

Despite DOE Denials

School Bus Union Says Driver Shortage Exists

- By CRYSTAL LEWIS
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MICHAEL CORDIELLO: ‘Staff shortage a factor in woes.’

MARK TREYGER: ‘See impact on delivery of service.’

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Though the Department of Education’s Office of Pupil Transportation denied there was a shortage of school bus drivers at a City Council hearing on the transportation delays that plagued students during the first weeks of school, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello insisted it played a role in the service problems.

When Council Member Mark Treyger probed OPT’s Senior Adviser for Transportation Kevin Moran about a potential shortage during the Oct. 16 hearing on delayed and no-show buses during the first weeks of school, he claimed that all of the city’s school-bus routes were staffed.

“There is no shortage in terms of our route coverage,” he told the Council.

Worse Than Usual

OPT transports 150,000 students and employs 14,000 bus drivers and attendants, about 8,000 of whom are represented by Local 1181. Though bus trips during the first month of school are

typically far from smooth, last month there was an average of 623 delays per day, 100 more than a year earlier.

Though multiple factors, such as new students being added to a route at the last-minute, contributed to the service disruptions, Mr. Cordiello said staffing levels were the primary explanation. "I don't want to point fingers at the DOE because it's a large system, but certainly the staffing shortage was a factor," he said, citing a route that was short 200 drivers.

Though there are bus-driver shortages across the country, Mr. Cordiello said in a phone interview that the problem was especially bad in the city thanks to the Bloomberg administration's elimination of the Employee Protection Provision in late 2012. The provision guaranteed school bus workers' seniority rights and compensation levels when a route was taken over by a new company.

"It used to be a career and now it has become transient. There's little benefits and wage progression," Mr. Cordiello said.

Mr. Treyger said he believed the labor issue needed to be dealt with because "it will have an impact on delivery of service."

Mayor Wants EPP Back

Raul Contreras, a spokesman for the Mayor, said Mr. de Blasio "strongly supports DOE's determination to restore Employee Protection Provisions for school bus workers, and DOE attempted to begin doing so through the procurement process in 2017."

"However, 17 bus companies sued DOE for including EPPs as part of the contract which has put that contract process on hold. We're still in litigation," he said.

Additionally, Mr. Cordiello painted a different picture than DOE officials regarding whether bus drivers were given adequate time to become familiar with their routes before the first day of school, Sept. 5.

The de Blasio administration told the Council Members that bus companies were given routes that served special-education students Aug. 22, while routes for general-education students were submitted two days later. But Mr. Cordiello said that many drivers were not given their routes until the day before Labor Day weekend.

"They never give us enough time," he said. "We always ask for the routes earlier."

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