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School bus system nearing 'collapse' due to lack of drivers, Akron transportation leader says

Jennifer Pignolet / *Akron Beacon Journal*

The school bus system in Akron and across the state is on the verge of collapse due to an ongoing lack of drivers, the transportation coordinator for Akron Public Schools said.

Buses are already making students late to school or late coming home, coordinator William Andexler said, and sometimes parents and students are having to adjust to a last-minute change in morning pickup times.

If the problem gets worse, he said, it could result in a canceling of services, and parents or other caregivers becoming responsible, possibly at the last minute, for transporting their children to school. "I keep saying this — not just Akron, but many districts, are right on the edge of, it's all going to start tumbling down," Andexler said. "It's just going to start failing."

Akron is down 19 bus drivers this year, he said, a drop of about 20% in the workforce. He's also down about 50 to 60 van drivers from a usual 160.

Akron schools spokesman Mark Williamson said the district is working on back-up plans for what would happen if the district was unable to transport children, but it has not yet come to that point.

Barberton adjusts as it temporarily cancels busing

The driver shortage is nationwide, with the Massachusetts National Guard called in to drive bus routes in that state, and others considering the same. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine addressed the issue in a press conference last week, said the possibility was under consideration here.

In Summit County, several districts have reported bus driver shortages, and the issue has already caused one district, Barberton, to cancel services.

Barberton Superintendent Jeffrey Ramnytz said it became clear on Tuesday the district wouldn't be able to maintain all its bus routes. That morning, he said, they were down six drivers out of 25, for various reasons. "I put a broadcast out that we were going to have some delays," Ramnytz said.

The remaining drivers doubled up on routes to complete the runs. But hours later, the situation got worse. "Mid-day I got a report that we were down three or four more [drivers]," he said. "[We] had to take a look at the next step."

With 10 drivers unavailable, the superintendent decided to cancel the district's main busing routes. "We suspended busing for a period of time until everybody was able to get back," he said. He expects to be back to full force by Oct. 11.

Until then, the district continues to provide busing for preschool, the 4 Cities Compact, special needs students and after-school activities.

Ramnytz said staff has come in early to the buildings to meet students who may need to be dropped off earlier than their buses would have brought them to school. "We felt we needed to do that for parents because they need to get to work," Ramnytz said.

Parents were also given the option to have their children attend remotely, but the superintendent said few have chosen that option.

Districts put out pleas for drivers

Green Local Schools has also canceled routes on a case-by-case basis, district spokeswoman Julie McMahan said, but nothing on an extended basis.

Copley-Fairlawn put out a plea on social media they were "desperately seeking bus drivers and substitute bus drivers."

The problem, Akron's Andexler said, is it takes two months, at best, to screen and train new drivers if they don't already have a commercial driver's license.

Akron recently held a job fair, which netted about 20 candidates for driving positions, he said. But the first hurdle — a check of their driving records — usually weeds out a good chunk of candidates, he said.

Akron has a more stringent set of requirements than the state minimum, he said. For example, the state says a person can't have a conviction for driving while impaired on their record in the last 10 years. Akron's rules eliminate anyone who has ever had such a conviction.

After other background checks and the full training, Andexler said out of a pool of 20, he would expect three or four to make it through to become full-time drivers.

The district pays a base wage of \$19.21 an hour and is one of the few districts that offers benefits, including health insurance, for fully contracted drivers. Drivers going through training can also earn pay as bus assistants or office staff until they are licensed to drive.

COVID-19 quarantines adding to staffing challenge

One day this week, Andexler said he had to pull all the office staff licensed to drive and put them on buses.

In addition to having a workforce depleted by 20%, on any given day another 10-20% are absent, he said. Many have had to quarantine, he said, for exposure to COVID-19.

If one bus is out due to a lack of driver, the stops on that bus are split among three other drivers, depending on who has enough space on their bus to accommodate the extra students. That means additional driving time as well, and can alter the drop-off and pickup times.

Athletics have also been impacted, he said, with events sometimes starting hours late because of a lack of a driver for a bus. The district is obligated to transport students home at the end of the day first, Andexler said, and then transport students for sports and other activities after those routes are complete.

Drivers have more job options, including Amazon

The district was able to avoid laying off bus drivers during remote learning last year, as it was still transporting students for private and charter schools, as required by law.

But drivers now have a plethora of options to choose from of where to work, Andexler said, including Amazon. Driving a school bus is unique because of the schedule, which requires employees to come to work twice in the same day with hours in between. It's not for everyone, he said.

The pandemic is also again peaking, and many potential drivers are hesitant to take on a job that involves being around a large number of other people, Andexler said, even though all students and staff on buses are required to wear masks. The district also installed a new sanitizing system on buses this school year.

Andexler said he is hoping the technology will make drivers feel more comfortable, and will increase recruitment.

Andexler said school districts have always struggled to find drivers, but this year is a perfect storm of several factors that have impacted everyone in education. "We're all on the edge," Andexler said. "It's going to collapse and it's going to be bad."

Anyone who wants to apply to be a bus driver for Akron can go to akronschools.com. Under the "District" tab is a link for an [online job application](#).