

# DRIVER RETENTION

## AND THE CASE FOR A MODERN RETENTION PLAN

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### DRIVER RETENTION & THE CASE FOR A MODERN RETENTION PLAN

We've been thinking a lot about shifts in the national labor movement and how we can better prepare, adapt, and overcome potential shortcomings attributed to a post-pandemic environment and the slew of unknowns that come with re-opening schools. One of the foundational themes we keep coming back to is the need to put a significant amount of focus on hearing, helping, and guiding the group that got you through it all in the first place – your school bus drivers.

The most valuable internal asset to a student transportation system is the drivers it already has. These dedicated employees are invaluable and quite literally what drives a district's academic mission and vision by consistently delivering safe, high-quality transportation services. While your system fine-tunes its recruitment stratagem among ongoing workforce changes, we believe it is equally critical to take both an inverted viewpoint and frequent temperature checks on the existing staff carrying the workload, day in and day out. Understanding their needs, concerns, and overall level of professional happiness provides necessary insight into the job factors, challenges, and benefits that may be most important when recruiting more to join your team. The benefits of tuning into driver experiences and daily needs carry significant weight in uncovering trigger points, avoiding unnecessary turnover and shortages, and provides you with valuable insight into the available opportunities to improve your recruitment efforts.

So we'd like to talk about it.

We want to bring conversations back around to the need to build a modern employee retention plan and pick up thinking about the complex needs of the school bus driver,

present some highlights of our favorite recognition and appreciation approaches, retention and turnover rate management, and simple ways that leaders may be able to provide increased job satisfaction and recommitment to the mission.

**“People work for money, but go the extra mile for recognition, praise, and rewards.”**

*Dale Carnegie*

It is no secret that, as we enter what feels like a post-pandemic phase, the job market is expanding with growth occurring in nearly every industry, from technology and retail to production and agriculture. As people rethink personal and family priorities and consider their health, safety, and professional futures, many employment shifts are taking place as people decide where and how to return to the workforce. And, as people decide whether or not to return at all, competition across organizations has never been fiercer.

Specific to transportation, drivers are in demand for everything now from warehousing and hub operations, to gig economy jobs and commercial trucking. Business giants such as Amazon and Walmart, and other employers with lower skill jobs, are already increasing pay to more than \$15 an hour and offering full-time work, while school transportation often grapples with low pay, seasonal or part-time hours, and heightened concern over personal health across a generally older driver force.

The post-pandemic restructuring of the labor market will have a significant impact on the success of businesses and operations across the country. In our industry, it is of critical importance to focus on the drivers who show up to work every day. Simply put, it is more efficient to retain a quality employee than to recruit, train, and orient a new employee of the same caliber. Estimations often conclude that ~30% of an employee's salary is spent on recruiting, filling, and training replacements; therefore, the importance of developing a smart, creative, and cost-effective retention plan cannot be overstated. These plans usually contain a combination of well-budgeted, low-cost, and non-monetary strategies that will help guide efforts to combat turnover, boost morale, and maintain employee focus.

Creating and adhering to a comprehensive employee retention program plays a vital role in achieving your staffing goals by both attracting and retaining key employees, as well as reducing turnover and its related costs. It comes down to controlling what you can, and we've had great success with the plans we have developed for our clients. We believe that fairness and transparency are fundamental concepts that make lasting impressions on employees, which is why we've spent time reimagining how we think about retention management and where we can help clients improve. Placing focus on nurturing an environment that is welcoming to school bus drivers is key – not only in a post-pandemic era but always. Now is the time to revisit policies and daily habits that may have been altered, set aside, or forgotten altogether over the past year.

Our push to start a discussion about the importance of retention planning in a post-pandemic environment is twofold. First, we sincerely believe it's time to talk to our peers

and partners about rapidly changing labor statistics and what that means for our industry in both the short and long term. Secondly, because our own transportation managers have been busy reintroducing modern retention strategies across their school districts and we are so proud of the results. Putting our attention on things we can control, like retention methods and approaches, has allowed us to not only show appreciation to our driving staff for their efforts during the pandemic – but permits us to control and navigate opportunities in rethinking workspace culture and growing efficiency initiatives back to pre-COVID levels.

## **SO, CAN WE BRAG FOR A MINUTE?**

Our managers have invested a lot of creative time and energy into making their driver appreciation efforts meaningful, and we'd like to share some of our favorites with you. Remember – the purpose of this is to improve the working lives of employees who come to work for you so that they can better carry out the mission of the school district.

**Relaxation Zones or “Recharge Rooms”:** A safe and healthy space for drivers to relax when not on a route that allows for decompression, conversations with friends, and energy boosts. We are talking about pool tables, healthy snack assortments, board games, good lighting, plants, artwork, kitchens, couches, etc.

**Why we love it:** We love the concept of a relaxation zone because it promotes community. These spaces represent an area of the workspace that can feel more like home, with comfy alcoves where workers are encouraged to relax and be sociable with colleagues. This often promotes friendships, which are proven to improve employee retention and satisfaction.

When mentally recharged and relaxed employees bring their A-game, everyone wins. We know that not every facility has space for a recharge room and that COVID-19 precautions are still highly necessary, but it can be something to consider when evaluating your retention planning and looking ahead to the new school year. How's your break room? Where are drivers spending their breaks? What opportunities do you have here to make your organization feel more like a community?

**Listening:** Not a new concept, we know. But do you actually promote communication channels to really listen and encourage drivers to open up and provide candid feedback?

**Why we love it:** Listening to what your employees have to say is one thing but giving them multiple opportunities to express themselves can empower workers to open up about their struggles, offering a slew of benefits to your understanding of why turnover rates are high, attitudes are on the defense, or insight to why a general decline of morale may be occurring.

At our operation with Bethlehem Area School District in Pennsylvania, our manager Jenny Robinson hosts "Coffee with Jenny" where all drivers dial in virtually and have the opportunity to speak directly to her about that week's situations, concerns, or wins. A recent Gallup study<sup>1</sup> showed that highly engaged workplaces saw a 41% lower absenteeism rate. And the reason for this isn't new. Disengaged workers take less responsibility and ownership of their attitude, behavior, and motivation – which drains overall productivity. Being heard is engagement. Talking about issues is engagement. Managers taking the time to listen, consider, and guide is one of the most impactful ways to build a sense of engagement. Seeing significant change based on feedback is a surefire way to boost engagement.

We highly encourage frequent all staff meetings, direct supervision, open-door policies, evaluations with both praise and criticism as needed, and creative but impactful surveys. This is the easiest way to tap into critical information that will help both your recruitment and retention efforts.

**Community Discounts:** In direct response to the struggle to keep up with rapidly changing driver wages with stagnant budgets, we've seen a transverse approach in which managers are working with the community to uncover opportunities to get discounts and perks for their drivers.

**Why we love it:** Much of the community understands the importance of the role of a school bus driver and wants to help where they can. We are noticing trends in partnerships with area businesses offering school bus drivers discounts or perk considerations at local restaurants, gas stations, hospitality businesses, spas, and more.

These strategies are relatively low-cost and can have a significant impact on destressing a workplace while boosting morale through appreciation. Recognition is classically known as one of the most successful ways to build a sense of security through personal value, resulting in satisfied employees who feel proud to deliver safe and efficient service continuously and consistently.

## WHERE'S A GOOD PLACE TO START?

The recipe of retention is a guide long used by managers to determine which rugs could be looked under to uncover ways to lower turnover rates and save money. It's common to think that wages alone are what drive an employee to stay in their position. While that is often true in the school bus driving arena when competition is stiff, there can be many other pieces that resonate with people in different ways, each with the

## RECIPE OF RETENTION

- Remunerate competitively
- Encouragement and expectations
- Training and development
- Annual review cycles
- Inform and involve
- Nurture

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236366/right-culture-not-employee-satisfaction.aspx>

potential to increase professional happiness, drive productive energy, and increase workplace engagement.

Setting wages aside and focusing on how turnover costs affect your organization, it's important to consider how and what your turnover rate is costing you in the long run. Turnover is not only a monetary cost to your budget lines; it also appears in customer service declines and frustrations among staff who have to consistently fill gaps and cover for absences.

A study by Glassdoor<sup>2</sup>, a popular job search platform, estimates that the average company spends about \$4,000 on the hiring of a new employee. These costs include advertising, job fair events, human resource assistance, training, etc. That's a significant amount of money to factor into already stretched thin student transportation budgets doing more with less.

In order to avoid costly turnover and recruitment costs, and to start thinking about the most successful ways to revamp an existing retention plan, we've highlighted a few of our favorite foundational methods below. We believe that starting here, and frequently returning to these points, aids in providing clarity into areas that could use improvement or attention. These points always deserve significant insight and review because here is where the most impactful changes could be made.

**You must be competitive in your pay:** This does not mean simply in hourly wages, but also in available benefits, opportunities for extra work, the guaranteed minimum number of hours, etc. With competition increasing among companies needing employees with Commercial Driver's Licenses, this is where savvy recruiting comes into play. You will need to be diligent in setting yourself apart from the rest. Do not shy away from creativity while acknowledging your limitations.

**You must offer frequent encouragement:** Encouragement can come in both spoken word and monetary reward, and we applaud both. Sometimes it's just as effective to tell a driver of their job well done as it is to hand them a coffee gift card; the approach will vary from one employee to the next. We understand that budgets are tight in nearly all instances, yet we challenge you to find ways that fit your system to offer encouragement within the context of what you can do for employees. Their job is tough and deserves recognition.

**Setting expectations early and often is an underrated management technique:** We've seen firsthand the impact that setting expectations for professionalism and work performance can have on the morale of an organization. You may be surprised how many employees thrive off of structure that may have been missing at their previous jobs.

**Internal Reviews:** There is no single reason why high-quality employees leave an establishment; however, even as different industries face different turnover rates, the general reasons why employees leave a business boil down to three major categories:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/hidden-costs-employee-onboarding-reduce/>

- ✓ **Workplace Culture:** The surroundings can influence a worker's decision to leave, including the daily culture, the way things are done, and the atmosphere.
- ✓ **Managers:** A considerate and nurturing manager can make a world of difference in an employee's decision to stay or leave.
- ✓ **Personal Reasons:** Occasionally, an employee may have personal reasons that may influence their decision to leave a job, such that no external factors are responsible for the decision. This is why performing exit interviews are imperative to understanding your unique local situation.

## **LASTLY, WE WANT TO TALK ABOUT COMFORT ZONES**

A leadership comfort zone often dictates how we show up to our workday and how we present ourselves to our staff, our own bosses, and often, to those we don't even know are watching. A leader sets the tone for the day and it spreads like wildfire, either in a positive or negative manner. The zone is invisible, but it's a flexible shield that can adjust as needed to navigate daily demands and (wait for it...), steers the bus in the right direction.

As we head into a new school year – does your comfort zone allow you to feel in control of your own employee advocacy?

Changes in the national economy have customarily equated to control over the number of job applications and actions required to successfully staff a student transportation system. A struggling economy is good for applications, whereas, in a thriving economy, trouble starts to brew. However, we are experiencing a somewhat new territory in a post-pandemic rebounding economy where there is significant job growth in burgeoning industries, shifts in mindsets, and swings in a required skill. Workers who would have stuck around for a few more years are either retiring early or have turned towards a new career entirely. This is all very new and should be handled as such. As transportation experts, we cannot predict how this job market will shake out over the next few months, but what we do know is that it is unlikely to be reminiscent of anything we've seen in the past. For these reasons, we want to highlight two discussion topics as we close on this topic, for now.

The first is to be mindful of the language used. As we all navigate staffing challenges together it's important to channel frustrations into positive reinforcement and action. Having a negative tone or consistently pessimistic outlook on the state of employment will affect your system more than you may notice.

For example: Be mindful of using the term "lazy." Workers are human and have a myriad of reasons for not applying or acting as enthused as they may have been in the past. This is not laziness. Life has changed significantly for many families over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and what may have worked in the past will simply not work now. This is an opportunity to rethink your application process, the job requirements themselves, remuneration amounts, and what your system may be able to offer that other industries are not. Be careful not to miss opportunities with a stuck mindset – while old tricks may have to be adapted for a new era of staffing, we like to think of it as an opportunity to welcome newcomers and broaden the search to find perfect candidates.

The second: While staffing bus routes is inherently challenging due to the nature of the work, if prolonged and severe driver shortages are experienced and there is no end in sight – don't pull your hair out! Use the opportunity to revisit your bell time and routing system structure to determine if there are channels to reduce the number of drivers needed altogether. This reminder is paired with the possible need to revisit investments in customer service that have been made in districtwide academic programming, student rider eligibility, acceptable ride times, charter, and parochial school partnerships, and many more.

**“When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills.”**

*Proverb*

Knowing that unavoidable change is on the horizon, it's essential that leaders in our industry embrace the paramount importance of preparation, creativity, and flexibility when it comes to their local labor force. Retainment of quality employees is a strong first step in the achievement of goals, but what has worked in the past may not work as easily now and it is imperative to identify where there are opportunities to build change “windmills” that bring in and power your responsible and comprehensive employee retention plan and its possible solutions.

Placing focus on nurturing an environment that is welcoming to school bus drivers is key – not only in a post-pandemic era but always. Now is the time to revisit policies and daily habits that may have been altered, set aside, or forgotten altogether over the past year, and [talk with us](#) about implementing some of the retention strategies we love most.

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### **About TransPar Group**

TransPar Group is a leading organization that offers an array of products and services representing the most comprehensive and responsible services in the student transportation industry. And we do this all while keeping your students safe and improving the cost and quality of your school transportation operation.

Our experience with student transportation programs of all sizes includes school districts that own and operate their own school bus fleet, school districts that utilize contractors, and school bus contractors themselves, thereby allowing us to provide innovative solutions to the entire spectrum of student transportation needs.

TransPar provides Management and Staffing Services to develop solutions for difficult operational questions and problems; Advisory Services to deliver resources and expertise that transportation contractors and organizations often cannot access on their own; and Fleet Management Services and Technology Products to help customers create the strong foundation necessary to support effective service delivery. So no matter your needs, we are your all-inclusive solution to creating a successful, reliable, and profitable student transportation program.