

Central Falls

Bus driver absences leave some students stranded

12:53 AM EST on Thursday, February 8, 2007

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CENTRAL FALLS — About one-half of the bus drivers who take city students to local and out-of-district schools were absent from work Tuesday and yesterday, leaving the administration scrambling for alternative transportation and stranding some children during one of the coldest weeks of the winter.

School administrators made arrangements for transportation and sent out a news release yesterday telling parents and children to expect buses to pick up students at their regular times and places.

The school administration has been considering whether to privatize the school transportation system to make it more efficient and less costly. Bus drivers, some of whom have worked for the city for years, have been worried about their jobs and have pleaded their cases to the administration and the Central Falls Board of Trustees. The school leases buses and employs 13 bus drivers and a bus monitor. On Feb. 13, Interim Schools Supt. William Holland will make his recommendation regarding the outsourcing of school transportation.

The school system transports some 800 students. Officials would not say how many of them were left waiting in the cold Tuesday when seven bus drivers were absent. Five bus drivers were absent yesterday, according to Robert Murray, finance director for the district. Murray said the numbers were higher than usual.

After the absences Tuesday, the schools notified parents through their computerized telephone system that the school would not be picking up in-district students yesterday. The schools were able to provide transportation to out-of-district students, Murray said.

Administrators would not speculate on whether the absences were organized, but one school official said she hoped that students would not be caught in the middle.

“I would hope that people would not use the kids as levers in negotiating,” said Anna Cano Morales, the president of the Central Falls Board of Trustees. “I feel really bad for the parents and the kids. They don’t need to be worried about having kids cold walking to school.”

John Tassoni, a senior business agent for Council 94, the union that represents the Central Falls bus drivers from Local 1627, said that the bus drivers are “unequivocally opposed to privatizing the bus yard” but the union did not call for a sickout.

Tassoni said that of the absences, two people were injured, a few were sick and some were taking vacation days. “This has been blown out of proportion. The facts speak for themselves. The union would never sanction a blue flu. We don’t want kids outside waiting on the corner for forty-five minutes to an hour,” Tassoni said.

Holland is scheduled to meet with members of the bus drivers’ union to determine whether their absences were part of an organized plan.

The school system transports elementary school students who live more than a half-mile from their school. They transport middle and high school students with special needs and those who attend charter schools, private and vocational schools. In 2005-06, the school transportation budget was \$1.4 million. Tassoni said that hiring a person who is knowledgeable about the school transportation system would help the district more than a private company who doesn’t know the routes or the students.

Police Chief Joseph Moran said there were no reported calls to the police or incidents on the days that the bus drivers were absent.

Angelo Garcia, a member of the Board of Trustees, who lives in Central Falls and has a child who is bused to a charter school in Providence, said he found out about the bus drivers when his son, Malik, 13, called him Tuesday to tell him the bus had not picked him up. Shortly afterward, a parent came into the Ralph Holden Community Center, where Garcia is the director, and said she had dropped her children off at Veterans School and asked if he had heard that the drivers were on strike.

Garcia said his son is older and had the sense to ask permission to use someone’s phone to call him, something that might not happen with a younger child.

Garcia said the bus drivers have always been great with his son and that he understood their desire to protest but still he worried about the students’ safety.

“My concern, regardless of what side people stand on, is are we gonna endanger the kids. I don’t know what happened. If it was intentional, it was done with a heavy heart. [The bus drivers] are really good with our kids,” Garcia said.

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