Monroe schools need bus drivers

Shortage

Districts are actively recruiting for new hires, and the shortage is acute where grades are being reconfigured

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On a typical day at the East Irondequoit Central School District transportation garage, it's all hands on deck.

Facing down a shortage of bus drivers means everyone, from the transportation director on down to the mechanics and administrative staff, could be called on to take a wheel, hit the road and head out to pick up and drop off students.

"We've got to do what it takes" to go out and pick up all of our kids, said Kathy Callon, head of the district's transportation department. "We were worse off last year than this year, but we've been consolidating routes where we have to and there are definitely days I have the mechanics and dispatchers out there driving."

And that district is not alone. Other school systems in Monroe County, including Greece and Rush-Henrietta, are actively recruiting for new bus drivers, with some using online tools and video. Rush-Henrietta even released a fun recruitment video last week of drivers and transportation staff lip-syncing "All About That Bus" to the tune of Meghan Trainor's hit "All About That Bass."

The issue is especially acute there, as Rush-Henrietta drives toward the 201718 school year with a plan to reconfigure

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Patrick Lynch of Greece, a school bus attendant with Greece Central School District, is working on obtaining his bus driver's license. He practices by making sure everything is working on the bus.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lynch, right, tells Frank Copenhagen, a driver trainer and safety coordinator with the school district, what he's doing as he does an external examination of the bus. Copenhagen is also a certified examiner for school bus drivers.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER **"Drivers are truly the ambassadors of our school district. They are our**

eyes and ears."

RICHARD STUTZMAN

INTERIM DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT, GREECE CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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school distributions that means going from five kindergarten-through-fifthgrade elementary schools to four kindergarten- through-third-grade schools and two fourth-through-sixth-grade intermediate schools. Associated new bus runs call for at least 10 new drivers. Add in pending retirements and various leaves and Rush-Henrietta is in need of nearly 25 new drivers, said Director of Transportation Shirley Smith-Gravanda.

So far, the issue hasn't become so severe that districts are cutting back on after- school runs or field trips, but that doesn't mean it couldn't get worse.

"Sometimes it's really a magic show behind the scenes, though," said Richard Stutzman, interim deputy superintendent in the Greece Central School District. He joked that some days, he'd be on the road driving a bus, too, if he had a proper license. "But we make it so nobody notices the glitch on the outside."

The pinch isn't just in this area, either. Peter Manella, executive director of the New York Association for Pupil Transportation, said districts statewide are hurting for bus drivers.

"Part of the problem is that the overall unemployment rate has gone down," he said. That rate is currently 4.9 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "When that rate goes down, part-time highway jobs aren't always something that people want."

Nationally, 92 percent of school districts say they are running short on bus drivers, according to a recent survey by *School Bus Fleet* magazine. And, about a quarter of those say their problem is "severe" or "desperate."

Those words are too strong to describe the situation in the Greece Central School District, but it is fair to say there's a significant shortage there, said Stutzman. That district — which has the nation's 92nd-largest public school bus fleet — is looking for somewhere around 25 drivers.

Scott Banner, the district's assistant director of transportation, said the department has about 240 drivers and 215 buses and other vehicles. There's a daily need for about 200 drivers, and the numbers get tight when accounting for snowbirds, late runs, illnesses, field trips and sports runs. On a typical day, the district transports about 11,000 students to 87 different destinations.

Like the others, his district has nearly continual training programs for prospective drivers. It's a job that typically has a starting wage of around $14

per hour — while those with experience can earn significantly more — with weekly hours running anywhere from 25 to close to a full-time 40.

Caveats are that the job can be demanding, the training is intensive, the responsibility is grave and the schedule is unique.

Training can take as many as three or four months, and it is mostly unpaid. Rush-Henrietta and East Irondequoit are among the districts that do hire prospective drivers as bus attendants (about $10 per hour) during their training period.

Callon said interested applicants need to be at least 21 years old and have a clean driver's license. There is drug and alcohol testing, hours of behind-the-wheel and classroom training and a commercial driver's license test with the state Department of Motor Vehicles.

The job also has big benefits for the right kind of people, said Deb Rigby, a longtime driver and now operations expediter in Greece. While it's true that drivers often start with a series of morning bus runs, then have a few hours of down time before heading out to do afternoon runs, that also means daytime flexibility, there's also the opportunity to join the state retirement pension system, and perhaps most of all, the chance to make a meaningful impact on the lives of students.

"Drivers are truly the ambassadors of our school district," said Stutzman. "They are our eyes and ears. Unlike most of us, they get two home visits a day and get to see things that other people in the district don't have the opportunity to see. And, we take great care to help them understand their role in that child's day, they are going to be the first impression of the district the child sees each morning and the last impression they leave the district with in the evening."

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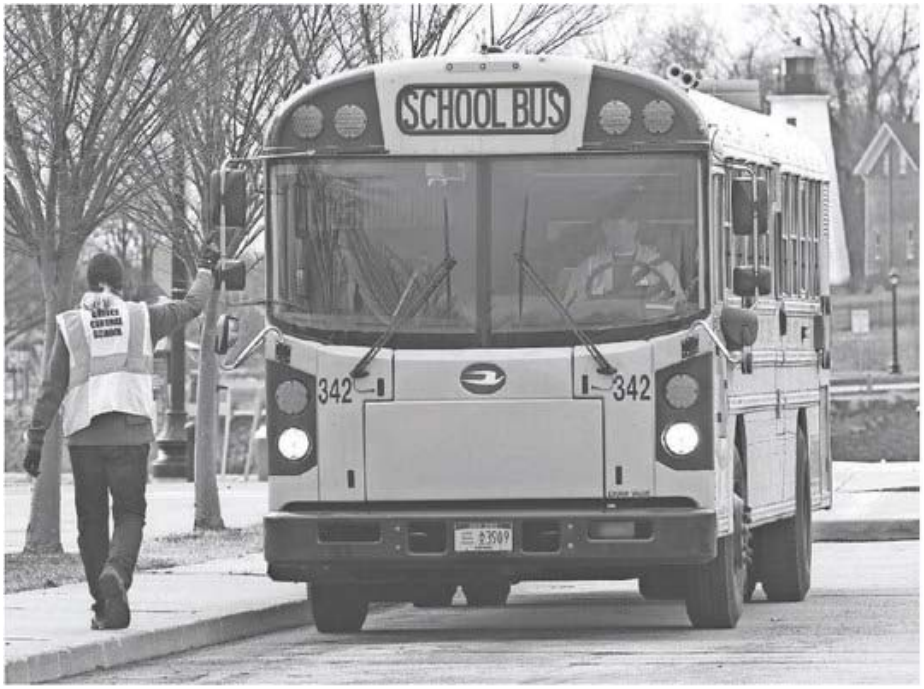

Patrick Lynch practices parallel parking under the direction of Frank Copenhagen. The Greece Central School District has nearly continual training programs for prospective drivers.

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PETER MANELLA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NEW YORK ASSOCIATION FOR PUPIL TRANSPORTATION

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