



City Rejects School Bus Bids, Awaiting Employee Protections

By Eliza Shapiro

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The de Blasio administration has rejected a recent round of bids from a group of school bus companies, delaying the bidding process until the state legislature votes on a law that would reinstate benefits for experienced bus drivers.

The bids were for 1,569 routes that will serve special education students needing busing services this summer, from July through the end of August. Service for those students will not be disrupted, a City Hall official said, as existing contracts ensuring the busing will be extended for the second year in a row. The existing contracts contain the Employee Protection Provision (E.P.P.) for longtime bus drivers.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has vowed to reinstate the protections after they were stripped by former mayor Michael Bloomberg, leading to a month-long bus strike in 2013.

As a mayoral candidate, de Blasio promised to restore the protections, arguing that keeping experienced bus drivers was a matter of safety for city schoolchildren.

Last summer, the City Council passed a bill supported by de Blasio creating a \$42 million grant program to subsidize more experienced bus drivers.

The program was not approved without controversy: Councilman Dan Garodnick, supported by the watchdog budget group the Citizens Budget Commission, argued that the grant program violated the city's protocol for collective bargaining, as city workers' wages are not negotiated via legislation.

Since the summer, the grant program has served as a band-aid for longtime drivers waiting the official reinstatement of E.P.P., which has to be passed by the state legislature.

Now, the city is hoping some version of the E.P.P. will be restored by the state by the end of session, and is holding off on the bidding process pending the passage of a law restoring the protections.

David Ross, the Department of Education's director of contracts and purchasing, wrote to all the bidding bus companies on Friday, informing them that their bids had been rejected.

"The Request for Bids (R.F.B.)'s specifications did not include certain protections for employees of the contractors, which the D.O.E. at this time believes should be included in its school bus contracts," Ross wrote. "To cover the work that was the subject of the R.F.B., the D.O.E. will be extending for two years, with the possibility of a third year, existing contracts that contain employee protections."

The Panel for Educational Policy will officially vote on the contract extension at an upcoming meeting in May.



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"We've made very clear our intention to secure state legislation that will better protect experienced drivers and attendants, laying the foundation for the most reliable, cost-effective and safest services possible," Devora Kaye, a D.O.E. spokeswoman, said in a statement. "Once we achieve that authority, we will begin new procurements. We don't anticipate this causing any disruption in providing quality bus service to our families."