

Want to Drive A School Bus? You're Hired.

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FULL TEXT

Just weeks into the new year, schools are struggling to fill jobs. Low pay, few benefits and erratic schedules are keeping workers away.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker is activating the National Guard to help with the shortage in bus drivers. In North Carolina, legislators are hoping to ease a cafeteria worker shortage by giving districts federal funding to cover signing bonuses for new hires. And some Missouri districts are wiping away some of the requirements to become a substitute teacher to attract more applicants.

Across the country, school districts are desperate to fill jobs. Some are struggling to retain counselors, teachers and principals, but a more urgent need seems to be for employees who have traditionally operated behind the scenes – cafeteria workers, bus drivers and substitute teachers – according to Chip Slaven, interim director for the National School Boards Association.

Many relatively low-paying industries, like restaurants, are facing worker shortages because of the pandemic. But school districts have for years struggled to recruit and retain workers, according to Mr. Slaven, because of the low pay, sparse benefits and erratic schedules.

"You really have to look back before the pandemic," he said. "You're seeing a problem that was already bad become worse."

The coronavirus has scared away workers who are wary of face-to-face interaction with children, and the federal government's pandemic unemployment benefits, which recently ended, spurred some to wait for better opportunities.

The shortages have affected families, already under stress. Since the first day of classes, Melissa Minter has driven her three children every morning to middle school and high school in the Northside Independent School District in San Antonio. A severe staffing shortage has forced bus drivers to make multiple trips, turning what should be a 15-minute bus ride into an hour-and-a-half odyssey.

"My children are begging me to start picking them up in the afternoon, too," Ms. Minter said. "My husband and I have talked about it – but we don't know if there's enough in our budget for more gas. It's stressful."

There are hundreds of unfilled positions in the district, according to Brian Woods, Northside's superintendent – more than he's ever seen in his career.

The district is using funds from recent federal stimulus bills to hire more teachers, drivers, nutritionists, counselors and administrators.

"It's ironic because for forever, schools have been underfunded and felt like they couldn't do what they needed," he said. "But now you have this federal funding. We have plenty of money. But the human capital is not there."

Dona Rose Nero has been a bus driver in the Evesham Township School District, in Marlton, N.J., for 17 years, and receives health care benefits because her seniority allows her to add more hours. She works coveted midday shifts, in addition to both mornings and afternoons, for a total of six hours per day, or 30 hours per week.

Roughly half of the drivers in her district clock in at about five hours a day, with a starting hourly rate of about \$20, according to the National Education Association, a union that represents school employees. The schedule makes it difficult to find other part-time jobs.

"They're exposed to these kids, they're driving in the dark, rain, snow and ice," Ms. Nero said. "It's a huge responsibility, and there are no benefits. You can't even do anything else."

And it isn't just bus drivers. Cafeteria workers and substitute teachers struggle with inconvenient scheduling, lack of benefits and subpar pay.

Pearl West is a child nutrition manager for Gregorio Esparza Elementary School in the Northside district in San Antonio. The school needs an additional three workers just to get by, but she's struggling to find people to apply. "It's hard to appeal to them when the fast-food chain is offering \$1 more per hour," Ms. West said. "The pay is competitive with other school districts in the area, but as a whole, it's not competitive with the cost of living." Ms. West works full time with four other employees to make close to 400 meals a day, but she still relies on welfare to make ends meet. Ms. West makes less than \$25,000 a year.

Despite the low pay, Ms. West said she feels committed to her job because she wants to make sure her students get fed.

"We are really running on the smiles of our students that come in to see us every day," Ms. West said. "That's why we show up at 4:45 in the morning -- we all know those kids by name. But when the cafeteria doors close, we sigh and our shoulders drop. It's exhausting."

Labor economists have been talking about this worker shortage issue for years, said Erica Groshen, an economist at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

"School districts have been able to underpay employees for a long time, and they're discovering that they can't do it anymore because of a serious decline in labor force participation now," she said.

According to Ms. Groshen, increased unemployment benefits during the pandemic have given workers the leeway to pass up jobs with abysmal working conditions while they look for better employment opportunities.

"Because people have gotten relief payments, they don't have to take the very first job that comes along," she said. "They get to be selective, and hope that something better comes."

In Santa Fe, N.M., Randy Mondragon has worked as a bus driver for 20 years, and his pay is slightly higher than the average, which is about \$16.40 an hour, according to the district.

He works six days a week, usually topping out at 70 hours.

"There's been only one day in the 22 years I've worked that they didn't need me to drive a route," Mr. Mondragon said. "We are the first and last ones that students see in the morning, so our job is very important and, sometimes, we don't get that acknowledgment."

Many of these workers are older; they often take on these jobs to supplement their Social Security checks. But with the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic, many are choosing to retire early to reduce the risk of exposure.

Because of the substitute teacher shortage, Angie Graham, a 51-year-old high school teacher in Fleming County, Ky., has been covering shifts for other colleagues. She's worried that if she gets sick, no one will be able to cover for her.

"I wear my mask, I wash my hands and I'm as cautious as I can be," she said. "But I am scared."

Most of the substitute teachers in her rural community are retired, looking for extra money or even just a reason to be social. But Ms. Graham said that she knows the pandemic has prompted many of them to leave.

"It's just disheartening," she said. "I looked at our school web page today and saw all the jobs we need. It's just rough times."

In the Griffin-Spalding County School System, outside of Atlanta, Keith Simmons, the superintendent, shut down schools for a week after the death of two bus drivers and a bus monitor from Covid-19. The schools reopened on Monday.

The district is now trying to hire more bus drivers, using incentives like \$1,000 signing bonuses, and raising its hourly rate to as high as \$16. In Delaware, a school district is paying parents \$700 to transport their children to school.

Chris Horstman, who trains school bus drivers in Ithaca, N.Y., and drives a bus himself, says that the Ithaca city school district needs 11 more bus drivers to be able to "limp through" the rest of the school year. Ideally, they'd be

able to find another 25 workers.

"Employers should have been prepared," he added. "We've been screaming this to them since before the pandemic – that the pay has been low. Districts across the country have not stepped up to the plate."

Some employers hope that the end of federal unemployment benefits will push more people to apply for these positions. Ms. Groshen, the labor economist, does not think that most schools will see a big upswing in applicants. "Some states ended unemployment benefits early, so there is already some research," Ms. Groshen said. "And when you look at the studies, there was some effect in the market from unemployment ending, but it wasn't very large."

For school leaders like Mr. Woods, of San Antonio, the staffing shortage has put a damper on what should have been the happy return to a normal school year.

"Folks are really disappointed because we have got to continue to adjust," he said.

For her part, Ms. Minter continues to drive her children to school.

When she recently joined her son at school for a birthday lunch, she heard him talk with his classmates about the bus.

"He was upset because he was on the first run, but now he's been placed on the second," she said. "That's what all the kids are complaining and talking about. It's the bus."

Photograph

The school bus arrived late on Monday to pick up children on their way to William H. Taft High School in San Antonio.; Pearl West, a cafeteria manager in San Antonio, feels an obligation to her students. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW BUSCH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); Dona Rose Nero has been a school bus driver in Marlton, N.J., for 17 years. (PHOTOGRAPH BY HANNAH YOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); Angie Graham, a teacher in Fleming County, Ky., worries about a lack of substitutes. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JARED HAMILTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (A18)

DETAILS

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