

ASD will suspend school bus routes for weeks at a time, affecting most students - The Anchorage School District is facing such a severe bus driver shortage that there are only enough drivers to serve 7,000 of the district's 20,000 eligible bus riders at a time, officials said.

By Morgan Krakow August 10, 2022 Publication: Anchorage Daily News (AK) Word Count: 713

The Anchorage School District is dealing with such a severe bus driver shortage that nearly all eligible students will be without bus service for weeks at a time, officials announced this week.

There are only enough drivers to serve 7,000 of the district's 20,000 eligible bus riders at a time, according to deputy superintendent Mark Stock.

Bus service will be available to families for three weeks at a time, followed by six-week periods without service, on a rotating basis, officials said. It's unclear how long the bus route suspensions will persist, Stock said.

The news comes just before school is set to start next week and while gas prices are at historic highs.

The suspension of routes will affect all general education students but won't affect special education students. Students who live within a 1.5-mile radius of the school also won't be affected since they weren't receiving bus service before.

Additionally, the district has condensed bus routes for efficiency, meaning students will need to walk farther to those stops than in past years.

Specific information about routes will be available for families by 5 p.m. Saturday.

"Even though we continue to make progress retaining more and hiring new bus drivers, the situation isn't improving fast enough," superintendent Jharrett Bryantt told reporters during a briefing Wednesday afternoon.

The school district was 71 bus drivers short on Wednesday and has 14 drivers in training, according to deputy superintendent Stock.

“We’ve implemented some aggressive recruiting strategies and retention strategies,” Stock said. “We believe those are showing some success.”

But that takes time, he said, noting staff shortages are happening nationwide.

The district does conduct a free, three-week training program for new drivers and pay salary during the training, said acting chief operating officer Rob Holland.

High school students can take the city’s People Mover bus using either this year’s or last year’s school identification card. High schools are also suspending parking fees for drivers, since students often drop off and bring their siblings to school.

Stock said the district is looking into giving gas cards to families who need additional support, which the district did last year in \$50 increments — though this year’s gas card amount will probably be lower so the district can reach more families.

The district is prioritizing getting students who attend school on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson back to full bus service after one of the schools on base, Ursa Major Elementary School, was abruptly closed for the year due to seismic concerns.

A bus driver shortage isn’t new to ASD; the district contended with a shortage last year as well. But the impacts of this year’s shortage is significantly more widespread, affecting all general

education students.

Anchorage Mayor Dave Bronson issued an urgent plea for more school bus drivers in a video posted to Facebook on Wednesday.

“This is a desperate need,” Bronson said. “If we don’t have enough people, our kids will be walking to school on icy, dark sidewalks this winter.”

Issues with staffing in the district stretch beyond just a shortage of bus drivers. Several schools don’t have cafeteria managers, and in those situations, students will be provided a brown bag lunch instead of hot meals, school district spokesperson Lisa Miller said.

As of Wednesday, the district’s hiring dashboard showed 375 open positions in various departments, from student nutrition operations to speech-language pathology. That number is “a little higher than normal,” but the district’s applicant pool is lower, Stock said.

The hardest positions to fill are in special needs, while the district has also experienced a slowdown in hiring for usually easy-to-fill positions like elementary positions, Stock said.

Anchorage Education Association President Corey Aist said the news Wednesday feeds into an even broader question of how to support students and families when there are a “limited number of people able to transport those students to school, and a limited number of educators in the schools available to do the work with the students.”

Students head for home on the last day of school on Thursday May 21, 2009 at Service High School. (Erik Hill / ADN) Anchorage School District superintendent Jharrett Bryantt addresses reporters on Wednesday. The district is dealing with a severe shortage of school bus drivers. Behind Bryantt are, from left: secondary director Kersten Johnson; elementary director Erik Viste; deputy superintendent Mark Stock; and acting chief operating officer Rob Holland. (Morgan Krakow / ADN)

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