

Dear Kansas State Legislators,

Thank you for your consideration of House Bill 2092 and Senate Bill 137. My name is Pam Ward. I drove a school bus for the Blue Valley School District from 1981-89 and therefore was employed as a school bus driver when the current law went into effect in 1985. I found a better paying job in 1990 and worked there until 2000. I became a school bus driver again in 2000 and still drive Blue Valley School children to and from school. I witnessed the district contract with RW Harmon, Mayflower, Laidlaw and now First Student.

Back in the 1980's, school districts generally owned and operated their own school buses and/or directly sub-contracted with individuals who happened to own their own bus or small family-owned companies. There were not as many buses needed to transport children to and from school as there are in existence today. As an example, the Blue Valley School District operated only about 19 buses in 1985 and today they have over 130 buses.

Furthermore, the cost of living (rent, utilities, groceries and fuel prices) were much less than they are today. Moreover, help wanted ads in newspapers took up many pages back then compared to the few pages we now see today. As time passed and populations grew, school districts in Kansas and across the country began to hire medium- to large-sized, for-profit companies to provide the school bus transportation needs of their district's children.

As the economic climate began to change and cost of living increased, parents with school-aged children found driving a school bus compatible with raising children since preschoolers were allowed to accompany the parent on the school bus in the ride-along-programs developed to attract more school bus drivers.

Typically, school bus drivers are only paid for the hours they are operating the bus. Therefore, compensation during times school is not in session is very rare. This is especially true for drivers that are employed by for-profit private companies that bid on school district contracts. We are not paid for snow days, teacher work days and even some holidays. The impact becomes most troubling during the summer time.

It is important that you understand that a school bus driver's annual income generally keeps them at or just slightly above the poverty line, which means that they do not qualify for social services such as food stamps, etc. I am saddened by the stories of single-parent school bus drivers and monitors, usually mothers who will work so hard during the school year trying their best to get in as many hours per week as possible, and then who, come summertime, try to apply for the

WIC program or other services and are turned down because they literally made between \$40 and \$280 dollars more annually the previous tax year... disqualifying them from this important financial aid.

So as you can see, it is extremely difficult and many times impossible for some families whose parents are school bus drivers to pay for their basic living expenses during the summer months in particular. These people literally go hungry.

Before First Student purchased Laidlaw and took over the Blue Valley District's student transportation contract, Laidlaw allowed school bus drivers who could not find work to apply and receive unemployment compensation. Even though the law was in place, Laidlaw did not challenge it. They were honest about the 'reasonable assurance' clause and did not dispute that they had laid off most of their employees and reduced the wages of those who were lucky enough to win a bid for a summer route or other summer work. Moreover, Laidlaw frequently allowed the most industrious and motivated drivers to work a couple hours overtime. In contrast, First Student very strictly monitors overtime.

As long as the law remains in effect as currently written, First Student (as well as any privately-owned for-profit company) can and many will deny all their bus drivers and monitors any chance of receiving unemployment benefits, despite the fact that they do NOT promise reasonable assurance in writing or verbally to their employees. And instead, they tell the unemployment offices that they have given reasonable assurance to the employees. It is important for you to understand that the number of routes in more recent times has diminished due to school budget restraints and fewer parents paying directly to the company for bus transportation of their children. To illustrate the point, at the Blue Valley District, we have 20 drivers from Minnesota driving for us since August. They were laid off in Minnesota due to a severe decrease in available routes with the school districts in Minnesota.

Thank you so much for giving Kansas school bus drivers who are employed by private, for-profit companies a moment of your time to testify how this current law is negatively impacting them and their families, especially during the summer months.

Respectfully yours,  
Pamela Ann Ward