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# New study finds old woes in Hillsborough school bus system

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Hillsborough schools' department of transportation drives more than 90,000 students on 988 buses that travel more than 17 million miles annually, according to the report. That's about 46 percent of the district's total enrollment. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

TAMPA — Hillsborough County School bus drivers are underpaid and unmotivated, according to an independent study. But school officials say they have already taken a number of steps over the past year to get the department on the right path.

School board members will discuss the study, conducted by national advocacy group the Council of Great City Schools, at a school board meeting 3 p.m. today.

The council sent a group of transportation directors from school districts across the country to Tampa in December for a four-day review of topics including manager changes and training and hiring practices in the transportation department. The team gave 24 recommendations to the school district, including developing a new business plan and communications plan, investing in technological upgrades, and better measuring customer satisfaction.

Hillsborough schools' department of transportation drives more than 90,000 students on 988 buses that travel more than 17 million miles annually, according to the report. That's about 46 percent of the district's total enrollment.

The school district still needs 219 drivers to fill those routes, the report said, and has seen shortages every year since 2012 or earlier. Recruitment is likely the biggest issue facing the transportation department, said Director Jim Beekman, but now the district needs only 50 to 75

more drivers to cover routes.

There are currently more drivers than routes but that includes substitutes covering routes on a permanent basis. The department plans to hold job fairs every month to fill the positions and hired about 15 at a fair last week, Beekman said.

“The biggest challenge right now is recruitment of bus drivers, which is typically an HR function, but we’re working to move that back under transportation,” Beekman said. “There were a lot of things we weren’t surprised with because there are a lot of processes we’re currently trying to change. Two years ago, the issues were life, safety and health issues, and now we’re getting into the managerial issues.”

The study acknowledged that the district has taken positive steps toward addressing problems and improving morale since hiring Beekman in 2014.

The day after the study was completed, the district increased minimum salary for bus drivers from \$12.21 an hour to \$12.71 an hour, reduced the years needed to get to the top of the salary scale, and allowed drivers to come in with credit for up to seven years of experience in other school districts. That equates to higher pay. Top pay now, after 28 years, is \$22.12 an hour.

The district also instituted Driver of the Month and Driver of the Year awards, surveyed staff to identify problem areas, and offered professional development classes that also include skills such as resume writing and household budgeting.

New bus drivers are receiving 70 hours of training, well over the state’s minimum of 28 hours.

Operating costs also have been reduced and fewer district vehicles have been involved in accident claims. Estimated costs have gone from \$30,000 to \$15,000 per claim since 2000 thanks to cameras on school buses, improved accident investigations, and defensive driver instruction.

“When I came here, morale was horrible,” Beekman said. “We did our first parade in Christmas and had a bunch of drivers show up, and we had a bus in the Martin Luther King parade and had three times the drivers show up. They’re participating more and more.”

Still, there are challenges.

“The team was told that there is a lack of school-based support for drivers experiencing student discipline incidents on buses, which is contributing to low driver morale and high driver attrition,” the report said. “It was reported to the team that the DOT was a ‘dumping ground’ for poor performing district employees.”

Through interviews with 25 staff members, the team learned transportation managers spend a “considerable amount of time” responding to complaints sent from drivers to school board members and other top administrators, instead of the appropriate manager in transportation.

“The COO and General Manager have taken significant steps to address the culture and move the department forward, while the staff has taken a decidedly ‘wait and see’ attitude to changes,” the auditors wrote. “It was apparent to the team that the district has done little to implement many

key recommendations contained in prior studies, particularly those related to driver shortages.”

Many of the recommendations point to chronic issues with driver shortages, low morale and lax oversight that were addressed in three similar studies over the past decade – one in 2006, 2007 and 2014.

There are long waits for maintenance requests because the current bus to mechanic ratio is 46:1, compared to a median statewide of 21:1.

The department also operates without control of its own budget, it’s overseen by the district, so the auditing team couldn’t verify the budget was properly aligned.

The department has taken on an extra liability cost of about \$7.9 million by driving more than 13,000 students who don’t qualify to ride the bus because they live too close to school.

Beekman said the department plans to stop providing some of these courtesy rides at the start of next school year but will keep offering them to students along dangerous roadways.

“This criteria was developed in the 1970’s and hasn’t changed,” Beekman said. “There are certain things we are not going to do and one is make kids walk in areas that aren’t safe.”

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