

...Portland Public Schools bus drivers are speaking up

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of \$23.84 after 25 years.

“Are you saying that meatloaf, hamburgers and hotdogs are more valuable than our children?” school bus driver Beth Blumklotz asked school board members at their March 20 meeting — to cheers from parents who had turned out to oppose a planned relocation of a program for disabled children. Blumklotz, who delivers kids safely to James John Elementary and Jackson Middle School five days a week, serves on the union negotiating team.

“We’re not against our colleagues earning a livable wage. We just want the same,” Blumklotz told the Board. “We want compensation that is commensurate with the responsibility that we shoulder every day transporting our students.”

The school bus drivers who are employed directly by the district transport about 600 students who have autism, mild moderate or complete deaf or blindness, learning disabilities, mental retardation, physical impairments, speech, language, or mental impairments, or emotional traumas. They make slightly less than school bus drivers who work for outside contractor First Student transporting the district’s general student population, who are also Local 757 members. The district employees do get somewhat better benefits however.

Most of the jobs are part-time: 30-hour weeks consisting of weekday split shifts of three hours each. Some drivers find that those hours at current wages aren’t enough to afford rent. One driver who turned out to picket March 23 said he’s currently homeless.

The current union contract provides for a starting wage of \$14.58, but the district couldn’t

find qualified drivers to work at that wage, and increased it \$1.67 an hour — to \$16.25 — with the union’s agreement. [That was made easier by the fact that the State of Oregon picks up 70 percent of the tab for school district transportation costs.]

At the March 23 bargaining session, district representatives made what they called their “last, best, and final offer.” It would increase starting pay to \$17.96 in July.

Blumklotz and other members of the bargaining team say it doesn’t go far enough; they want parity with the food truck drivers.

They also object to a district proposal that they say would open the door to the use of non-union drivers and less-skilled less-compensated union drivers to do substantially similar work to that of regular union members. The proposal has to do with a new program of using vans and cars to transport students who because of behavioral or discipline problems can’t travel with other students. Local 757 signed an agreement about the use of such drivers in September 2016 on the understanding that it was only for part-time positions and only to replace much-more-expensive trips currently provided by taxi companies. But Blumkoltz says the program hasn’t replaced taxi rides, has instead started to cannibalize existing bus routes, and has since grown to about 15 employees, often working more than part-time hours, under a new department manager. The employees are members of the union, but are stuck at the starting wage and lack benefits, all of which is unacceptable, Blumkoltz said.

The two sides are planning to meet again April 9 with the assistance of a mediator to see if they can move toward agreement.



ONLINE EXTRA

See school bus driver Beth Blumklotz make the case for a livable wage at the March 20 meeting of the Portland Public Schools Board at <https://bit.ly/2fl8r0>

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