



Bentonville Schools renews look at bus ads

Story by [Dave Perozek](#)

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BENTONVILLE -- The School District once again is exploring the possibility of putting signs on its buses.

It's an idea the district considered two years ago, soon after a state law took effect allowing school bus advertisements. District officials interviewed companies that specialize in selling advertisements, but nothing came of the effort.

School bus facts

- There are more than 7,000 school buses in Arkansas.
- Students are about 70 times more likely to get to school safely when taking a bus instead of traveling by car.
- Yellow was chosen the color for school buses because of its eye-catching quality during a 1939 conference held at the University of Manhattan to develop school bus standards.
- A law passed last year by the Arkansas Legislature requires school districts to propose a tax increase to voters to raise money for seat belts on school buses if at least 10 percent of that district's qualified electors sign a petition requesting seat belts.

Source: Staff report

Discussion at the time was about signs advertising local businesses. This time, however, the idea is signs would carry district messages sponsored by businesses, said Janet Schwanhausser, director of finance.

"We'll have a district initiative on the biggest part of the space and a company can just sponsor the message," Schwanhausser said. "So you won't see an advertisement for chicken nuggets going down the road."

A mock-up of such a sign was shown as an example at last week's School Board meeting. It showed a woman on the phone with the slogan "If you see something, say something," a program aimed at raising awareness of potential security threats at the schools. In a corner of the sign was a company logo.

"This isn't what we have to do, but imagine that on the side of a school bus," said board vice president Eric White, who was appointed last month to a committee that interviewed firms interested in coordinating sign designs for the district.

White said he supports the concept presented at last week's meeting. The idea is to minimize the distraction to drivers by keeping the signs simple with as few words as possible, he said.

"You don't want people having to stop and look at the bus to read it," White said.

The district put out a request for proposals earlier this year -- as it did two years ago -- from marketing companies interested in selling or creating the signs.

The committee invited two vendors to present and determined which vendor it prefers. Schwanhausser said she plans to bring more information to the board at its next meeting on April 2.

Responses to the first request for proposals in 2016 indicated the district could make ad revenue between \$100,000 and \$150,000 the first year and up to \$450,000 annually by year five, Schwanhausser told the board last month.

Arkansas became the 10th state in the nation to allow school bus advertising in 2015 when legislation sponsored by state Rep. Dan Douglas, R-Bentonville, was signed into law.

The legislation stipulated all revenue generated from school bus ads be used for transportation purposes only. The money could be used to buy buses. Bentonville bought six, 77-passenger buses last year for a total of \$593,076.

Debbie Jones, Bentonville's superintendent, said administrators also have discussed using the money to provide some professional development for drivers, including training on how to deal with special education students.

The law otherwise allowed the Commission for Arkansas Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation to set rules on bus ads. The commission mandates all ads be limited to the exterior of a bus on its rear quarter panels, starting at least 3 inches behind the rear wheel and not closer than 4 inches from the lower edge of the window line. Ads must be contained within a block of 30 inches in height and 60 inches in length.

No school district in Northwest Arkansas has advertising on its buses.

The Booneville School District, a district of about 1,200 students southeast of Fort Smith, put signs on its buses starting last year. The district began displaying decals on five of its buses promoting a program called "A Hope and a Future," started by the Booneville Rotary Club to raise money for scholarships for Booneville students.

John Parrish, Booneville's superintendent at the time, said the Rotary Club came up with the idea to raise enough scholarship money to pay for the first year of college for every graduating Booneville High School senior.

Parrish resigned from the district last month. Scotty Pierce, interim superintendent, was not able to provide information on the bus ad program when reached Friday.

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services published a paper in 2011 outlining its opposition to school bus ads. Though there is no data showing bus ads are distracting to passing motorists, there have been studies verifying the effects of driver distraction on motor vehicle crashes, according to the association's paper.

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