

State Department of Education School Bus Fleet
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Excerpts

Old buses, high mileage

- The state sends children to school on buses that *average* 14 years in age and nearly 200,000 miles.
- Nearly 5,000 of the state's school buses - almost the entire fleet - are already at or past the industry-recommended retirement age of 12 to 15 years.
- More than 20% of buses have logged more than 250,000 miles.
- The oldest buses are on the third decade and have more than half a million miles on them.

Average age of bus fleet

S.C. Dept. of Education	S.C. Dept of Corrections	S.C. Dept. of Juvenile Justice	National Average for school buses	Delaware Public Schools
14	10	10	9	5

Bus breakdowns mean students arrive late to school

- The state recorded nearly 12,000 bus breakdowns during the 2005-06 school year—nearly 67 bus breakdowns every school day.
- The state estimates that 1,500 students arrived late each school day last year as a result of bus problems.
- The school day cannot be extended when buses come late and kids miss instruction.

Danger of older buses

- Nearly half of the state's total fleet is so old that they lack modern safety features such as
 - Anti-lock brakes
 - back-up alarms
 - emergency roof and window exits
 - passenger crash protection seats with high backs
 - fire-resistant seat covers
- Anti-lock braking systems are included only on buses built after 1999, and only buses purchased after 1998 come with seat covers made with fire-resistant material.
- Aged buses regularly burst into flames when leaking gas, oil or hydraulic fluids contact frayed electrical wires. Take the May 2006 case of a Berkeley County bus from which 60 elementary and high school students barely escaped as flames engulfed the bus.
- Children unnecessarily risk injury when aged buses break down on busy highways. Breakdowns rarely occur in convenient places, forcing drivers to shepherd children to spare buses, often along narrow road shoulders or amid rush-hour traffic.

Higher costs without a regular replacement cycle

- Costs to keep the buses on the road have soared. The state spent nearly \$13 million last school year on school bus maintenance.

- During this budget year, \$4 million will be spent for major bus components (engines, transmissions). Without any significant increase in the size of the state bus fleet, expenditures on major bus components has increased from \$700,000 in ten years.
- As the school bus fleet ages, spare parts no longer exist or aren't readily available. Maintenance staff must either wait weeks for delivery of a part, (and often pay a higher cost for a limited supply of parts) or cannibalize spare or unusable buses for parts.
- High turnover of bus mechanics increases costs. Nearly 25% of school bus mechanics leave their job every year. In recent years the turnover rate has been as high as 34%. A large number of mechanics leave because they are overworked facing a never-ending stream of broken-down buses
- "The amount of time and money required to keep older buses running simply doesn't make business sense. Fourteen or 15 years is where you start spending an inordinate amount to keep it running." (Statement by the Alabama administrator of pupil transportation.)
- The aging engines on the state's oldest buses also cost taxpayers more because of poor fuel efficiency.
- According to a national school bus expert, the lack of a dedicated bus-buying plan costs taxpayers more because bus manufacturers would offer better deals if they knew the state soon would buy again.

Financial "Time Bomb"

- The last time the state bought a substantial number of new buses was in 1995, when it purchased more than 2,000. Those buses are now 12 years old and starting to require expensive engine and transmission replacements.
- Taxpayers face a financial time bomb that is set to explode when the 1995 buses and the nearly 3,000 older buses cannot be kept on the road. Based on an estimated cost of \$72,000 for a new school bus, the state faces a \$360 million bill that could come due at any time.

Most polluting bus fleet in the nation

The state's bus fleet recently was ranked as the most polluting in the country in a national survey of school buses. Many of the state's buses are so old that they fail to meet federal clean air standards, spewing hazardous emissions into the air and contributing to health problems in children.

Many other states have replacement cycles

- The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services recommends a 12-to-15-year age limit.
- Delaware retires buses when they reach the age of 12.
- Alabama enforces a 15-year replacement plan and gives school districts financial incentive to replace buses even earlier. Most of Alabama's buses are 10 years old or less.
- South Carolina law does not stipulate when a school bus must be retired.

Last year's state appropriation for school buses

With a \$37 million appropriation last year by the State Legislature, the state bought 630 new buses. This accounts for just over 10 percent of the fleet and is not enough to retire all of the state's buses that are more than 20 years old.