NEW BUS POLICY SET FOR SECOND SEMESTER

In spite of efforts to recruit and retain bus drivers, routes must be cut due to lack of staff

by Grace Logan
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School buses sit lined up Dec. 4 at the DS Bus Lines' lot located on Merriam Drive. Starting second semester, students who live two miles or less from Northwest will be unable to purchase bus service. photo by Sydney Jackson

Every afternoon, freshman Greta Grist speed walks as fast as her Black All-Star Converse can carry her to get to her bus. So many new things have happened this year: new school, new teachers, new responsibilities. The bus has been a consistent for nearly five months.

This upcoming semester, another "new" will be introduced. Grist will be able to drive to school. Her parents planned on the bus as a back-up if the roads were icy or if life got in the way. This is no longer an option for the Grist family as the Shawnee Mission School District (SMSD) will also be introducing another "new."

Starting second semester, the district will not provide bus transportation to high school students within two miles of the school for the remainder of the school year. This excludes SM North students who live west of I-35 as well as special education students in need of transportation services.

Previously, students within a two-and-a-half mile radius of the school had the option to pay for bus transportation. Those outside of the radius and students who qualify for the Federal Meal Program will continue to be offered free transportation.

Since COVID-19, the number of bus drivers has decreased significantly.

Pre-pandemic, there were roughly 200 drivers. At the SMSD board meeting on Nov. 14, Chief of Student Services, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Dr. Christy Ziegler reported that the number of available drivers had dropped to 133 as of Nov. 7. This staff shortage had caused routes to double or triple in size, with some having to run consecutive routes delivering elementary, middle and high school students to school.

"The labor shortage has hit in some key areas of the district, and transportation is one of them," Ziegler said. "That's not unique to Shawnee Mission; that's something that's happening nationally. One of the ways districts have addressed the shortage of bus or Commercial Driver's License (CDL) drivers is to reduce the optional transportation service: the things we aren't required to provide. It's a last resort. Nobody wants to do it, but we just don't have the resources."

In the past, the ride-time has ranged between 15 and 45 minutes. With the current labor shortage, some students may be riding for over an hour.

There are also currently 19 routes unassigned because no drivers are available to staff them. This forces students onto other buses. Increasing the number of riders per bus lengthens route-time and delays subsequent routes.

Another obstacle SMSD faced was the prospect of the increase in students who use transportation. In the past, the need for transportation for students in Early Childhood Special Education and McKinney-Vento programs, as well as foster children, has fluctuated over the course of a year, putting additional stress on the system.

DS Bus Lines, which provides bus service for the district, has attempted to solve this problem without cutting bus routes in the following ways:

- Increasing communication related to job openings.
- Offering a referral bonus of $1,500 for employees who refer a driver successfully hired.
- Offering a retention bonus of $1,000 for existing drivers.
- Offering a sign-on bonus of $1,000 for drivers.

These efforts did not produce the results needed to maintain all routes. As a result, the district estimates that 15 routes will be cut. This decrease will allow the district to make improvements for students outside of two miles as well as special education students. Families who paid the transportation fee for the second semester will be reimbursed if they no longer qualify for bus services.

The district will re-evaluate this decision before the start of the 23-24 school year.