

National Guard deployed in Massachusetts as pandemic worsens school bus driver shortage in US

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Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker has deployed 250 National Guard troops to transport students in the state as school districts across the country scramble to deal with a nationwide shortage of school bus drivers brought on by the pandemic. The action by the Republican governor takes place as the Biden administration and politicians from both parties risk the lives of millions of students and school employees by opening schools across the US amid the surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths.

Baker said 90 soldiers would begin training Tuesday to transport students in the Chelsea, Lawrence, Lowell and Lynn school systems. Military transport vans known as 7D vehicles, which have a maximum of 11 seats including the driver, will be used to drive a token number of special needs students back and forth from school. A bus monitor will be aboard each vehicle.

Baker told reporters that if more qualified drivers could not be found, “we’ll try to serve as many communities as we can.” He said the state would be reimbursed by the federal government and added, “Obviously the goal here is to try to make sure if we have vehicles, we put people on them who are qualified to drive them and do what we can to make sure kids can get to school.”

Boston Public Schools uses the private operator Transdev to transport 25,000 students each day, about half the district’s students. The driver shortage and last-minute routing changes have resulted in many delays since the district opened last Sunday. So far, officials in the Democratic Party-run city have not taken up Baker’s offer for military assistance.

Last week, the National Association for Pupil Transportation released the results of a national survey, which found that over half of the school transportation officials who responded were experiencing “severe” or “desperate” bus driver shortages, and nearly two-thirds stated that the driver shortage is currently their number one challenge. Even the few districts that said they were not short of regular drivers said they did not have enough drivers to address COVID-19 quarantines and the wave of retirements.

Minnesota is facing a “devastating school bus crisis,” school officials said, while Ryan Dellinger, executive director of the

Pennsylvania School Bus Association, estimates there are about 1,000 unfilled bus driver jobs across the state.

An estimated 200 school bus drivers have died during the pandemic, including dozens since the reopenings started in August. In Chicago, officials have given money to parents to hire Uber drivers, and in Iowa, teachers and staff are being asked to get licenses to drive school buses.

School bus drivers, many of whom are older and have underlying health conditions, are retiring in droves. But the shortage predates the pandemic and was driven by decades of bipartisan budget cutting, school bus privatization and mass layoffs, which gutted the jobs, pay and medical and retirement benefits of bus drivers. Now districts are offering a meager pay bump and signing bonuses to lure retired drivers back. However, older workers with underlying conditions and prospective new hires do not want to risk their lives or bring home the disease to their loved ones.

“We’re afraid,” Mary, a retired school bus driver in Detroit who has received several job offers, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Kids have a better immune system than older drivers but if they get sick, we’re going to get COVID immediately. You’re asking a bus driver and an aide to risk their lives. That’s why most of the drivers are quitting. New drivers are quitting after working a week or two because they are getting sick or being quarantined.

“It’s unreal that they are bringing in the army. It’s criminal to open the schools. People are losing their lives so the rich can get richer. How many bus drivers and teachers have to die? So many have already died in Florida, Tennessee, Indiana and other states. They get the virus and in a couple of days, they’re dead. This is very scary. I feel sorry for the parents, but if I had a young kid, I would not be sending them to school.”

Mary said Detroit was offering \$18 an hour and the suburbs about \$20, plus a \$1,000 to \$3,000 bonus after 90 days. But drivers only get paid for five or six hours of work a day. “That’s about \$100 before taxes,” Mary said, “and most people are saying that’s not enough to get COVID and take a chance on your life.”

Mary said school bus drivers have always been essential.

“When I drove, I went into homes to help kids get out of bed, I gave them food when they didn’t have breakfast and gave them money for lunch. But we were treated like garbage by the school officials. We had to have a wildcat strike just to get the money we were owed. We had to fight them to get the asbestos out of the bus yard. After all the diesel fumes we breathed, almost every one of my friends died from cancer. Then the district privatized the buses and robbed new workers of their pensions. Now they’re begging for drivers, along with janitors and cafeteria workers, and bringing in the army because we are just as essential as nurses, doctors and other frontline workers.”

The opening of schools, which culminated in the return of more than a million students in New York City on Monday, has led to a disaster. Although many state and district officials are deliberately concealing details about outbreaks, more children have been infected in the opening weeks for some schools than all of last year, and nearly 1,700 schools have been temporarily closed, according to data from Burbio.

In **South Carolina**, more than 4,000 students and 400 staff have contracted the coronavirus since the start of the academic year, with one school in Beaufort County shifting to remote learning until September 2 because half of its students are in quarantine. At least two children in the state have died from COVID-19 this month.

In **Kentucky**, custodian Bill Bailey died Sunday and instructional assistant Heather Antle died in August. The state, where 20 percent of the schools have been forced to close temporarily due to outbreaks, reported 5,252 new cases last week, including 1,602 new cases among people 18 years and younger.

In **Tennessee**, at least eight public school employees, including five teachers, one pre-K assistant, a cafeteria worker and a school bus driver, have died from COVID-19 since the beginning of the year.

In **West Virginia**, there have been 86 outbreaks and two county closures since the reopening of schools.

In **Florida**, ten children under the age of 16 have died since July 30. Meanwhile, Governor Ron DeSantis continues to oppose mask mandates in individual districts by withholding school board members’ salaries in districts that require students to wear masks.

The reopening of schools for 50 million students, including some 30 million below the age of 12 who are not eligible for vaccinations, is leading to a spike in infections among children, who now make up 28.9 percent of all COVID-19 cases.

On Monday, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that there were over 243,000 new child cases last week, the second highest number since the pandemic began. After declining in early summer, child cases have increased exponentially, with nearly 500,000 cases in the past two weeks and nearly a million since the beginning of August, although this does not count several states that do not break down cases by age.

Opposition to this murderous policy is growing, including among parents who are not directly under the thumb of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, which have fully backed Biden’s back-to-school policy. In recent days, there have been protests in Chicago, New York City, Knox County, Tennessee and Hawaii, including against deliberate efforts by school officials to conceal outbreaks. In Georgia, dozens of school bus drivers in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System have engaged in rolling sickouts and protests over wages and the lack of adequate COVID-19 protections. In Allentown, Pennsylvania, teachers rejected by a five-to-one margin a contract proposed by a mediator that would have sharply increased out-of-pocket health care costs.

In their rush to get children into schools so their parents can be sent back into workplaces to produce corporate profit, the Biden administration and politicians from both parties have ignored the warnings of epidemiologists and public health officials. Pointing to the predominance of the more infectious Delta variant, Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota and a member of Biden’s COVID-19 transition team, said, “The current guidance is not based on scientific reality. We’ve seen such a dramatic change in transmission... There’s no such thing as a safe school today with COVID.”

The shutdown of public schools, along with nonessential workplaces, is critical to a public health strategy to finally eradicate COVID-19. But this is completely opposed by both big-business parties and the corporatist trade unions, which want to continue the horrific sacrifice of human life to corporate profit. That is why educators, parents and all workers must expand the national and international network of rank-and-file committees in every school district to mobilize the working class to shut schools and reallocate society’s resources from the super-rich for high-quality remote learning, student and parent support and other critical needs until the pandemic is eliminated.



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