



## Improving School Bus Transportation

Every day, families across the country trust school bus drivers to carefully and safely transport their children to and from school. Retaining experienced operators who are familiar with their students and their neighborhoods requires creating a job environment where staff stay on the job year after year. There is a nationwide shortage of school bus operators—the number of school bus drivers on the road has dropped 12% since 2019, even though student enrollment has grown by 1.4 million. School districts should be responding to the driver shortage by raising wages. Instead, real bus driver pay has dropped nearly 3%.<sup>1</sup> Low pay, split shifts, part-time status without affordable benefits, a stressful work environment, and limited job security leave student transportation systems unable to fully staff their operations.



Because school schedules include a long summer break, school bus drivers and aides are left without an income during several months of the year. If an employer gives a school bus operator a reasonable assurance of rehire, then

the worker is not eligible for unemployment in many states. Legislators can remedy this with a simple fix by allowing school bus drivers who have a return-to-work date for the new school year to collect unemployment benefits without having to search for work.

ATU supports in-house student transportation operations. When governments contract out service, however, protections for employees are needed to preserve the quality and consistency of service and protect the workforce which provides it. The way that school bus contractors bid for work in many jurisdictions adds to the instability of the industry. Municipalities and school districts seek contractors through a competitive bidding process whereby contractors try to underbid one another to offer school transportation service at the lowest cost. This system not only puts downward pressure on wages but also forces hard-working school bus drivers and attendants to live with constant uncertainty about the future of their jobs. They worry about how they'll make ends meet.

Employee Protection Provisions (EPPs) are policies that work to provide stability for experienced school bus drivers and aides and protect them from this race to the bottom. With EPPs in place, when a new contractor wins a bid, they are required to hire from a pool of qualified school transportation workers, which keeps experienced employees on the job while providing some flexibility to contractors.

School bus operators should be able to trust that they will be able to work free from harassment or violence. Having trained aides on each school bus so that drivers can pay full attention to the road and traffic around them ensures that kids get to school and back in the safest way possible.

<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Martinez Hickey, David Cooper, and Emma Cohn, "The School Bus Driver Shortage Remains Severe, and Bus Driver Pay Is Getting Worse," Working Economics Blog, Economic Policy Institute, Nov. 14, 2024, <https://www.epi.org/blog/the-school-bus-driver-shortage-remains-severe-and-bus-driver-pay-is-getting-worse/>.



There is also a need for practical and ongoing training for school bus drivers and aides on procedures and protocols for defusing crises and responding to violence and bullying. These policy proposals, from hiring pools to enhanced safety training, improve driver and student safety on the road.

## ATU SUPPORTS:

1. Requiring Employee Protection Provisions that ensure that private school bus contractors who win bids prioritize hiring school bus workers from a pool of experienced personnel by seniority;
2. Allowing school bus workers who are laid off for the summer to collect unemployment benefits until they return to work in the fall;
3. Mandating that trained aides be present on all school buses;
4. Requiring training for school bus drivers and aides on managing student behavior, safety and security awareness, and emergency preparedness and response; and
5. Amending criminal statutes to treat physical attacks on school bus drivers and aides in the same manner as attacks on other school personnel.