



STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
KA 'OIHANA HO'ONA'AUAO
P.O. BOX 2360
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96804

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

August 10, 2023

TO: The Honorable Ken Kuraya
Chairperson, Finance and Infrastructure Committee

FROM: Keith T. Hayashi
Superintendent 

SUBJECT: Presentation on Department Student Transportation for 2023-24 School Year

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced during the specified school years and the various solutions sought to address the ongoing student transportation driver shortage. The implementation of innovative strategies and collaboration between the Hawaii State Department of Education (Department) and the bus contractors played a crucial role in mitigating the impact of the shortage on students' transportation needs since the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the recruitment and retention of qualified drivers as well as partnerships with state and local agencies remain critical areas of focus to ensure efficient and reliable transportation services for all students in the coming years. Continued efforts and proactive measures will be essential to meet the transportation demands of schools across the state.

2. DESCRIPTION

Presentation on student transportation starting with school year (SY) 2020-2021 to SY 2022-2023 and plans for SY 2023-2024.

3. PRESENTATION

SY 2020-2021:

Schools were shut down in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, resulting in an estimated 120-150 school bus drivers retiring or leaving the profession.

Action Taken - In May 2021, the Student Transportation Services Branch (STSB) proposed a coordinated bell time plan, but its implementation faced challenges due to union-involved processes that schools were not equipped to handle.

SY 2021-2022:

The Department's bus contractors faced a shortage of over 100 Class A CDL drivers when schools restarted in August 2021.

Action Taken – The Department reached out to various sources, including the National Guard, tour bus operators, and firefighters, but they were unable to assist. The Department explored collaboration with mainland bus operators, but the national driver shortage hindered this effort. Lack of backup drivers and high turnover among applicants were also addressed through various strategies.

SY 2022-2023:

The Department continued to face school bus driver shortages—90 drivers short statewide at the start of the school year. General education routes were not adjusted to accommodate real driver counts causing service disruptions and safety issues, leaving students stranded at bus stops when drivers would call out unexpectedly.

Action Taken – The Department and the Hawaii Department of Transportation applied for a driver qualification exemption, but it was denied by the United States Department of Transportation. The Department partnered with county bus agencies to launch the Expanding Ridership to Educate Students in School (EXPRESS) program, offering more options for high school student transportation. A total of 10,568 applicants statewide applied for the EXPRESS program. General education routes were adjusted and combined to accommodate the driver shortfalls.

SY 2023-2024:

General education school bus service for schools in the Kapaa district were suspended due to the limited driver availability. Oahu bus driver counts reduced by 20 over the summer months. In total, the Department is short 140 drivers statewide at the start of this school year.

Action Taken – The STSB requested additional SPED van drivers and aides to free up CDL drivers for regular school bus routes. Akita Enterprises, the bus contractor responsible for this district, has provided the following update to their recruiting efforts as of 7/27/2023:

- A \$1,000 sign-on bonus;
- Increased pay for SPED drivers = \$23.00 per hour;
- Increased pay for SPED aides = \$20.00 per hour;
- Increased job posting visibility by expanding to Craigslist, Facebook, and Garden Isle Newspaper; and
- Reached out to former employees.

The STSB proceeded to utilize the EXPRESS program for nine (9) Oahu high schools, making the City and County of Honolulu bus the only transportation option

for these schools. All available drivers were reallocated to prioritize services for SPED, elementary, and middle school students.

Statewide, all general education routes were adjusted to match the anticipated driver counts provided to the Department by the bus contractors. Some routes were altered to cover areas that were cancelled due to drivers leaving during SY 2022-2023.

Plan for SY 2023-2024:

The STSB and the Department of Transportation Services (DTS) will meet monthly to discuss the service areas and usage volume. As ridership data becomes available, DTS is open to adjust the service areas and times to accommodate the additional student riders.

The STSB will be working with Department leadership and schools to promote school bus driver job fairs statewide. All bus contractors have been notified and are open to this idea of working collaboratively with their respective schools to find potential drivers and aides that live in the communities they service. We hope this will bring awareness to the nationwide driver shortage issue and encourage community members to be a part of the solution.

Upon the successful onboarding of new school bus drivers, the STSB will work with Department leadership on route reinstatement to ensure the concerns of the affected schools are considered appropriately. If the hiring of new drivers proves unsuccessful, the STSB will consider implementing a shuttle service with a central pick-up point for students, providing direct transport to schools.

While changing school bell schedules may appear simple, it is a complex process with direct impacts on students, teachers and other stakeholders.

The ongoing school bus driver shortage has posed significant challenges, and various solutions have been sought to address it. Proactive measures, innovative strategies, and collaboration between relevant agencies remain critical in ensuring efficient and reliable transportation services for all students in the coming years. Continued efforts are essential to meet the transportation demands of schools across the state.

Thank you for your continued support of public education.

KTH:jk

c: Curt T. Otaguro, Deputy Superintendent of Operations
Randall M. Tanaka, Assistant Superintendent, Office of Facilities and Operations
Student Transportation Services Branch