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## 'Desperately seeking bus drivers': Shortage forces districts to suspend busing, adjust routes

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A bus driver shortage is complicating another school year already made difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barberton City Schools is temporarily suspending some transportation services, citing "the challenges of delivering education and services to students during a pandemic."

Beginning Wednesday through Oct. 7, transportation services for the district's main bus routes will be suspended, the district announced Tuesday on Facebook.

There is a teacher workday Oct. 8 when students are not required to go to school. Normal busing will resume Oct. 11.

Busing for preschool, the Four Cities Compact, students with special needs and after-school activities will continue normally.

Bus riders must find another way to school or participate in their classes remotely.

The district reiterated that in-person school is open and working.

"Please know that we are doing everything possible to keep our students in front of our teachers — we appreciate your patience and understanding as we work through this challenge!" the district wrote.

Copley-Fairlawn City Schools also said it's "desperately seeking bus drivers and substitute bus drivers."

"The bus driver shortage is not unique to our school district but, rather, is a state and national problem. This is a crisis that continues to get worse," the district wrote on Facebook on Wednesday. "We ask each of our community members to help with this problem by sharing this message with anyone who might be interested in joining our school district as a bus driver."

Copley-Fairlawn City Schools has been forced to combine bus routes and cancel extracurricular activities because of a lack of bus drivers available to drive students. "If we are unable to identify new bus drivers we anticipate that our ability to transport our students to and from school on a daily basis will become more difficult," the district wrote. "We anticipate that we will be forced to cancel additional extra-curricular activities because we simply do not have a bus driver to drive our teams. We absolutely do not want this to become our reality thus, the reason we are asking for help.

The district emphasized it's extremely grateful for its bus drivers and desperately wants to provide them with help and support by adding new bus drivers.

### **Nationwide decrease in number of school bus drivers**

Last school year, there were 314,920 school bus drivers nationally — a nearly 15% decrease from the previous year, according to a May 2020 report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

There are currently 18,349 active school bus drivers in Ohio as of Sept. 17, according to the state Department of Education. The department said they did not have figures for previous years.

In a new [nationwide survey](#), half of the 1,500 school transportation coordinators who responded described their bus driver shortages as either "severe" or "desperate." And roughly two-thirds of respondents indicated that the bus driver shortage is their No. 1 problem.

"School bus drivers are an integral part of the education process," said Steve Simmons, president of the New York-based National Association of Pupil Transportation. "Without the bus drivers bringing the kids to school, it would be hard for many people ... to get their students to school."

The bus driver shortage has been ongoing for at least the past two decades, with many districts and bus companies dealing with an aging workforce even before the pandemic hit, Simmons said.

But as with most things, COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem, he said. Among other effects, some aging drivers, who are more at risk for getting sickened by COVID-19, have retired or found other jobs.

### **Petermann Bus Company seeking drivers**

Officials with Petermann Bus Company, which provides busing in Ohio and Pennsylvania, said the company has had to adjust and even cancel some routes due to driver shortages. Petermann provides transportation to the Tallmadge, Hudson, Nardon and Willoughby Eastlake school districts in Northeast Ohio, as well as supplementary services to Akron Public Schools.

"This has been a very challenging year to recruit drivers not just for us, but for our whole nation," Petermann spokesman Edward Flavin said. "We have been able to coordinate with each school district we service to 'share' drivers when possible.

"We have had to also adjust routes and cancel a few in some districts. Lastly, we have combined routes and try our best to not cancel routes, but we have had several instances where we simply could not cover routes due to an insufficient number of drivers and had to unfortunately cancel them."

There have been occasions where providing transportation for after-school events has been difficult, Flavin said. "We have had to adjust some leave times and have asked some customers to have parents transport students to some events," Flavin said.

To recruit more drivers, Flavin said that the company has offered sign-on bonuses and has ramped up as much training as it can. Pay is negotiated through each district and varies.

### **Ohio National Guard help with school busing has not been ruled out**

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said schools should talk with his office if they're having busing problems, and he will see what the state can do.

"We need to understand directly from the schools exactly what the problem is and what their situation is in their school," DeWine said.

DeWine hasn't ruled out deploying the National Guard to help, as his counterpart in Massachusetts did earlier this week. DeWine called on the National Guard several times during the pandemic to help with food banks, testing, vaccine administration and more.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker's office said Monday that as many as 250 National Guard members would be made available "to address staffing shortages in certain districts," according to a news release. It said that 90 would be trained immediately to drive students to school.

*Beacon Journal staff writer April Helms and [The Columbus Dispatch](#) and contributed to this report.*