



A Public School Transportation Crisis

When Anne Arundel County students returned to in-person learning in September 2021, Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) faced an urgent transportation crisis. A persistent, nationwide school bus driver shortage—made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic—hit the school system hard, leaving the district 40 to 60 drivers short on any given day. This gap severely disrupted daily operations, with dozens of routes regularly delayed or canceled.

The effects were far-reaching. Hundreds of families were left in limbo, with notifications about route changes arriving late at night or early in the morning. Many students were left stranded at bus stops or missed school entirely if parents were unable to rearrange their work schedules. Some schools saw a rise in behavioral issues, further adding to the disruption. Meanwhile, unexpected bus driver absences due to strikes and COVID-related illness further strained the system. While the shortage reflected national trends, its local impacts were immediate and severe, demanding a swift, coordinated response.



Seeking a Solution

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, AAWDC partnered with County Executive Steuart Pittman and other county leaders to convene a series of roundtable discussions with local school bus contractors—the employers of most AACPS drivers. These conversations uncovered three core challenges:

- Mass retirements, as older drivers chose to leave the workforce due to health concerns.
- Competitive pressure, with drivers leaving for better-paying CDL positions elsewhere.
- Unsustainable working conditions, including part-time schedules, limited benefits, and no pay for unexpected school closures.

In addition, inefficiencies in the CDL licensing process created further delays in onboarding new drivers.

While temporary fixes—such as route consolidation and free access to municipal buses—provided limited relief, a more sustainable solution was needed. It became clear that making bus driver positions more competitive and building a stronger pipeline of new drivers were essential to addressing the shortage.

2021-2022 School Year



NUMBER OF
BUS DRIVERS
588



NUMBER OF
ATTENDANTS
247

RECEIVED ALL THREE PAYMENTS:

87.7%



TOTAL PAYMENTS MADE:

\$3,588,103

Recruitment and Retention

AAWDC led the design and implementation of a recruitment and retention bonus program, funded through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The initiative launched in collaboration with AACPS, local government, and school bus contractors, and addressed the driver shortage through a multi-pronged strategy:

- **Targeted bonuses:** In year one, new drivers received up to \$5,000 and bus aides up to \$2,500, disbursed in staged payments: one after their first week, one after 90 days on the job, and one at the end of the school year. Existing staff received matching retention bonuses on a similar three-stage schedule.

In year two, the bonus structure was adjusted to include a 7% wage increase for drivers and aides, supplemented with additional bonuses that brought their total earnings in line with what was offered during the first year.
- **Incremental wage increases:** During years two and three of solution implementation, driver and aide wages were gradually increased to match the total earnings from the first-year incentives. These incremental changes allowed Anne Arundel County to make the necessary budget adjustments to support long-term competitive wages for school bus drivers and aides.
- **Recruitment efforts:** AAWDC launched a countywide campaign using hiring events, social media outreach, and partnerships with all local school bus contractors to attract talent.

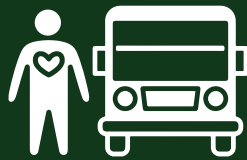
To help fill immediate gaps in service while long-term solutions were underway, some routes were transitioned to vans instead of buses, which allowed non-CDL drivers to provide transportation for students. Van drivers were included in the recruitment and retention bonus program as well.

As a result of these efforts, Anne Arundel County became one of the first counties in Maryland to fully staff all school bus routes following the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 school years began with every route filled.

2022-2023 School Year



NUMBER OF
BUS DRIVERS
809



NUMBER OF
ATTENDANTS
277

RECEIVED ALL THREE PAYMENTS:

83.7%



TOTAL PAYMENTS MADE:

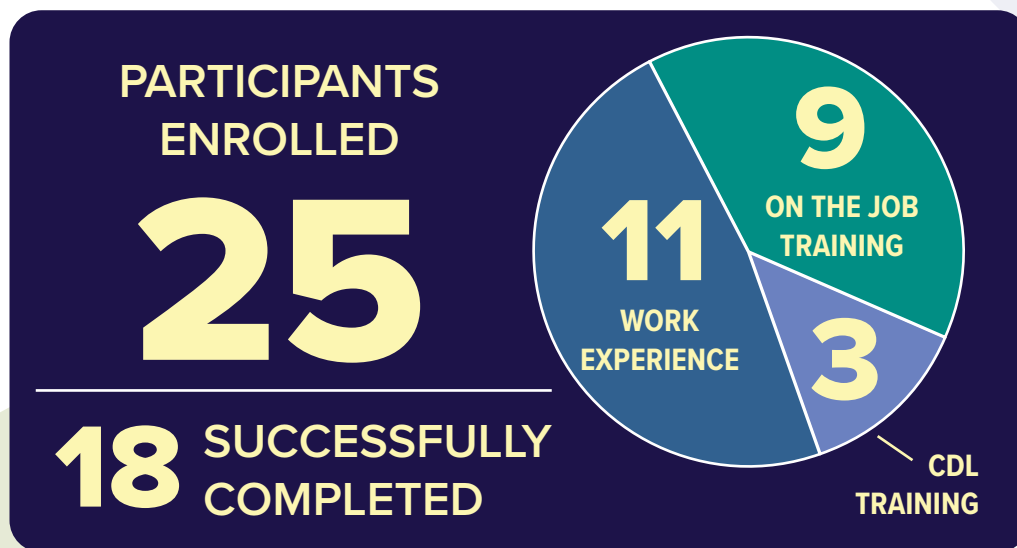
\$1,438,300

Building a Sustainable Talent Pipeline

To ensure long-term success, AAWDC launched a rolling enrollment CDL training program in partnership with local providers. Following a summer 2024 training cohort, AAWDC (in partnership with the Local Workforce Development Board's Transportation Collaborative) reassessed the program based on contractor feedback and identified key areas for improvement.

The revised approach, initially launched with Chesapeake Charter in fall 2024, provides participants with paid training opportunities—first through Work and Learn experiences, then through On-the-Job Training after CDL certification. As of May 2025, 18 trainees (nine in each track) were actively enrolled. When contractors shared with the Transportation Collaborative that it was difficult to pay trainees during CDL training, AAWDC stepped in to provide stipends, enabling participants to commit full-time to the program without financial hardship. This partnership has become a model for responsive workforce development, aligning training with employer needs and resulting in direct job placement, with contractors committed to hiring all successful trainees.

By leveraging leftover ARPA funds to support the pipeline and tailoring programs based on contractor feedback, AAWDC has helped create a more stable and forward-looking transportation workforce. Recruitment efforts will continue through summer 2025 and beyond to fill any remaining or future vacancies.



NUMBER OF
CDL LICENSES
OBTAINED

18

All data collected as of May 2025

“Partnering with AAWDC has been a game-changer. Their support—from training stipends to on-the-job training assistance—has helped us hire, retain, and grow a stronger team of school bus drivers ready to meet our community’s needs.”

Jake Lonergan,
Owner of Chesapeake Charter

Connect with us at: www.aawdc.org