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# Madison Metropolitan School District And Badger Bus Lines Combat Bus Driver Shortages

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WORT 89.9FM Madison · Madison Metropolitan School District and Badger Bus Lines Combat Bus Driver Shortages

The Madison Metropolitan School District is looking for 30 new bus drivers for the upcoming school year.

In a video posted to the district's YouTube page, Badger Bus co-owner John Meier and MMSD Superintendent Dr. Carlton D. Jenkins invite Madisonians to "step up" and help their community before the start of school next month. The school district contracts with Badger Bus for school bus services.

"Once again, I'm here as we're partnered with our Badger Bus Company, and we're coming out together to ask you to come join us in getting students to school on time," Jenkins says in the video.

Elizabeth Merfeld is MMSD's public information officer. She says that the district has been working with the Badger Bus Line to try and resolve the lack of drivers.

The district is working ahead of time to plan what to do if they can't find enough drivers before the school year begins. One strategy they're considering is consolidating routes.

Another strategy could entail delayed arrival and departure times.

"Yeah, so we've been working really closely with Badger Bus to try to problem-solve around this because we do anticipate it being an issue. I mean, even if we could find 30 drivers today to get them all trained up and ready to go by Sept. 2nd, would be pretty aggressive, so we've had to kind of plan around some contingencies. Consolidation of routes is kind of one idea," says Merfeld.

"So, they've been working on this sort of complex puzzle of like, 'How can we consolidate routes while being within bus capacity limits?' So, that's something that they're working on, and then we might have to plan around possible delays in arrivals or departures. We don't love that idea. We really want our families to be prepared and to have consistency and know what they're going into in the fall, but the reality is that we might have to do some delays."

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Merfeld says that the district has been working on a plan to have middle schoolers begin class later in the morning, as she says starting later has been proven to improve performance. But, disrupted bussing schedules could adversely impact that initiative.

"One potential disruption is we've had a multi-year kind of phase-in plan for changing start and dismissal times on behalf of our middle school students... There's a lot of research that's been done about middle school students needing extra sleep in the morning and having that sort of different time that is best for them to wake up, and they've been shown to just do much better when they don't have to wake up so early," says Merfeld.

"So we're kind of in the middle of a phase-in plan for changing some of those times, and this could potentially impact that, which also has impacts on our elementary school times, which would be kind of changing for some of those elementary schools to accommodate the middle school starting later."

Dee Thompson is Badger Bus Lines' recruiting and hiring manager. He says the bus line currently busses for three school districts — including MMSD, the Verona Area School District, and the Beaver Dam Unified Area School District.

Each district could use more drivers. Dee says they've tried several tactics to recruit more drivers.

"You know, the typical. Put an ad up, put job postings up in both the electronic and print medias. We're, like many other employers, offering sign-on bonuses. We've increased the job pay itself for the positions, and so yes, we're seeing some elevated response. It's looking better than it did even two months ago."

John Meier says the current number of available school bus drivers varies from area to area.

"Well, that's kind of a tough question. I mean, it kind of depends on what area we're looking at, but I mean, just like every other business you know in the front line, like the hotels and everything else, we've lost a significant part of our crew. So, it's gonna effect them, and it's gonna effect other places that we're working because it's just, we have to build that crew back," says Meier.

Meier says that he's worked in the bussing business for 40 years and has never seen a shortage like this. He says it's been difficult to find employees during the pandemic.

"You know, with the pandemic and people just — they're not working for three to six months to nine months. It's just hard to get people back. They're taking other opportunities, or they're deciding that maybe they're done in their career. So, that's been the problem," says Meier.

Prompted by the driver shortage, Badger Bus Lines is offering a \$5,000 sign-on bonus for bus drivers and a \$2,500 sign-on bonus for van drivers. Starting pay for the role is twenty dollars an hour. (<https://badgerbus.com/jobs/>).

Meier says that he's seen more inquiries for driving positions since Badger Bus has announced their sign-on bonus offers but that he thinks this shortage will be something that they'll be fighting for a while to get back to normal.

They'll continue to work on strategies for bus routes and how to accommodate the kids being bussed as the school year gets closer. For more information, visit [mmsd.org/drive](https://www.mmsd.org/drive) (<https://www.madison.k12.wi.us/about/news/will-you-drive-for-us-this-fall>).

Image Courtesy: Joshua Hoehne // Unsplash

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 BADGER BUS LINES, BUS SHORTAGE, CARLTON D. JENKINS, DEE THOMPSON, ELIZABETH MERFELD, HAILEY GRIFFIN, JOHN MEIER, MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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