Salaries of school bus drivers in Louisiana average about $18 an hour, not $40 an hour as reported last week, a Department of Education official said Wednesday.

A typical bus driver in East Baton Rouge Parish makes even less per hour — about $12, according to parish school officials who use a different formula to figure how much an average bus driver gets for each hour on the job.

Louis Nicolosi, director of transportation for the state Department of Education, retracted the $40-an-hour figure he reported to a state board last week. Nicolosi said he had miscalculated.

“It was an honest error,” he said. But he reaffirmed results of a survey that shows Louisiana bus drivers are well paid compared to their counterparts in other states.

“We're the highest in the Southeast. We're No. 1,” he said. Bus drivers in some states are paid minimum wage.

Bus drivers in Louisiana are paid annual salaries averaging about $9,600, counting state base pay plus supplements from local school districts. Nicolosi said he computed an hourly rate so Louisiana salaries could be compared to pay for bus drivers in other states.

The effective hourly wage varies widely across the state, however, since local supplements differ by thousands of dollars and the twice-a-day routes vary greatly — from about 20 minutes in some city neighborhoods to three hours for some routes for handicapped students, Nicolosi said.

The $18 figure is based on a typical bus driver who carries students for about an hour and a half in the morning, and the same time in the afternoon.
school days a year.

By comparison, the average public school teacher in Louisiana was paid $20,460 last school year, or about $20.67 for each hour spent actually teaching the 5½ hours of classes in a typical school schedule.

Nicolosi stressed that his wage figure for Louisiana bus drivers is only an average.

“To break it down, you’d almost have to go to each driver in each parish,” he said.

The president of the state association that represents school bus drivers said they average about $22.50 an hour.

However, several bus drivers in East Baton Rouge Parish called to complain that even the $22.50 figure is exaggerated.

Nicolosi said his revised $18-an-hour figure includes only the amount of time a driver is carrying students.

Patrick Cosper, director of transportation for East Baton Rouge Parish schools, said $12.39 is the official estimate of an average hourly wage for bus drivers in the local public school system.

That figure includes all the time a driver operates his bus — from the time he leaves home to the time he arrives home, including so-called “deadhead” time during which no students are riding the bus.

Nicolosi said he doesn’t count deadhead time because it’s comparable to commuting time for an office worker.

Cosper said it’s fair to count deadhead time because it would be less efficient to require drivers to commute to a central barn, then drive buses to all corners of the parish to pick up students.

Nicolosi and Cosper said neither of their figures count other time that drivers must spend on work-related activities.

For instance, bus drivers must take their buses to a shop for repair work. They must inspect their buses for safety defects before each run. They also must attend training sessions without extra compensation.

In East Baton Rouge Parish, bus drivers must drive students on five field trips — some of them all-day affairs — without payment, Cosper said.