

WHO'S DRIVING THE BUS?

Wisconsin has seen a 17.7% drop in licensed school bus drivers over the past 15 years, creating challenges for school districts and the families they serve. This problem may get worse before it gets better, as more than one-fifth of licensed school bus drivers are 65 and over. Transit systems across the state are facing a similar problem, with the number of people licensed to only drive passenger buses falling by 19.6% over the same time period, and the average age of these drivers rising by nearly six years.

School districts across Wisconsin report struggling to find [enough bus drivers](#) to drive children to school, with some exasperated districts considering their own [school board members](#) as potential drivers. Transit systems across the state face pressures of their own because of a shortage of drivers, with some acknowledging [rising costs and more crowded routes](#).

These shortages make it harder to get students to school at a time of rising [chronic absenteeism in Wisconsin](#) and can create stress for working parents, who have to drive their children or arrange another ride. The loss of drivers also puts pressure on transit system budgets and can affect transit-dependent workers and the broader labor market.

Using data from the Wisconsin Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV), we find that bus driver shortages appear partially tied to a drop in licensed drivers since 2007. Over that time, the number of licensed school bus drivers in Wisconsin declined by 3,062, or 17.7%, while drivers with a license to drive only passenger buses dropped by 4,952, or 19.6% (see Figure 1).

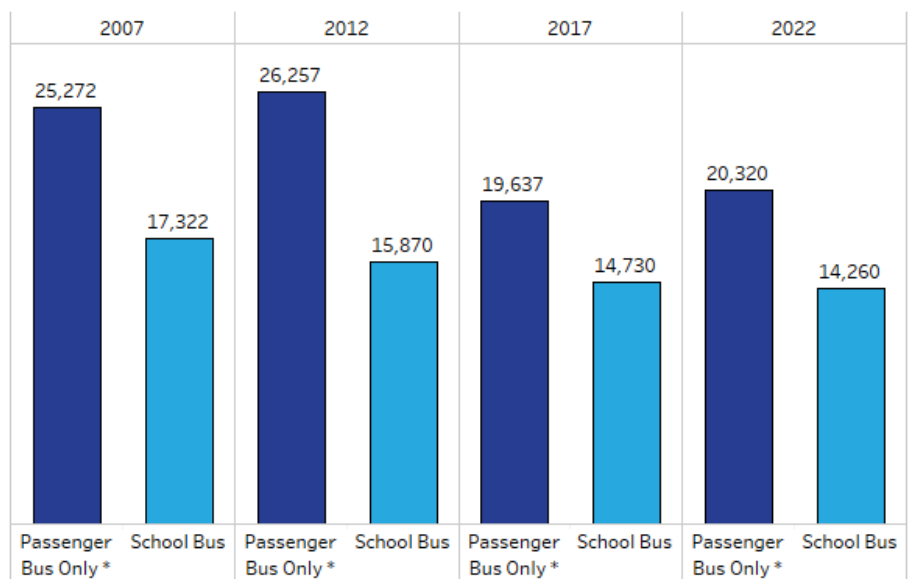
In Wisconsin, school bus driver licenses are also valid for operating passenger buses, but passenger bus license holders cannot operate school buses. In our analysis, we split school bus and passenger bus licenses, but readers should note that at least some licensed school bus drivers are likely employed driving passenger buses. We also draw on data on students from the state

Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and on transit passengers from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to understand changes in demand for licensed bus drivers.

DEMAND TRENDS FOR DRIVERS

While school and passenger bus driver license holders have declined by similar percentages, the school bus driver shortage appears to have received more media attention so far. For example, districts across the state have reported serious service delays, with students picked up after [school has begun](#), or on schedules that stress both [parents and students](#). Disruptions for transit providers have received less attention, though leaders at some agencies such as Madison Metro Transit [have](#)

Figure 1: Supply of Licensed School and Passenger Bus Drivers Has Declined
Licensed bus drivers in Wisconsin by year



Source: Wisconsin DMV. *Note: These data refer to "P" license holders only.



[indicated](#) that they have also had to work to [hire enough drivers](#).

Any difference in the severity of the shortage likely relates to the supply and demand for each type of driver. The data suggest school bus operations are being stretched thinner over time, while that does not appear to be the case for passenger bus drivers. The number of [public and private school students](#) in Wisconsin per licensed school bus driver has increased from 59.5 in 2007 to 68.5 in 2022 (see Figure 2). In the case of transit agencies, however, their hours of service operation per licensed passenger bus driver were higher in 2012 than they were in 2022.

While instructive, each metric is at best a limited tool for determining the true demand for drivers, in part because they are simply a ratio of potential service needs divided by total possible drivers, not an estimate of the number of students per busload or hours driven by each passenger bus driver. For example, some licensed school bus drivers may not be actively driving a school bus at present. Changes in total statewide enrollment also may fail to capture districts' true busing needs. Substantial enrollment declines in a rural district, for example, may not lead to a drop in the number of miles that buses must travel to pick up the remaining students. In addition, it's likely that on some routes school buses are already at maximum capacity, [generally 70 to 80 students](#).

Another important trend in school bus services is the move by many large school districts to contract with private firms for student transportation. The state's

[school district employee staff file](#) shows that in 2017 267 districts employed 4,542 drivers. By 2023, the numbers had dropped to 219 districts employing 2,955 drivers. That suggests a shift to private vendors for this group of districts, which includes the Madison and Kenosha school districts. While this shift likely is not the cause of the decline in licensed drivers, it may make it harder for school districts to track and understand how many drivers are available.

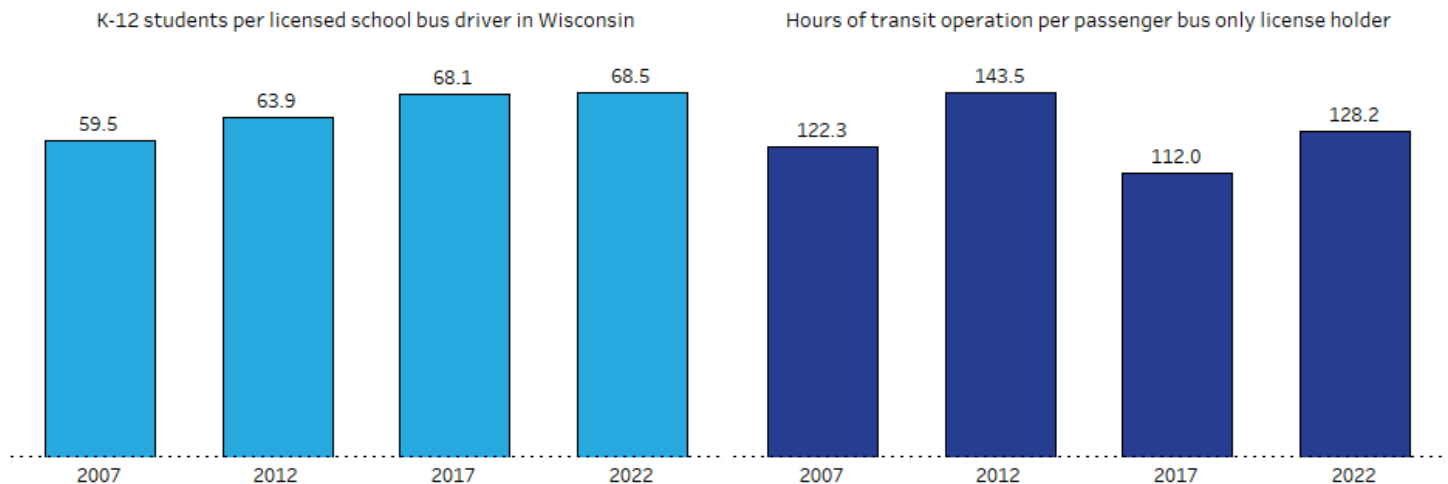
The decline in licensed passenger bus drivers has been greater both in number and as a percentage than the decline in school bus drivers. But the overall demand for this type of driver seems to have dropped, resulting in a less dire shortage for transit agencies. As shown in Figure 2, the number of revenue hours per bus driver has fluctuated but remained only somewhat higher in 2022 than in 2007. Revenue hours are a measure of the total number of hours per year that buses are in service offering transportation to customers.

One entity that has experienced an acute driver shortage is the Milwaukee County Transit System's contracted [paratransit provider](#). Those drivers do not need a Commercial Driver's License (CDL), which shows hiring can be difficult even in cases where applicants do not need to incur the cost and time to obtain an advanced license.

RAPIDLY AGING DRIVERS

Not only are there fewer licensed bus drivers, but the available license holders are aging rapidly, with the average age of both school and passenger bus drivers

Figure 2: Demand for School Bus Drivers Stretching Licensees Thin, While Transit Drivers See Mixed Trends in Demand

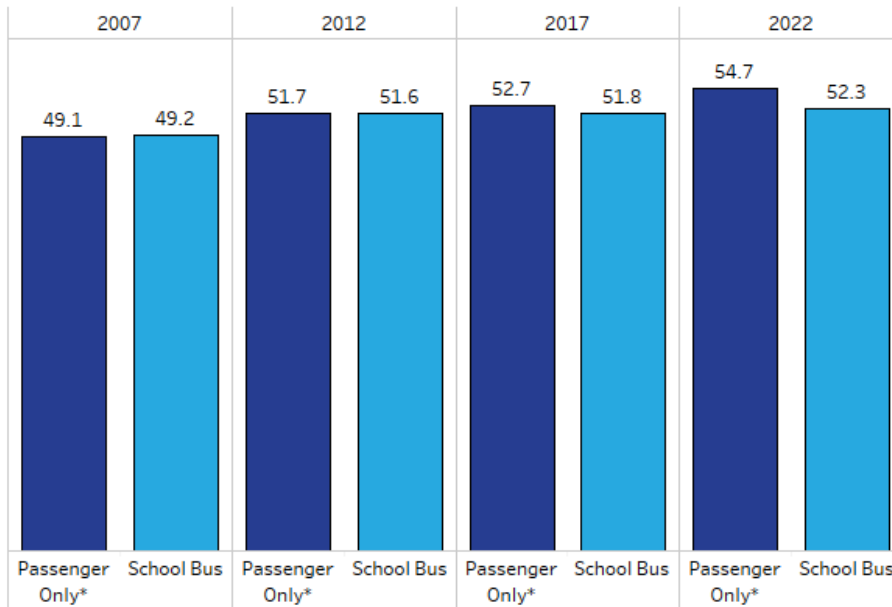


Sources: Wisconsin Division of Motor Vehicles, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Federal Transit Administration



Figure 3: Average Age of Bus Drivers Has Risen Since 2007

Average age of licensed passenger and school bus drivers in Wisconsin, 2007 to 2022



Source: Wisconsin DMV. *Note: These data refer to "P" license holders only.

at least three years higher now than in 2007 (see Figure 3). A concerning share of both groups could retire right now if they have not already done so, with 22.8% of school bus license holders and 25.4% of those with passenger bus licenses only at least 65 years old. Thus, this driver shortage likely will continue to impact school bus and transit services for the foreseeable future and may well intensify.

While K-12 enrollment declines are expected to continue, the pace of school bus driver retirements is likely to exceed them, resulting in even larger numbers of students per licensed driver. Transit ridership is lower than it was prior to the pandemic, but transit leaders statewide are hopeful it will continue to recover and some are implementing strategies that are designed to increase the pace of recovery. For example, both Milwaukee and Madison are planning to initiate new or expanded bus rapid transit services over the next few years, which may help to boost ridership and stabilize or increase demand for passenger bus drivers.

DRIVING A BUS REQUIRES SKILLS - AND MEETING LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

Obtaining a bus driver's license requires a commitment of time and money, with training designed to ensure safe operation of these large vehicles. These requirements make it difficult to rapidly increase the number of available drivers.

Before obtaining either of these licenses, applicants must first obtain a basic CDL that allows them to operate heavy vehicles. Training and testing cover the basics of operating and maintaining a large vehicle and also come with a health examination requirement.

Once the CDL is completed, there are two types of bus driving licenses: an ["S" endorsement](#) that allows the holder to drive a school bus; or a "P" endorsement that allows holders to drive buses with 16 or more passengers, but not school buses. Holders of either license can also drive other regular CDL vehicles like semi-trucks.

In addition to regular [CDL requirements](#), there are bus-specific skills tests that applicants must pass. School bus drivers must also pass a criminal background check, with certain convictions such as those affecting children permanently [disqualifying an applicant](#). To maintain a CDL of any type, licensees must pass tests on license renewal, typically every eight years. Drivers under 70 are subject to medical examinations every two years, while drivers over 70 must have a medical exam every year. All drivers must undergo periodic drug testing under federal regulations.

DMV officials indicate the time it takes to complete these licenses depends heavily on an applicant's motivation and the amount of time they can dedicate to training. For example, some training courses for the written exam take 12 weeks, while others take three. Some transit systems, like MCTS, have in-house training and testing of bus drivers, which has helped ensure the system largely avoided driver shortages.

There is a specific exception for school bus drivers to obtain a license without meeting some training requirements related to maintaining their vehicles. DMV officials indicate that a very small number of licensees take advantage of this, however, because the reduced training needs are relatively small, and without meeting the maintenance requirements the licensee can only operate school buses, limiting their flexibility in employment.



CONCLUSION

Wisconsin school districts and transit systems are hiring from a smaller, older pool of licensed bus drivers. This shortage will continue to impact schools, students, and businesses for the foreseeable future, particularly given the historically tight labor market that is creating hiring and retention difficulties across the entire workforce both statewide and nationally.

Efforts to produce more drivers will be challenging. Increasing salaries would help with recruitment but would also impact cash-strapped school districts and transit systems. Reducing training or other background requirements may also aid with recruitment, but such steps may be unwise given the tremendous responsibility of driving buses full of school children and other passengers (though one option may be to reduce certain targeted requirements such as those around maintenance).

Some districts have attempted creative solutions, such as paying parents to arrange for their own student's transportation, though the effectiveness of that practice has been [mixed](#). It may also be possible for transit systems, school districts, and bus contractors to build on [existing partnerships](#) to work together to share assets and drivers in a more efficient way.

The greater challenges related to ensuring an appropriate supply of bus drivers must now be added to the other obstacles facing school districts and transit systems statewide, such as their struggles to [recruit and retain teachers](#) in the case of schools and respond effectively to [ridership losses](#) in the case of transit agencies. Their ability to develop effective responses likely will be hampered by the same financial constraints that are limiting their efforts to address these other problems, which means help from other levels of government may be needed to determine who will be in the driver's seat.

