

Driver shortage strains school transportation in Baton Rouge district: ‘You’re always at a deficit’

- [BY CHARLES LUSSIER | Staff writer](#) The Advocate Baton Rouge

Despite several upgrades since [a catastrophic start to the school year in 2023](#), East Baton Rouge Parish schools remain short of drivers and are struggling to compensate for their absence.

“We’re trying something, and if it doesn’t work we’re trying something else,” Transportation Director Rob Howle said. “We’re not just living with the notion that we can’t do what we need to do because of staffing. We just keep trying different things.”

Howle gave an update on transportation to the parish School Board last week, coinciding with the 11th day of the 2026-27 school year.

Board members peppered Howle with back-to-school transportation questions.

“We don’t want to ever be in a position again like we once were where we had a dysfunctional fleet, not enough buses to hit the road,” board member Nathan Rust said. “We never want a bus on the road that isn’t GPS-enabled, that doesn’t have AC, that doesn’t have all the things your drivers need to do their job well.”

Howle said his biggest problem is a lack of drivers.

“We never stop hiring. It’s constant,” Howle said. “There’s no need to even advertise for the position. It’s permanently there. We never stop. You’re always at a deficit.”

Currently, Howle’s department employs 355 drivers, 55 fewer than he had budgeted for.

District leaders had hoped to retain veteran drivers and attract new ones with a large employee pay raise approved in June. Last year, drivers started at \$14.20 an hour and topped out after 40 years at \$22.53 an hour. Now they start at \$20.50 an hour and eventually increase to \$29.04 an hour after 35 years.

Howle said he was surprised in July when dozens of drivers decided to retire rather than stay and make more than they had before.

“We were really hoping that the increase in pay would incentivize some of them to at least give us three more years, since your retirement is based on your three highest years,” he said.

To become a school bus driver, you have to earn a Commercial Driver's License, a valuable commodity once you have it.

“It's very competitive,” Howle said. “When you can take that same license and drive a garbage truck and make \$70 grand, it's tough.”

He said he has eight more drivers slated to start work in the next week and 10 more who need to undergo about two months of training and onboarding before they can start.

For the past two years, the school system has paid extra to have drivers cover extra routes, which has helped to patch the hole.

And this year, buses are running fewer routes.

“We have 13 less routes, and not necessarily by choice,” Howle said.

To improve routing, the East Baton Rouge district **last month purchased new software, EZRouting**, which Howle said is working well, except for some routes that failed to migrate properly and are being updated.

Board member Cliff Lewis posed several sharp questions to Howle. Lewis objected to principals and assistant principals participating in routing, which he has said he has witnessed several times this year during visits to schools.

“I’ve got their job descriptions right here,” Lewis said as he held up a piece of paper, “and nowhere does it say as principal A of school B, I’ve got to route buses, or I’ve got to help Transportation route buses.”

“I’ve never asked a school,” Howle responded. “I have had schools volunteer.”

The strain this year is greater because of a modest increase in students riding buses.

“The buses are crowded,” Howle said. “We understand that in a lot of instances there’s no choice.”

Howle said his staff is working to make sure the crowded buses are safe.

“Students should not be standing on buses. And if that is the case, we try to come up with alternatives,” he said. “Some of these alternatives are not necessarily pleasing to parents or students.”

For instance, one strategy is for buses to handle two pickups rather than one when there are too many children for one run.

Howle shared good news that almost all East Baton Rouge buses now have air conditioning as well as working GPS — the reverse of 2023. The exceptions, however, are still causing challenges.

This summer, the school system unexpectedly purchased 30 new air-conditioned buses after another district canceled its order. The new buses, however, did not have GPS locators, prompting him to order more devices, which have yet to arrive.

One of those GPS-less buses became an issue last week when it ran a route too early, missing 20 students who were heading to Westdale Middle, and the parents were unable to track its progress on their WheresTheBus phone app.

In his defense, Howle said he chose to put the air-conditioned bus on the road without the GPS rather than have it sit and wait on the device.

Howle said he has been encouraged by other factors: more in-house maintenance, well-used collection points used in lieu of home pickups, and more buses reaching transfer points on time.

The school system is putting more stress on transportation by changing start times. A dozen schools this year will have start times different from the other schools in the district. The plan is to change all schools to new start times over the next two years.

Howle said schools in the Capitol and Glen Oaks areas, which adopted new times a year ago, are “rocking and rolling.” Six schools in the Belaire area, particularly Belaire High and Park Forest Middle, are having more problems. They have been bedeviled this year by an unexpected spike in train traffic, affecting the many buses that cross the track that parallels Choctaw Drive, Howle said.

“It has really caused some issues,” he said.