

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Date: January 3, 2020

Source of Report: LD 1641, Issues Relating to the School Transportation Workforce

Topic: School Transportation

Context

LD 1641 directs the Department of Education – in collaboration with the Department of Labor - to examine issues associated with the school transportation workforce including strategies for hiring, training, and retaining school transportation personnel. Implied in the directive is concern about the adequacy of the numbers of school transportation workers, a concern which is held and substantiated both nationally and in Maine. For example, in 2016 the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT) issued a *Driver Shortage Study* based on a national survey. Key findings of this study are that over half of the respondents reported the bus driver shortage is their number one problem, and respondents overwhelmingly believe the trend of having a shortage of bus drivers is getting worse (NAPT, 2016). A more recent study, conducted by the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) reported on the worker shortage and offered a list of factors that contribute to it: “...there is a shortage of school bus drivers in many parts of the country, which is unfortunately typical when unemployment is low and there are many competing job opportunities. Many school bus drivers are part-time, rather than full-time employees, which also limits job benefits (for example, insurance and retirement). The Department encourages school districts, private schools, charter schools, and contractors to seek innovative, effective ideas for recruiting, training, and retaining qualified school bus driver applicants. Such efforts should include compensating professional school bus drivers at a level that is commensurate with the complex job they perform,” (2018).

Within Maine, several news reports have highlighted school districts that have or are experiencing driver shortages: [USA Today](#) featured an article and [NPR](#) featured a newscast a year ago about the one-day closing of the Kermit S. Nickerson Elementary School in Swanville due to insufficient numbers of substitute bus drivers.

Actions

The Department engaged in several activities to gather background information and data regarding the issues raised in LD 1641: The Department organized meetings with stakeholders, with personnel from the Department of Labor, and provided informal time during a presentation at the fall MSMA/MSBA conference for discussion of the topic of school transportation workers. Furthermore, the Department developed a survey to gather data from the field. The results from meetings and the survey are summarized below in I. and II.

I. Meetings

The timeline for the meetings were:

September 25, 2019 – Commissioner’s Office personnel structured a conversation with leaders of MSMA, MSBA, MEA, MPA, and MADSEC. We read through the language of LD 1641 and asked participants to respond to the items in the resolve.

September 27, 2019 – The Department’s School Facilities and Transportation and Safety Team and legislative liaison met with the leaders of the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT) to discuss the items in the resolve.

October 3, 2019 – The Department’s transportation administrator and legislative liaison met with the Department of Labor’s Director of the Bureau of Unemployment and the Division Director of the Bureau of Employment Services to discuss the collaborative study of school transportation workforce issues as directed by LD 1641.

October 25, 2019 – Department legislative liaison structured an informal discussion with school board members and district leaders at the Fall Conference of the Maine School Boards Association during her session on the upcoming legislative session.

Themes that emerged from the discussion with leaders of stakeholders on September 25 and 27 were:

Training – availability of free permit class through Adult Education, fees for taking and often re-taking the CDL exams as a barrier to applicants, availability of coaching for the exam from experienced drivers for applicants, necessity of training in student management in addition to training for safe operation of bus or van, and access to training from certified instructors.

Hiring and Retaining – need to promote and elevate the career area, seek non-traditional aged drivers, schedule Open Houses and Job Fairs to attract applicants, reinvigorate Hire a Vet campaign,

Other Pressures – scheduling of afterschool and athletic events, increase in needs for special transportation arrangements for students who are homeless or displaced, and for students who attend special programs outside of their SAU area, applicants who use alternate medications such as medical marijuana are not able to pass required drug tests.

These same themes were echoed during the informal discussion during the Fall Conference on October 25; school board members spoke of ways their districts had created full time positions for drivers who could perform other duties for the district between the morning and afternoon bus responsibilities, and while board members expressed appreciation for the dedicated service and abilities of drivers who are at or beyond traditional retirement age, they also acknowledged that more drivers of traditional working ages need to be attracted to the positions.

Themes that emerged from the meeting with the Department of Labor in October were: unemployment options, current labor shortage, employee development plans (driving as a step to other positions with increasing responsibility and compensation), recruiting at active retirement living settings and among younger people, Job Fairs, use of Department of Labor Career Centers

and job listing service. Following the meeting, the Department of Labor shared with us a recently developed, user-friendly handout with strategies employers may use to recruit job applicants in the current job market.

The following background information enhances an understanding of the themes that emerged from the meetings regarding training:

Entry-level school bus driver training.

In Maine, new candidates for school bus driver must complete a minimum of forty (40) hours of initial school bus driver training. Curriculum is local choice. Training is historically delivered at the local district and typically delivered by the transportation director or lead school bus driver. Training provided at local districts is typically free for new school bus driver candidates. School bus driver training courses are also offered - for a fee - at school bus driver training schools.

Student riding safety practices training.

In Maine, student riding safety practices training must be delivered two (2) times per year. Curriculum is local choice. Training is historically delivered at the local district by transportation staff, typically, the transportation director or lead school bus driver. Districts must keep records of student riding safety instruction training and school bus emergency evacuation drills.

Transportation employee in-service safety practices training.

In Maine, school bus drivers and transportation employees must complete a minimum of sixteen (16) hours of in-service training annually. The training must include both behind the wheel and classroom training. Curriculum is local choice. Training is historically delivered at the local district and at the annual MDOE sponsored Regional School Transportation Safety Training Conferences.

Training agreement between the Department and Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT).

Annually, the Department contracts services with MAPT to deliver school transportation training: Maine Regional Transportation Safety Conferences (single day trainings at 6 regional sites) and a Maine State School Transportation Conference (4 days of training at one central site.)

Department of Labor Career Centers may be used to help organizations recruit, hire, and train employees.

Their services are provided at no charge for Maine workers and businesses. They can also assist with ideas to districts about job retention and expansion, and offer access to labor market information. Maine Career Center locations include: Augusta, Bangor, Brunswick, Calais, Hinckley, Lewiston, Machias, greater Portland, Presque Isle, Rockland, Springvale, and Wilton. MDOL Career Centers are available as a hiring resource for school districts.

State subsidy considerations.

Transportation operating costs, which includes training, is an eligible expense for determining the subsidy for a school administrative unit per 20-A M.R.S. § 15672(32-C). As transportation

training selection is local choice, districts that hire training services or purchase transportation training programs may submit the training cost to the Department to be included in the district's transportation operation costs and be eligible for allocation. The amount of allocation varies by districts through the EPS formula.

Federal information regarding training.

Under a new U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) rule mandated by Congress, by February 7, 2020 states will be required to implement a program for entry level driver training of commercial drivers who are seeking their initial commercial driver license (CDL), including school bus drivers.

Link: <https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/commercial-drivers-license/eldt>

According to the FMCSA, there is a new **proposed** compliance date of February 7, 2022 for two key provisions of the 2016 entry-level driver training (ELDT) final rules: 1) the requirement that training providers upload driver-specific training certification information (i.e., proof of completion of application theory and behind-the-wheel (BTW) training) to the Training Provider Registry (TPR), and 2) the requirement that the State Driver Licensing Agencies (SDLAs) confirm driver applicants are in compliance with the ELDT requirements prior to their taking a skills test for a Class A or Class B commercial driver's license (CDL), or a passenger (P), or school bus (S) endorsement, or prior to taking the knowledge test to obtain the hazardous materials (H) endorsement.

One (1) Maine local school transportation staff was selected to participate in the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) ELDT Pilot Program. The ELDT pilot was conducted over a 10-day/two-week time period during September 2019. During that time period, selected participants were required to complete ten (10) online, self-paced modules and assessments with a time commitment of about six (6) hours. The Maine participant expressed positive comments and enthusiasm about the quality and ease of the online training.

II. Survey with Results

MDOE conducted a survey during November and December of 2019. Themes that emerged from the meetings with Stakeholders and the Department of Labor earlier in the fall provided insight for developing the survey questions.

The survey questions sought perspectives from school district leaders – superintendents, business managers, and transportation directors, largely - about hiring, training, retaining, and other issues associated with the transportation workforce. The survey included one close-ended question combined with five open-ended questions as well as identifying questions such as district and position of the person completing the survey. The open-ended questions allowed participants to answer each question based on their understanding of the subject instead of selecting from a limited set of options.

Findings

One hundred thirteen SAUs and 6 other category schools responded to the survey. Only 14 entities that received the survey did not respond. Of the people completing the survey, 41% were transportation directors, 27% were superintendents, 18% were business managers, and 9% were either bus drivers, operation managers, administrative professionals, or teachers.

Authenticity of the shortage and contributors to it

Highlights of the responses are that 86% of the participants indicated that they were facing a bus driver shortage. Categories of responses in the question about most important factors attributing to the shortage in order of most frequent to less frequent (Question 6) were pay and benefits, responsibility and organizational climate and culture, license process time and cost, medical marijuana use and drug test, and preparing for generational workforce turnover.

Strategies used to attract and retain

Participants were asked to identify strategies they used to attract and retain workers. The following suggestions were listed in the response: Increase driver pay and benefits for regular drivers and substitute drivers, provide paid holiday and vacation time, change the position from part-time to full-time, cross train transportation staff for positions with food service and maintenance departments, pay all fees to become a licensed school bus driver (CDL with S and P endorsements), include signing bonuses (e.g., \$500, \$1,000, \$1,500), develop an “Earn to Learn Program” so drivers are paid during CDL training, provide an experienced driver to train new driver applicants, hired an extra driver as a regular substitute and train for all bus routes, and work with Adult Education programs to offer CDL classes.

Training strategies

SAUs use a wide variety of training resources. Survey Question 9 lists all of the options identified by the participants in the survey. Briefly, districts use local resources in the forms of in district training of candidates, job shadowing, Adult Education classes, and CTE training classes. They also use state materials including Maine DOE Training Conferences, Federal manuals and materials, and for profit and non-profit providers.

Top recommendations

The following categories summarize topics that participants repeated the most. The categories are listed in order of highest response, e.g., comments related to organizational climate and culture had the most responses.

Organizational climate and culture: Respect transportation staff, improve the culture of transportation teams, involve drivers in the decision-making process and hold regular meetings with the superintendent/business manager and bus drivers.

Job design: Provide pay and benefit increases, provide fulltime driver positions hire military personnel (they have transportation operations experience and typically already hold a CDL and would just need to add S and P license endorsement to drive a school bus.)

Training: Regionalize State supported training (training and driver pay), provide state school bus driver training, offer regular, ongoing driver training courses, hire new drivers in general transportation fields to slowly introduce them to the transportation industry.

Other - Licensing process and background checks: Reduce the time to process background checks and acquire a CDL, Work with Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles to expedite the CDL licensing process.

Other – Operations: Provide and fund bus monitor positions on each bus so the driver can focus on driving and safety.

Other – Marketing and outreach: Develop a Department supported marketing campaign about school transportation, provide help for districts to advertise transportation positions.

Other – Workforce policy: A very small number of participants indicated that there are people who want to work and could drive a bus. Only two participants mentioned unemployment benefits during the summer as avenues they recommend for addressing the shortage.

A note about unemployment compensation during the summer for school transportation workers:

The Maine Department of Labor’s Director of Bureau of Unemployment Compensation indicated that school districts overwhelmingly select to directly reimburse unemployment compensation rather than pay state unemployment taxes because it is typically advantageous to do so. Thus, most school districts would be billed for full cost of unemployment paid to school transportation workers during the summer.

Recommendations

The Department of Education can provide statewide training of school transportation workers by developing support for initial training and licensure steps, as well as with in-service training for employed drivers. The Communications team of the Department is currently planning to share information regarding pre-training being provided by transportation offices throughout the state.

The Department of Labor can assist local districts with providing labor market information, suggest strategies for job retention, listing job openings.

The field and stakeholders recognize the significance and positive influence of the Department’s lead in the area of marketing and promoting the professional of school transportation worker. The Communications team of the Department is currently developing a public service message to support recruitment efforts of school transportation workers.

The Department can continue to provide adult education to provide strategies that foster respectful work climates and acknowledge the important work of school transportation workers.

The field also recognizes that increasing the compensation of school transportation workers can improve recruitment and retention.

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