Tier 3 counties (Table 4, Figure 1).

Table 4: LEA Categories by NC County Economic Tier Designation

Economic Tier	Majority Tiered Routing	Some Tiered Routing	No Tiered Routing
Economic Tier One	17%	33%	50%
Economic Tier Two	28%	35%	37%
Economic Tier Three	68%	5%	27%
All LEAs	34%	26%	39%

Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018); North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2018 County Tier Designations



Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018); North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2018 County Tier Designations

Dual Employment

Another strategy employed by many North Carolina LEAs is utilizing dual employment, where school bus drivers have another position within the LEA. For example, a school bus driver might drive his or her morning route(s), then work another position in the school district, and then drive the school bus afternoon route(s). There are many configurations of the dual employment approach that are discussed below. Many LEAs have gone so far as to require all their non-certified staff to obtain a school bus driver's license. However, some LEAs have found that requiring non-certified staff to obtain a license and drive a school bus can hinder recruitment and retention of employees in other departments, due to the reality that driving a school bus requires a very different skillset from other LEA jobs.

Overall, the average LEA reported having about 36% of their school bus drivers employed somewhere else in the LEA. Larger school districts have a higher percentage of full-time drivers, presumably due to tiered routing use (*Table 5*).

Table 5: Average Percentage of Dual Employment by LEA Size

Number of Drivers in LEA	Average Percentage of Drivers who are Dual Employed*
Over 400+	0%
300-399	40%
200-299	46%
100-199	45%
0-99	39%
All LEAs	36%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

** Note: This is survey-reported data. Other data submitted by the LEAs about bus drivers and routes in October 2017 indicated somewhat different percentages.*

Study Results

Q1 | School Bus Driver Compensation Across North Carolina

School Bus Driver Pay

Inadequate pay was the most frequently mentioned issue by school transportation directors when asked about recruitment and retention challenges. Over half of the survey respondents mentioned this issue, as well as all the interviewed school transportation directors. *Table 6* presents the low, average, and high hourly pay rates, averaged by LEA.

Table 6: Hourly Compensation Rates by Size and Economic Tier of LEAs

Number of Drivers in LEA	Low	Average	High
All LEAs	\$12.96	\$14.13	\$16.84
(Standard deviation)	(\$1.15)	(\$1.18)	(\$1.93)
Over 400 Drivers	\$12.75	\$14.23	\$19.20
300-399 Drivers	\$13.42	\$15.51	\$20.57
200-299 Drivers	\$13.68	\$14.31	\$16.92
100-199 Drivers	\$12.90	\$14.17	\$16.94
0-99 Drivers	\$12.86	\$14.00	\$16.52
Economic Tier One	\$13.21	\$14.54	\$17.45
Economic Tier Two	\$13.26	\$14.12	\$16.96
Economic Tier Three	\$12.44	\$13.82	\$16.32

Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018); North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2018 County Tier Designations

The most notable trend in comparing hourly rates by LEA size is that the high end of the hourly rate increases as the size of the LEA increases. Contradicting the general connection between LEA size and economic tier, the average high rates of the LEAs is higher for the lower tiered counties. This is despite the fact that retention rates are generally similar when comparing across economic tiers, and may be explained by the idea that rural LEAs have a core group of long term school bus drivers. Across LEA size and economic tier, the high rates of pay are between \$3 and \$7 more than the low rates of pay. Raises are few and far between in most LEAs, an issue school transportation directors identified as a hindrance to retaining good drivers.

School Bus Driver Benefits

In the survey, 31% of respondents stated that lack of benefits was a large problem when trying to recruit drivers; each interviewed director concurred. Transportation directors said that if they were able to offer benefits they would have a much easier time hiring drivers. However, in many LEAs it is difficult for a school bus driver to accrue enough hours to earn benefits. [Note: 20 hours/week for partial benefits; 30 hours/week for full benefits].

Currently, 31.9% of school bus drivers accrue full benefits by working at least 30 hours per week as a bus driver; however, six large LEAs account for 73% of these full-time drivers. That leaves an average of 8.6% of drivers as full-time dedicated drivers for all other LEAs.

One approach to increasing hours to qualify for benefits is to offer dual employment. 34.8% of all drivers across the state attain benefits by pairing driving with another position within the LEA. While this means that 66.7% of drivers across the state work enough hours to earn benefits, the numbers vary greatly by LEA and are highly concentrated in the largest LEAs. Many LEAs have few drivers that ever acquire benefits, with 29% of the LEAs reporting that less than one quarter of their drivers work 30 hours per week in any capacity with the school system.

While overall many drivers currently earn benefits, these are primarily a small number of veteran drivers, exceptional children route drivers, drivers in large counties, or drivers in counties heavily invested in dual employment.

Survey respondents and interview participants stated that once drivers had been on the job for 5-7 years, they were more likely to be working full time in some capacity and tended to stay with the job long term. The benefits problem is thus greater with new recruits and junior drivers. In many LEAs, few candidates are offered benefits right away or can expect them in their first few years on the job and it is this fact that often makes the job unattractive to potential drivers.

Q1.A | Driving Experience of School Bus Drivers

The majority of school bus drivers have no previous experience driving a school bus when hired by their local LEA, as shown in *Table 7*.

Table 7: Previous Experience of Drivers by LEA Size and Economic Tier

Number of Drivers in LEA	Previous School Bus Driving Experience
Total	10%
Over 400 Drivers	1%
300-399 Drivers	2%
200-299 Drivers	4%
100-199 Drivers	7%
0-99 Drivers	13%
Economic Tier One	18%
Economic Tier Two	5%
Economic Tier Three	5%

Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018); North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2018 County Tier Designations

It is notable that the overlapped categories of small LEAs and those in economic tier one have a greater, but still small, percentage of drivers with previous school bus driving experience. Interviewed transportation directors said that as the economy improves they have more difficulty recruiting drivers. It is possible that experienced drivers in economically limited counties have fewer jobs opportunities than those in other areas. Further, the low number of recruits with existing licenses means that most new drivers need to receive CDL training, licensing, and earn their school bus driver's certificate. This creates significant problems in recruitment, as discussed in sections below.

Q1.B & Q1.C | Rates of Retention & Term of Service for School Bus Drivers

Approximately half (49%) of LEAs retain somewhere between 81% and 100% of their drivers each year. Several survey respondents and interview participants in small districts mentioned that occasionally they have near 100% retention from year-to-year, but the majority of LEAs are in a constant state of recruitment. *Table 8* shows the percentage of LEAs by rate of school bus driver retention.

Table 8: Retention Rates of LEAs

Rate of Retention	Percentage of LEAs
81-100%	49%
61-80%	40%
41-61%	10%
21-40%	0%
1-20%	2%

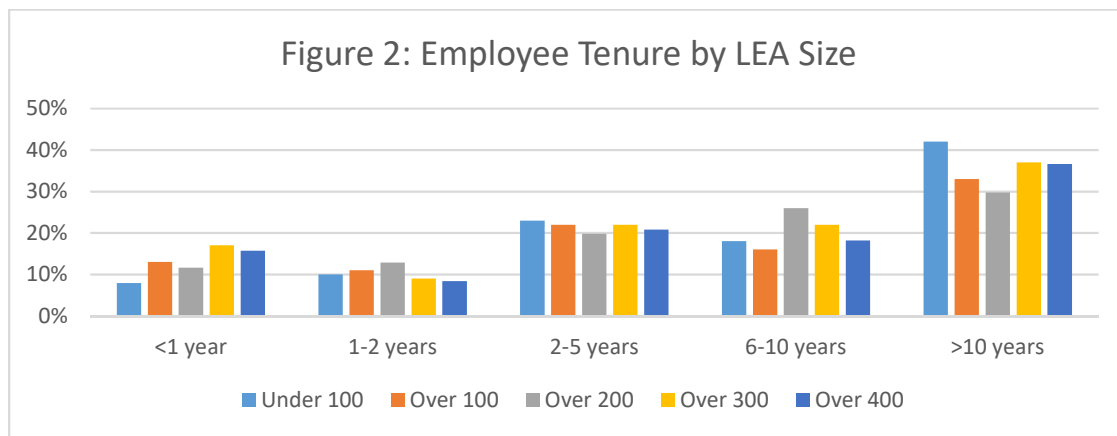
Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

Many respondents repeated the observation that the first year or two is when the greatest turnover occurs and that once a driver had been in an LEA for five years they were likely to stay, as shown in *Table 9* and *Figure 2*, with little difference by economic tier or size. Overall, LEAs report 20%-25% of drivers have 2 years or less experience. DMV School Bus and Traffic Safety reports that they provided new certifications to 5,049 new school and activity bus drivers in 2017. During that same period there were approximately 11,000 certification renewals.

Table 9: Terms of Service for School Bus Drivers by Economic Tier

	<1 year	1-2 years	2-5 years	6-10 years	>10 years
All	9%	11%	22%	19%	38%
Economic Tier One	13%	12%	23%	18%	33%
Economic Tier Two	10%	11%	22%	21%	36%
Economic Tier Three	8%	12%	24%	20%	36%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).



Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

During interviews, school transportation directors attributed retention trends and challenges to two main factors. First, as school bus drivers move up in seniority, drivers are more likely to get better routes and more hours per week. Several interviewees emphasized that being employed sufficient hours to receive benefits was a significant tipping point and that once drivers had benefits they usually stayed. Second, the reason there is so much turnover early on is that many drivers realize that trying to balance the demands of driving a large bus safely with up to seventy students behind them is not a job they can handle long-term.

Some interviewed transportation directors said that they had very little success when trying to recruit potential drivers to work just a couple of hours per day despite LEA efforts to market school bus driver positions directly towards retired people and stay-at-home parents who might be interested in a shortened workday. Transportation directors indicated that it was easier to find such people in the past; one director talked about when he first drove a bus as a high school student, which was a good time part time job but no longer acceptable.

Q1.D | Average Hours Worked by School Bus Drivers

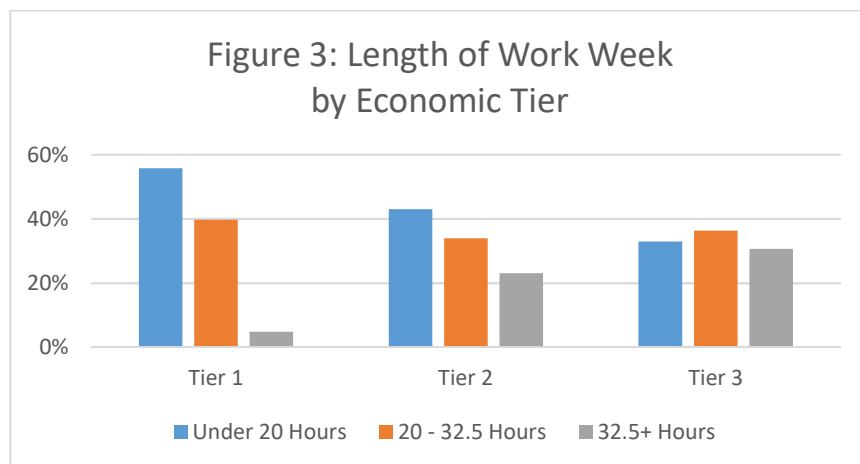
The number of hours available to work is perhaps the defining issue for LEAs when recruiting and retaining high-quality drivers. While an increased hourly rate helps with recruitment and retention, the weekly take-home check remains small, particularly for drivers who only work two or three hours per day. Furthermore, the split shift nature of the job makes it difficult or impossible for a driver to find a second job that can be completed midday before returning for the afternoon shift. LEAs are most successful in recruiting drivers when they can offer full or near full-time hours, usually through securing the candidate another job at the LEA or by offering multiple routes through tiered routing.

In the average LEA most drivers work less than 32.5 hours per week, as *Table 10* indicates, and though 66.7% of drivers end up with full benefits, most aren't full-time drivers and *Table 11* demonstrates. Larger LEAs benefit from their size and economies of scale; they have more schools and more flexibility to stagger schedules and increase hours. Similar benefits are observed in economically advantaged LEAs (*Figure 3*), although this may be explained by correlation with LEA size. With less ability to utilize tiered routing, small and rural LEAs tend to emphasize dual employment when they can.

Table 10: LEA Average Hours Worked by LEA Size (Unweighted)

LEA	Hours Worked Driving per Week		
	Less than 4 Hours Per Day (<20 hr/week)	4-6.5 Hours Per Day (20-32.5 hr/week)	6.5+ Hours Per Day (32.5+ hr/week)
All	46%	36%	18%
Over 400 Drivers	3%	6%	92%
300-399 Drivers	20%	33%	47%
200-299 Drivers	39%	31%	29%
100-199 Drivers	56%	26%	17%
0-99 Drivers	47%	42%	11%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).



Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018); North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2018 County Tier Designations

Table 11: Percentages of Full Time Versus Part Time Drivers by Size of LEA (Weighted)

Number of Drivers in LEA	Percentage of Drivers Who Are:						
	Full Time Drivers (30+ hours, full benefits)	Full Time Dual Employees (30+ hours, full benefits)	Full Time Other (30+ hours, possible benefits)	Part Time Permanent Drivers (20+ hours, partial benefits)	Part Time Permanent Dual Employees (20+ hours, partial benefits)	Part Time Other (20+ hours, possible benefits)	Part Time Temporary (<20 hours, no benefits)
Over 400+	81%	12%	0%	5%	0%	0%	1%
300-399	36%	39%	2%	16%	0%	1%	5%
200-299	45%	30%	2%	17%	0%	0%	6%
100-199	8%	50%	2%	16%	0%	2%	22%
0-99	8%	39%	2%	24%	3%	1%	22%
All LEAs	31.9%	34.8%	1.7%	16.4%	0.9%	0.9%	13.3%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, TD-2R Bus Driver Salary and Route Times Report.

A recurring theme from the surveys and interviews was that many smaller and rural school transportation directors would not be able to fully staff their school bus fleet if they did not use dual employment. Many LEAs depend upon district policies requiring non-certified staff, such as teacher’s assistants, custodial staff, and child nutrition workers, to obtain licenses and drive routes as necessary. Even when tiered routing is a possibility, most districts still utilize dual employment to some degree. It cannot be underemphasized that, presently, transportation directors report that requiring dual-employment is the only thing giving some LEAs sufficient drivers to operate daily.

Dual employment can work both for and against recruitment efforts. It may be an attractive option for non-driving staff, particularly for cafeteria staff who may be working short hours otherwise, as well as for teacher’s assistants, as their hours have been cut back recently in North Carolina. On the other hand, many custodial workers, child nutrition staff, and teacher assistants may have neither the desire nor the skillset to drive a large school bus, even after obtaining a permit.

Survey respondents conferred with LEA Human Resources and other appropriate departments to determine whether demanding school bus driver certification helped or hindered recruitment and retention. As can be seen in *Tables 12 and 13*, requiring non-certified staff is more likely to hinder recruitment and retention of those positions, although the effect was less for child nutrition workers who some LEA directors reported as working shorter hours. The ratio of LEAs reporting hindrance to help were between 2:1 and 6.5:1.

Retention appears to have worse ratios than recruitment which could potentially be a result of other staff not realizing what was entailed with being a school bus driver or a result of applying the requirement to existing staff who were not aware of it when they started working for the LEA.

Table 12: Impact on Recruitment of other Non-Certified Staff when Required to Have School Bus Driver Certificate

	Child Nutrition	Teacher Asst	Custodial/ Janitor	Other
Helped Recruitment	8%	8%	6%	3%
Hindered Recruitment	16%	34%	24%	14%
No Impact	13%	10%	15%	22%
License Not Required	63%	48%	55%	62%
Hindered/Helped	2	4.1	4	5

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

Table 13: Impact on Retention of other Non-Certified Staff when Required to Have School Bus Driver Certificate

	Child Nutrition	Teacher Asst	Custodial/ Janitor	Other
Helped Retention	6%	5%	6%	0%
Hindered Retention	15%	30%	25%	8%
No Impact	17%	20%	21%	26%
License Not Required	62%	45%	48%	66%
Hindered/Helped	2.6	6.5	4.4	Only Hinderance

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

Q1.E | Career Paths for School Bus Drivers

School bus drivers who leave their jobs seldom stay within the LEA:

Table 14: Types of Jobs After Leaving Bus Driving

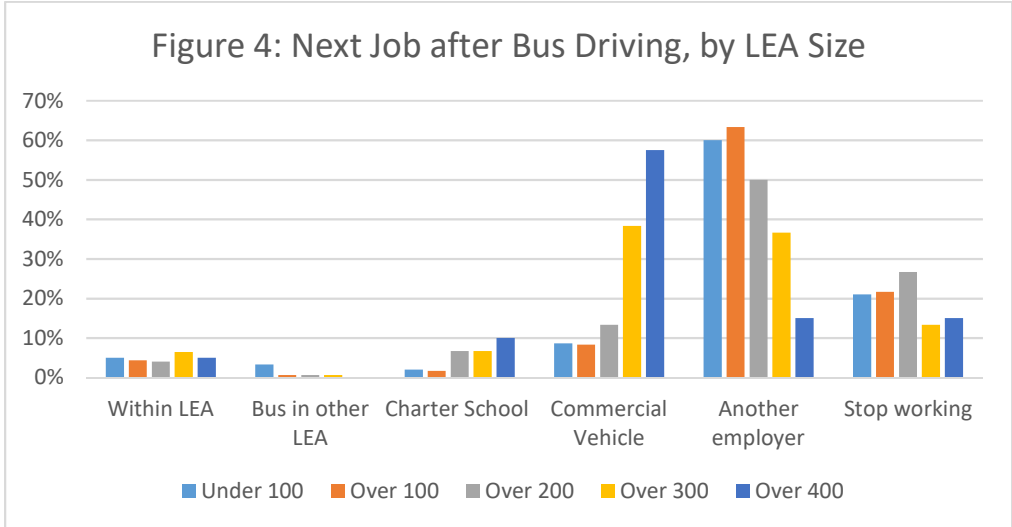
Next Job	Percentage of Former Drivers
Another Job Within LEA	7%
Drive a School for another LEA/Charter	7%
Drive a Different Commercial Vehicle	10%
Take a Non-Driving Job for Another Employer	55%
Stop working (Including Retiring)	21%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

The primary reasons interview participants gave for school bus drivers leaving the profession was low pay, lack of benefits, insufficient hours, and student discipline. Several interviewees said that since the state began requiring bus drivers to obtain commercial driver licenses (decades ago), many drivers realized they could make more money by driving commercial trucks. That trend is expected to continue.

There are notable differences in the post-driving job choice for school bus drivers based upon the size of the LEA (*Figure 4*). Most significantly, larger districts report many more of their drivers switch to driving commercial vehicles. This may be due to larger cities and counties having more opportunities for commercial drivers. When drivers do stay within the LEA, there are many different jobs they move into. Most often, they are dual employees who get increased hours in their other job. The most common jobs are teacher assistants, custodians, and cafeteria workers, including managerial roles in those fields. The other LEA jobs noted were clerical staff, teachers, fuel truck drivers, mechanics, and grounds workers.

Figure 4: Types of Jobs After Leaving Bus Driving



Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

Q1.F | School Bus Drivers Working Within LEA

The majority of school bus drivers in North Carolina work solely in the LEA as drivers, either as full or part time drivers. *Table 11* compares how many hours drivers work and if they are dual employees. Overall, 31.9% of all drivers work 30 or more hours per week (earning full benefits) by only driving, while 34.8% are full time because they drive and have another position in the LEA. Approximately 16.4% of the drivers are part time permanent employees (20+ hours but less than 30) who drive a school bus, compared to just 0.9% who are dual, part time employees.

Table 11 (repeated): Percentages of Full Time Versus Part Time Drivers by Size of LEA (Weighted)

Number of Drivers in LEA	Percentage of Drivers Who Are:						
	Full Time Drivers (30+ hours, full benefits)	Full Time Dual Employees (30+ hours, full benefits)	Full Time Other (30+ hours, possible benefits)	Part Time Permanent Drivers (20+ hours, partial benefits)	Part Time Permanent Dual Employees (20+ hours, partial benefits)	Part Time Other (20+ hours, possible benefits)	Part Time Temporary (<20 hours, no benefits)
Over 400+	81%	12%	0%	5%	0%	0%	1%
300-399	36%	39%	2%	16%	0%	1%	5%
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0-99	8%	39%	2%	24%	3%	1%	22%
All LEAs	31.9%	34.8%	1.7%	16.4%	0.9%	0.9%	13.3%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, TD-2R Bus Driver Salary and Route Times Report.

The most notable result is that larger LEAs are much more likely to have full-time drivers who do not have other positions within the LEA. Meanwhile, not only do the small LEAs have few full-time dedicated school bus drivers, they have more temporary employees who work less than 20 hours a week and accrue no benefits. Furthermore, it can be seen that all but the largest LEAs utilize dual employees to a significant degree.

These results shed light on the significant differences between LEAs with respect to the use of dual employment to bring school bus drivers up to partial or full employment. Large LEAs have the flexibility and resources to stagger schedules and arrange tiered routing, which allows more drivers to have more hours. LEAs that are unable to employ tiered routing may turn to allowing or requiring dual employment when they can, a finding supported by comments in both the survey responses and in the interviews. In truth, many districts support a hybrid strategy, using both techniques to most effectively use drivers.

Q2 | The Challenges of Recruiting and Retaining School Bus Drivers Faced by Local School Administrative Units

The 102 transportation directors who completed the survey identified numerous challenges to recruiting and retaining school bus drivers. Importantly, there were consistent themes across LEA size and county economic health, reviewed below. However, there is one important exception to these larger state-level themes. There are LEAs and school transportation directors who would prefer to utilize tiered routing but are unable to do so because there were too few schools in the LEA or the enrollment service area is too large to cover with tiered route structures. These structural and geographic barriers are important to highlight.

Recruitment

In terms of recruitment, four main issues were noted in the surveys and interviews:

- First, low pay was identified as a key challenge by 54% of the survey respondents. Some directors believed the hourly rate to be adequate but that if there was a daily rate instead, it would attract more candidates.
- The second main issue is related to the first; 39% of survey respondents said that insufficient hours were a key challenge, both per day and over the course of the year.
- Third, 13% of survey respondents and over half of those interviewed specifically noted that drivers disliked the long break between morning and afternoon shifts as they would be unable to secure a second job to cover that lost mid-day time.
- Fourth, 31% of survey respondents said that lack of benefits kept potential drivers away.

Several interview participants connected these issues, pointing out that any strategy to increase hours would serve to increase weekly pay and bring more drivers up to levels where they could accrue benefits.

Time to Become a Driver

Another issue that came up in interviews and was mentioned by 26% of the survey respondents was the time and money it takes for a potential driver to obtain a license to drive. The average time it takes to get a driver working on the job is **54 days**, although it can take months longer in some LEAs. Most people looking for work cannot afford to wait such a long time and many candidates withdraw their applications to look for other work. In LEAs with dual employment, this may be less of an issue, as the applicant can usually start the other job. However, the LEA remains a driver short until the applicant is trained and approved. Transportation directors noted that the commercial learners permit and the additional 14-day waiting period is a sticking point and may lead school bus drivers to leave the recruitment program. Furthermore, since drivers have a full commercial driver's license, some drivers have found that once they have the license they are able to find more hours and better working conditions elsewhere.

Startup Cost

Besides having to possibly wait months to get through classroom and on-the-road training, the candidates also have to pay sizable upfront costs out of pocket. While many LEAs cover a portion of these costs (see *Table 15*), it is usually only after a certain amount of time on the job, most commonly

three months. Several directors said that the candidates often don't have the money available and that the LEAs lose more potential candidates due to this. Furthermore, LEAs in more economically distressed areas tend to cover less of these upfront costs.

Table 15: Upfront Costs for Drivers and Percentage Covered by Economic Tier

	Upfront Costs	Percentage Covered by LEA
All	\$260	56%
Economic Tier One	\$256	67%
Economic Tier Two	\$272	65%
Economic Tier Three	\$253	41%

Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Bus Driver Survey (2018).

Many respondents discussed additional issues that affected recruitment. These included:

- The average number of drivers who are out each day and require substitutes was 9%, although 15% of LEAs said a typical day had 15% or more absences. This puts a strain on the entire system, requiring more substitutes (often employees primarily in other roles at the LEA) and forcing more emphasis on recruiting efforts.
- Too many candidates fail the permitting process due to poor driving records, drug testing, and background checks.
- There are insufficient resources to dedicate a staff member to recruitment efforts, particularly in smaller LEAs.
- Low unemployment makes it hard to attract drivers; private companies offer better compensation.
- It would help to offer incentives (e.g., longevity pay), bonuses (e.g., attendance bonuses), or supplements.
- There are too few substitutes, which forces teacher assistants to sub more often, which burns them out.
- A mentor program would help new drivers and give veteran drivers more money.
- The new DOT medical card requirements are difficult to manage and have reduced the number of drivers.
- It is hard to find flexible, dependable, hardworking people.

Retention

Many of the issues that are barriers to recruiting potential drivers also compel employed drivers to leave. Low pay was again the dominant issue (51% of respondents), followed by number of hours (39%), and lack of benefits (27%). All three of these issues are compensation issues. In the interviews, transportation directors said that the lack of pay raises affected morale and led drivers to leave; they recommended finding ways to increase salaries more regularly and to lower the hours necessary to obtain benefits.

Another issue that was brought up by 29% of the survey respondents and in interviews involved student discipline. Many drivers feel that they are not supported by school administrators; when they

enforce rules or issue write-ups to misbehaving students, the school principals often do not follow-up. LEAs working to employ senior citizens on a part-time basis have particularly found that they feel disrespected by the students and the schools. Several directors suggested having more paid monitors on the buses to let the driver concentrate on the road.

Overall, survey respondents and interview participants indicate that the state is making strides to increase the requirements for drivers, which could lead to a more capable school bus driver workforce. However, these requirements are also either precluding candidates or compelling active school bus drivers to leave their jobs due to additional requirements. Simultaneously, school bus drivers are increasingly asked more of and yet are not given the respect they feel they deserve. One respondent suggested trying to motivate the drivers through small incentives, regular get-togethers, Bus Driver Appreciation Week activities, bus rodeos, and similar activities to boost morale and a sense of respect for the position.

Q3 | Potential recommendations for consideration to improve recruitment and retention of school bus drivers

There are many potential ideas to improve recruitment and retention of school bus drivers. Below you will find some of these. Some are simpler (like hourly wage increases) and some require statutory changes and would thus be more difficult.

Increase Hourly Wage Compensation

Further increase hourly rate of pay as was done in the 2017 legislative session

Increase disparity between starting and ending salaries and encourage/establish an hourly rate increase schedule/process to retain more experienced drivers or to reward and retain drivers with superior driving and student management skills

Establish or permit incentive-based compensation from state funds such as attendance bonuses, longevity, safe-driving, or a mentorship program (where drivers could be paid to provide training to other drivers)

Increase Benefits Availability / Work Hours

Pay drivers for additional hours of work for training time each week with a mentor or as a mentor

Encourage employers to make it easier for bus drivers to gain dual-employment, if desired, within the LEA and look for jobs which more closely align with the skills of school bus drivers

Reduce the hour threshold for split shift employees to receive full or partial benefits

Enhance Recruitment: Reduce Recruitment Time and Upfront Costs

Explore options, in cooperation with DMV School Bus and Traffic Safety, for achieving tighter training time targets for school bus driver applicants statewide to reduce recruitment lag

Provide incentives for non-certified personnel to drive buses or to get permits and provide a supply of substitute drivers

Reduce the upfront costs of becoming a bus driver to prevent these costs from being a recruitment barrier

Define an intermediate job role such that a prospective driver who has passed the basic checks and tests and has obtained a commercial learner's permit can be employed and paid while training for permanent licensure and placement

Enhance Retention: Increase Job Satisfaction / Training

Provide/Require more paid hours of training in areas of classroom management and safe driving

Encourage school-based administrators to support their bus drivers as they would a classroom teacher when it comes to reported discipline issues

Increase State support to provide for school bus transportation safety assistants to monitor and keep order and reduce the burden on the driver

Fund the inclusion and maintenance of internal camera systems on all school buses to support the drivers and improve student discipline

Fund and include in specifications a service-brake interlock which sets the parking brake automatically during loading and unloading to improve safety and reduce mental and physical load on the driver during stops

Review other emerging technologies to improve driver comfort, job satisfaction, and oversight

Define and fund a bus driver training role within the LEA with job responsibilities to ride along, assess, and assist bus drivers in improving their driving and student management skills. Require reported regular assessments of drivers as you would classroom teachers.

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