

RCSD makes plea to parents amid lack of bus drivers

Justin Murphy

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Swamped by school bus driver resignations, the Rochester City School District is asking for parents to volunteer to opt out of transportation to start the school year.

The district is missing scores of bus drivers, with more resignations coming in every day, spokeswoman Marisol Ramos- Lopez said. That includes district employees as well as drivers with First Student, Ontario Bus Inc. and RTS.

Parents received an automated phone call Thursday morning asking them to contact the district if they are able to bring their own children to school.

RCSD is far from alone in its dilemma. Districts across the country are reporting dire driver shortages; a recent survey of transportation directors showed that more than half considered the shortage in their district “severe” or “desperate.”

The district already changed the start times for its schools to better align with a reduced number of drivers, but that has proven insufficient.

Ramos-Lopez said it is hard to say what the target number of opt-out students is because the number of resignations keeps mounting.

“At this juncture, all options are being considered with the understanding that this shortage may continue to impact transporting our students,” she said in a statement. “We are meeting with various stakeholder groups today to share these options and will share the determination as soon as possible.”

Schools in Monroe County and elsewhere have been contending with a driver shortage for years. The job combines relatively low pay, unusual hours, the stress of controlling dozens of children and the need to operate a large vehicle.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it worse in many aspects. Many of the older people who might ordinarily drive a bus are staying home to avoid getting ill; others could be unwilling to be vaccinated or tested regularly, as RCSD is requiring.

Training sites to obtain the necessary commercial driver’s license may have been closed during the past 18 months, making it more difficult to get trained.

“There is a shortage of drivers, and people are leaving not only because of the grueling year of illness, but the loss of work, the loss of medical benefits,” said Michael Cordiello, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 in New York City. “It’s been a very rough year for our members.”

Schools elsewhere in the country have offered cash bonuses to parents who offer to drive their children to school or have eliminated busing for general education students altogether.

Other local districts are eager to hire bus drivers as well. RCSD’s task is significantly more complicated, though: according to a 2017 study, nearly a quarter of its riders attend private and charter schools as well as Urban-Suburban destinations. It also has a much higher percentage of homeless and otherwise mobile students, making it more difficult to establish efficient routes.

The same 2017 study showed that about 11% of elementary students walked to school or got a ride.

In a Facebook video, school board member Beatriz LeBron criticized the district for not acting fast enough on the issue and communicating poorly with parents.

“School starts next week; we knew that COVID was impacting transportation for weeks on end,” she said. “For us to not figure out that we’re going to be in this crisis and have some foresight, some planning ... (is) a problem.”

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.



The Rochester City School District is hoping some parents will take their children to school rather than using school buses. GETTY IMAGES

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