Records show school system lax on bus driver violations

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Twice every school day, the parents of 45,100 public and parochial school students place their children’s safety into the hands of about 685 East Baton Rouge Parish school bus drivers.

But the school system and some of its bus drivers appear to have been taking safety for granted. A Morning Advocate investigation has turned up a pattern of careless driving, little, if any, School Board oversight, very little retraining of poor drivers and no action to get rid of those who haven’t improved.

The School Board and some of its drivers appear to place less emphasis on safety than the state Department of Education mandates.

“Perhaps in no other area of education is more responsibility for student life and welfare assumed than during the mass movement of children in school transportation vehicles on public highways, streets, and roads,” a state training manual for bus drivers states.

Bus drivers are “morally as well as legally responsible for transporting children using every precaution for their maximum protection,” the manual says.

However, through interviews with school system officials, drivers, and their union representatives and a search of School Board and area court records, the Advocate investigation revealed:

- At least 37 percent of school bus drivers in the parish have been at fault in at least one bus wreck or have been convicted of at least one moving traffic violation during the past five years, including two convictions for drunken driving. Most of the accidents were minor and few resulted in serious injuries.

- The School Board was not aware of all the tickets its drivers had received. At least two tickets issued to drivers while in their buses were not reported to the system last year, and Transportation Director Chuck Hill also was not aware of other tickets issued to drivers while in their buses in earlier years.

- Bus drivers are not required to report tickets they receive in their personal vehicles, even though Hill acknowledged those tickets reflect on how a driver handles his bus. The school system’s insurer has a policy that tickets in personal vehicles and those in buses carry the same weight.

- None of the poor drivers has been suspended or fired, and since the early 1980s, only four have been retrained. No drivers have been retrained since Hill took over the department as director in October 1989 after serving for several years as a transportation supervisor and assistant director.

- Superintendent Bernard Weiss was not aware of the lack of oversight of his bus drivers.

- The transportation department did not take any action against drivers for wrecks or tickets it had known about for several years until after the school system learned of the Advocate investigation.

- The School Board does not compile any reports on bus accidents or injuries, which Weiss said should be done regularly so that the training program and other aspects of the transportation department can be evaluated.

Driving records

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of tickets issued to</th>
<th>East Baton Rouge school bus drivers, either in school buses or in private vehicles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>12 tickets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>16 tickets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>30 tickets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>16 tickets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>22 tickets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>7 accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-87</td>
<td>25 accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>36 accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-89</td>
<td>80 accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>68 accidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td>96 tickets, 216 accidents in five years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: City Court, District Court & School Board records

| EBRP graphic by Margaret Austin |

See BUSES, Page 10A
CONTINUED FROM 1A

- The School Board and its insurers have sued at least 19 times in the past three years for injuries and
damage resulting from school bus accidents. They had settled six of
these suits by Feb. 5 and the remainder were pending.
- Although the School Board's
driver training program traditionally has exceeded
minimum state requirements, U.S.
Postal Service mail carriers for
years have received more training
that school bus drivers.
- The poor mechanical condition of
some of the school buses used
daily in East Baton Rouge Parish
might also be a safety hazard in
some cases.
- The school system still uses 22
pre-1977 model buses that the
National Transportation Safety
Board has called potentially unsafe.
They have no guard covering their
gas tanks and no padding on the
handrails along the tops of the
seats. The system uses eight of
them every day and it has 14 in its
backup fleet.

Hill said he doesn't believe, on
the whole, that the driving records
of his personnel are bad.

"You can take doctors, lawyers,
firemen, anybody, and you're going
to have the cream of the crop, the
average ones and some that aren't
quite as good. That doesn't mean
they aren't qualified for the job.
They just don't perform to the
expectations that you think they
should," he said. "It's just
something I guess we need to work
on. I don't think it's a horrible
driving record by any means."

Weiss said the number of
bus accidents and tickets the system's
driver have received could be an
indicator that there needs to be
more staff development in the
transportation department.
However, he said it is difficult to
determine what that department needs
because the school system has not studied
its safety record.

"I have not given that
dimension of this system any attention at all," Weiss said. "I really am surprised that we don't have some kind of
current data base."

"Unless we use this hard data,
then we are flying completely on
a subjective, seat-of-pants basis and I
would have some serious personal
problems with that," he said.

He also questioned the system's
policy of having drivers report their
own tickets, and then only those
they receive in buses.

"I would say we need to know
that. I don't think it should be on an
honour system at all," Weiss said. "If
it's only by happenstance that we
got to know about, say, really poor
driving, that's a very serious
matter. Again, I was not aware of
it."

Hill said he is a "firm believer
that your personal driving habits in
your own vehicle are going to carry
over into your work habits," and
that he didn't know why drivers are
not required to report all of their
tickets.

He said the fall-safe in the system
is an annual check of his drivers' records
on the state Department of
Motor Vehicles computer.
However, he said his office has done
only one such check in the past few
years.

The check missed some tickets
that are logged in state district
court, and Hill and his staff took no
action on what it did find until after
it learned of the Advocate's
investigation.

A bus driver filed a grievance
accusing the transportation
department of disciplining her late
last year for three wrecks it had
known about since August 1998. Hal
Ruddick, the woman's union
representative, said he was
prohibited from releasing the
driver's name.

"There's no justification for
taking disciplinary action against
someone two years after the fact if
you knew about the incident at the
time and didn't do anything,"

Ruddick said. "It's especially
arbitrary not to even pull the file to
see what was involved in the
incident. I think they were just
reacting out of fear of adverse
publicity."

Although Weiss conceded the
Advocate investigation "could be a
motivating factor," Hill denied the
charge.

"I didn't make the comment that
the newspaper was doing an article
and they're going to be scrutinizing
our records, but that was not the
cause of the record check," Hill said.
"We had run the record check the
previous year. We just didn't have
the personnel to get around to it.
We had separated those that we felt
needed conferencing, but we never
got around to the conferencing part
of it."

"For the last six years we've not
had the personnel to go through and
look at each driver's record and
evaluate it as thoroughly as we
should," the hiring of two
additional supervisors during the
summer of 1999 made that possible,
he said.

The lack of oversight of the
driver also led to very little
retraining of those with blemished
records. Only four drivers have been
retrained during the past 10
years or so, Hill said.

"I would have a real question
about that," Weiss said. "I would
suspect that more of our staff would
need some fine-tuning. Need some
help."

During that same 10-year period,
no drivers have been fired or
suspended, and the only
disciplinary action that has been
taken consisted of letters being put
trailing them about the "poor public
image" and increased potential for
accidents and injuries that results from
careless driving.

While the system has not been
calling drivers about their driving,
the drivers have been
complaining about the condition of
their buses.

Ruddick, a representative of the
Baton Rouge Association of School
Employees, said the poor
mechanical condition of some buses
on regular routes has led to two or
grievances by bus drivers
each month this school year.

"There are buses that really
shouldn't be on the road," he said.
"It could have a big impact on
wrecks — the condition of the
steering, the condition of the
brakes."

However, Hill denied any unsafe
buses are used.

"I ask them (BRASE) to prove it.
If they can show where it is, we
will address that problem. But to
my knowledge, we put buses out
there that are safe," Hill said.
"I certainly am not stupid enough to
put something out there that we know
has a major problem with it."

Ruddick probably made that
charge to take the heat off his
members, Hill said.