

School Bus Drivers are “Staff”

By Susan Martin, Central Regional Service Specialist (RSS)



Every morning and every afternoon, the school buses arrive at our schools. In the morning, they leave us with our students, and at the end of the day, they gather those students to take them home. School Bus Drivers are responsible for ensuring the safety of our children as they drive them to and from school. Many drivers assume additional responsibility

by driving for field trips and sporting events. School Bus Drivers keep our schools open each day. School Bus Drivers take the pulse of their students every day. School Bus Drivers know what is going on in the community. School Bus Drivers are the quiet heroes of our school districts.

In late September, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* estimated there to be a shortage of approximately 3,500 bus drivers across Pennsylvania (Tomasic, 2023). School districts have had to address these shortages in creative ways. Some have cancelled routes and closed schools. Some reverted to online classes. Others have notified parents and asked for their help to get kids to school. The problem exists across the country.

How can the school principal help with this situation? We are not the ones hiring and training the drivers. No, we are not. But there are many things we can do to help our drivers feel valued and part of the school team. As school principals, we need to recognize and encourage every adult who interacts with our students. A safe, supportive environment goes a long way to retaining employees.

The most important thing you can do is to get to know your drivers. Can you tell me who drives bus #3? Who has the longest route? Which driver do you get the most (or the least) behavior referrals from? Why is that? Which driver(s) make you cringe when you hear their name? We need to get to know these drivers as people, not just someone who

drives bus #3. As you are out on the bus ramp, take the time to greet the drivers and have a short conversation with them. The first thing you may be thinking is that they are going to complain about the kids or the weather. Then, you must lead the conversation. Ask them about personal things, steering them away from those topics they complain about. Which driver has a son in basic training? Which driver has a wife who published a cookbook? Get to know the drivers in the same manner you get to know your teachers.

Now, take those conversations and turn them into communication with the drivers. Once they begin to trust you as a person, you can begin conversations about their job as a School Bus Driver. Begin to encourage them to voice their concerns, ideas and to give you feedback on issues that affect them. Include them in your weekly staff newsletter or the monthly family newsletter, so they know what is happening at the school. A section of your newsletter could be all about them and their job. You could remind parents to be supportive of the bus drivers.

Your school may have *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (PBIS). Do you include the bus drivers? You may have something as simple as an acknowledgement they can hand to the students each day. Students love receiving little tokens for doing a good job. Why shouldn't the bus drivers have these tokens to recognize their kids? It may improve the overall behavior on the bus! Do you recognize your bus drivers with a token for doing a good job? Our school used "Grayson Greats" to give a shout out to the school staff. These tokens were provided to bus drivers as well. And then, there are the awards assemblies and fun days we have at school. Do you invite your bus drivers? I had a bus driver who showed up at every monthly awards assembly. I made a point of recognizing her and making a big deal that she spent part of her day with us. We also made a point of including the

School Bus Drivers during Teacher Appreciation Week. Our school celebrated the entire school staff during this week, including School Bus Drivers. I'm certain the bus drivers would love to be included in your school activities!

We need to be available to offer guidance and support to our School Bus Drivers. They have good days and bad days. But every day, they are there for our students. When a student on their bus is suffering, the bus drivers take it to heart and suffer with them. When a student comes bouncing out of school with the best news ever, they are right there celebrating with them. The same drivers drive the baseball team regardless of their record. They continue to offer encouraging words and show up to drive them to and from each game. School Bus Drivers give our students so much emotional support. We should be offering the same support to them.

Principals play a crucial role in creating a positive and supportive environment for bus drivers. I know we are all busy and dealing with transportation issues is the last thing we want to do on some days. However, if we support

our School Bus Drivers, they can be a tremendous help in resolving many of the issues that occur on the bus. Without School Bus Drivers, many of us cannot operate our schools. The day won't begin until those big yellow buses show up. If they do not show up, then what?

P.S. You will notice that I capitalized School Bus Drivers throughout this article. I did that on purpose. School Bus Drivers are important, and they need our attention! ■

REFERENCE:

Tomasic, M. (2023, September 23). School bus driver shortage forcing families to scramble for transportation as districts cancel route. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2023/09/23/pennsylvania-school-bus-driver-shortage-baldwin-whitehall-hempfield-central-valley/stories/202309220080>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Susan Martin is a Regional Service Specialist (RSS) for the Central Region. Susan retired as principal of Nancy Grayson Elementary School in the Shippensburg Area School District.*

You may contact your Regional Service Specialists (RSS) at:

Peg Foster – East I Region - foster@papprincipals.org
Dr. Dina Wert – East II Region – wert@papprincipals.org
Thomas Mulvey - East III Region - mulvey@papprincipals.org
Susan Martin – Central Region – martin@papprincipals.org
Darren McLaurin – Central Region - mclaurin@papprincipals.org
Cynthia Zajac – West I Region – zajac@papprincipals.org
Michael Allison – West II Region - allison@papprincipals.org
Dr. Carol Sprinker - West III Region - sprinker@papprincipals.org

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