

It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air

Trends: School Buses

We needed to determine existing policies and trends within school districts in regards to the idling of school buses. Phone calls were made to dozens of school district transportation supervisors in Washington State. In the course of this research, we discovered some larger urban school districts contracted out their bus service to firms such as First Student or Laidlaw. Many of the other school districts own and operate their own fleets. If a school district contracted out the service, then a follow up call was made to the contractor, i.e. – First Student, to determine what the company's policies were regarding idling.

Bus Contractors

The contractors want to idle as little as possible due to the nature of their relationship with the school districts (i.e. their margins rise when they use as little fuel as possible). The contractors typically have a newer fleet of buses which are more fuel-efficient and produce fewer emissions. In certain instances a school principal can ask a driver to "idle" in order to "warm" a bus in cold weather. The largest contractor with the Seattle School District, First Student (next school year will handle Tacoma as well), has a strict "no idle" policy at the schools and will not "idle for warmth" even if asked by a principal. They time their runs to arrive at the schools within 10 minutes so have no need in the winter to "idle" to keep warm. Other contractors who serve the eastern part of the state will "idle for warmth" if directed by the principals. Policies are for the most part verbal or reiterated in meetings, fliers, handouts and by supervisors, etc. The contractors are in full support of the "key tag" idea.

Public School Districts Owning Their Own Buses

The majority of the school districts have a five minute idle for warm up policy at the bus barn or garage and a "no idle" policy at the schools for drop off and pick up. There are a few exceptions to this policy. Cold weather, age of fleet/vehicle and physical layout of a school can lead to some idling. Examples – in winter months some buses do "idle" at pick up to maintain warmth of bus, if directed by the school, although they try to keep it at a minimum. Certain school districts have older buses, fully depreciated 13 or 18-year-old buses. Transportation Managers have indicated that in maintaining the older engines, vehicles can require a "cool down" time, and since they do not have a budget for a new vehicle they employ this process even though it increases idling. Physical layout of a school can dictate a bus to stop in front of a drop off area, unload the kids while still running, and then continue on with other buses behind them doing the same thing. If a school has a "parking area" for the buses, they are instructed to pull in and turn off. The school districts are in full support of the "key tag" idea.

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Private Schools

On average, about 10-15% of a private school's student population rides a bus. The buses are also used for sporting events. The number of buses used by private schools is small, usually four to six buses, and the drivers are instructed to not idle in order to save money on fuel costs.

Conclusions

Excessive school bus idling does not seem to be a significant issue. It is almost certain some unnecessary idling does occur; however, the sensitivity to fuel consumption is an incentive to have as little idle time as possible. School bus drivers and bus contractor companies are great vehicles to encourage, inform and reinforce the messages of "no idling."