

# The Post and Courier

FOUNDED 1803  WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

March 11–13, 2007

INVESTIGATIVE SERIES

## SCHOOL BUS BREAKDOWN

*Why South Carolina's public school buses are the oldest, most  
polluting and least safe in the nation*

By Ron Menchaca and Mindy B. Hagen  
The Post and Courier · Charleston, South Carolina

### Awards

- ◆ Education Writers Association Award for Investigative Reporting
- ◆ Taylor/Tomlin Award for Investigative Journalism, University of South Carolina
- ◆ Associated Press Managing Editors Public Service Award, Finalist
- ◆ South Carolina Press Association, Series of News Articles, First Place
- ◆ Judson Chapman Public Service Award, Third Place, South Carolina Press Association

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# The Post and Courier

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## SCHOOL BUS BREAKDOWN

*Why S.C.'s public school buses are the oldest, most polluting and least safe in the nation*

**BY RON MENCHACA AND MINDY B. HAGEN**

March 11, 2007

The school buses that South Carolina's children ride every weekday are so old that when they no longer run the state cannibalizes them for spare parts to keep the rest of its aging fleet rolling. One of the last times the state sold its used buses was about a decade ago. The only bidders were some cash-wielding buyers from Mexico.

Two years ago South Carolina was forced to replace part of its 5,701-bus fleet. The state didn't pick new buses with modern safety features. Instead, it bought 73 used school buses from a Kentucky school district that sold them because they were too old.

South Carolina's public school bus fleet is the oldest, most polluting and least safe in the nation, an investigation by The Post and Courier reveals.

Why? Because the state legislature has failed to create a system to regularly replace buses as they age. That forces school districts across the state, from Charleston to Columbia to Greenville, to shuttle children on many of the same school buses that carried their parents.

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, but state bus officials still call them the "new buses."

State Rep. Bob Walker, chairman of the House Education and Public Works Committee, said the main issue is money. He said the legislature has been reluctant to commit to a replacement plan that would lock it into buying new buses every year regardless of its ability to pay if the state has a tight financial year.

The failure to create a regular replacement system leaves taxpayers facing a financial time bomb that is set to explode when the 1995 buses, and the nearly 3,000 older school buses, can't 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.

The state sends children to school on buses that average 14 years in age, many with more than 400,000 miles.

South Carolina's convicts enjoy the more modern comfort and safety of prison buses that average about 10 years in age. That's because the state Corrections Department and most state agencies, except the education department and two small agencies, are advised to replace their buses after age 10 or when the cost of upkeep outstrips their value.

The newspaper's investigation shows that the legislature's failure to provide a similar system for school buses costs taxpayers money and places the state's children in unnecessary danger:

— 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.

— 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.

— Most of the state's school buses lack many state-of-the-art safety features such as anti-lock brakes and alarms that signal when a bus is backing up.

— Children unnecessarily risk injury when aged buses break down on busy highways. The state recorded nearly 12,000 bus breakdowns during the 2005-06 school year. That's nearly 67 bus breakdowns every school day.

— Bus breakdowns also mean that every day hundreds of children miss out on valuable classroom time. The state estimates that 1,500 students arrived late each school day last year as a result of bus problems.

— These same buses are among those that state emergency management officials have designated for possible use to evacuate coastal residents in the path of a major hurricane.

— Costs to keep the buses on the road have soared. The state spent nearly \$13 million last school year on school bus maintenance. Nearly one-third of that amount was used to replace worn out engines and transmissions.

— 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.

### **Safe, but for how long?**

Forty-two school children have died in school bus-related accidents in the state since 1969. Six of those were riding on a bus at the time of the accident. The rest involved children who were passengers in other vehicles or who were struck while standing or walking outside of a bus. In 2005, a 4-year-old boy in Dorchester County was killed when a school bus accidentally ran over him just seconds after he got off the bus.

South Carolina school buses were involved in about 500 accidents during the last school year, but there is no way to know how many were due in some way to wear or age. That's because the state's accident investigations focus on whether the bus driver was at fault and don't automatically take into account bus age,

mileage or maintenance issues that may have contributed, said John Dozier, who oversees school bus safety for the state Department of Education.

Dozier said if a bus driver involved in an accident said the brakes failed to work properly, the state would determine only whether the brakes worked, not how well they worked. Maintenance records show buses frequently develop brake problems. In August 2002, for example, 15 students were evacuated from a bus in Williamsburg County after the brake pads wore away and metal-to-metal contact sparked a fire.

### **Breakdowns put children at risk**

Most parents trust that when their children board school buses they won't step off until they reach their scheduled stop. But when a bus engine conks out or smoke appears inside a bus, a driver's first duty is to get the kids off and moved to as safe a place as possible. Such breakdowns rarely occur in convenient places, forcing drivers to shepherd children to spare buses, often along narrow road shoulders or amid rush-hour traffic.

Greenville bus shop supervisor Melody Bullman discourages bus drivers from using Interstate 385, the city's major thoroughfare. "There's no safe place for the kids to sit and wait, or for the mechanics to work," she said.

Mac Flood, bus transportation director for the Berkeley County School District, said herding large groups of children along the roadside is an accident waiting to happen. "That's not good to do. Thank God we haven't gotten any kids hurt, but it increases the potential," he said. Flood said he's also concerned about the children left waiting at their stops for a bus that's broken down. "The longer we leave them sitting at the stop, the more chance there is for an abduction or of a child running into traffic."

Bullman said most bus shops have a limited number of spare buses to draw from when buses break down. "If there's no spare bus available, they might have to wait until a different bus completes its route, comes back and then is sent out again to pick them up."

The state has no record of any child being injured as a result of transferring to a spare bus following a breakdown. So far, injuries are confined to academics when children arrive late to school.

At Berkeley County's Macedonia Middle School, Principal Janie Langley grows frustrated when the state's bus system works against education. "We can't extend the day when buses come late and kids miss the instruction," Langley said. "These buses are just the tail that wags the education dog in this state."

"I hold my breath when the buses go out, and I'm so relieved when they come back," she said.

### **Buses for hurricane evacuation**

Even families without school-age children could find themselves dependent on the state's aging buses. State emergency management officials responsible for coordinating the evacuation of residents in the path of a hurricane or other natural disaster have plans that call for deploying the state's school bus fleet to help move people to safety.

Lowcountry residents who experienced or witnessed the botched evacuation for Hurricane Floyd in 1999 and remember the miles-long lines of broken down and out-of-gas vehicles along the highways might be reluctant to board a decades-old, gas-guzzling bus fleet with a long history of maintenance problems.

State Emergency Management Division officials say they are not responsible for ensuring that the bus fleet is up to the task. That's the Department of Education's job, agency spokesman John Legare said. "As for the equipment and upgrading that equipment, that's really more their issue than ours. We'll take what we can get when we are trying to move people."

### **Buses lack safety features**

Many of the state's buses lack basic modern safety features such as back-up alarms, adequate heating, larger windshields, extra mirrors and fire-resistant seat covers. For example, state buses purchased before 2000 don't have alarms that alert drivers to check for sleeping students once they complete their routes. Buses built before 1999 don't have anti-lock brakes, which help prevent skidding on wet and icy roads.

Nearly 2,500 of the state's buses are so old that they lack roof and window exits that could enable children to escape a burning bus. Most parents don't know that bus age, mileage and safety features vary widely from one bus to the next.

Laurie Harth's two young sons ride a bus to and from Summerville's Newington Elementary. She assumed all of the state's buses were new and was taken aback to learn that the bus her children ride has been on the road since 1988, meaning it lacks many basic safety features. "As a parent, it freaks me out."

### **Scheduling bus replacement**

The average school bus in America is about 9 years old, or 5 years newer than the average South Carolina bus. Many states retire school buses or use them as spares after they reach a certain age or mileage. States such as Delaware, Alabama and Kentucky yank their older buses out of service early enough that they fetch top dollar in a thriving used-school-bus market, where money-strapped foreign governments shop for deals.

South Carolina's Department of Juvenile Justice and the state's School for the Deaf and the Blind have far more modern fleets than the education department. Their average buses are 10 years old and 6 years old, respectively. Katie Rice, spokeswoman for the School for the Deaf and the Blind, said her agency will soon retire its two oldest buses — 1995 models. "We have two new buses coming in so we will give the two old ones to the Department of Education."

The state vehicle replacement guidelines that ensure public money is not wasted on clunkers exempts the state Department of Education's buses. South Carolina law does not stipulate when a school bus must be retired. Nor does it require the General Assembly to set aside money for new school buses.

As a result, the state sporadically buys new buses. It purchases none or a trickle in tight budget years. Then, in occasional bursts of desperation, it buys hundreds at a pop. This feast-or-famine approach concentrates risk in a single model year of buses. If a particular bus model develops a mechanical problem — as happened last year when the state temporarily sidelined all 2,000 of its 1995 model buses because of a fire risk — a substantial chunk of the fleet could be out of service.

Still, lawmakers repeatedly fail to adopt a bus replacement plan, and the average age of the buses continues to climb, more than doubling in the past 12 years. Today, the average state school bus has logged about 200,000 miles, more than double the average mileage a decade ago.

State Rep. Roland Smith of Aiken County introduced a bill this year that would establish a 12-year school bus replacement cycle. "There are lingering feelings that we are paying too much per bus," Smith said. "But we're behind. We realize that we have to address this issue."

## **Deja vu**

The House bill recently proposed by Smith and Walker marks the second time in two years that the legislature has considered a bus replacement bill, but the need for a bus replacement plan has been discussed for more than a decade. The original proposal called for a 12-year replacement cycle, but some lawmakers felt that was too short and tacked on three more years to squeeze more life out of the fleet.

So mechanics keep expectations low. Kenny Bligen, assistant supervisor of the Charleston County bus shop, said the sooner the state adopts a replacement plan, the sooner it can put its oldest buses out to pasture. "Hopefully, in a few years, we'll be out of the '84 and '85 buses altogether."

The state's purchase of more than 2,000 school buses in 1995 — a deal that still ranks nationally as the largest single public bus purchase ever — only delayed the inevitable. The state faces a looming maintenance crisis as its 1995 buses, more than one-third of its fleet, reach retirement age at the same time.

A replacement engine for a 1995 Thomas bus can cost \$10,000, far more than the bus would fetch on the used market. On a recent afternoon, Beaufort County bus shop supervisor Robert Hoffman was down to one spare transmission for a 1995 bus. Later that day, a wrecker pulled up to the shop towing another broken down bus. It would take Hoffman's last spare transmission. "We are getting to that period when they are going to start falling apart," he said.

## **Good advice**

Lawmakers have overlooked school buses for decades despite warnings and recommendations that they act immediately. In 2001, the Legislative Audit Council concluded that the state faces "reduced assurance that the buses can be operated in a safe and reliable manner" if it fails to start phasing out old buses. In the six years since that report was written, the odometer on the average state bus has accumulated an additional 100,000 miles.

The state Department of Education hired a consultant to review South Carolina's bus-buying practices a few years ago. The California-based expert, Jim Wilkins, has helped local and state bus officials all over the country improve their operations. South Carolina ignored his recommendation that the state adopt a bus replacement plan.

In a recent telephone interview with The Post and Courier, Wilkins expressed surprise that the state had not followed his advice and had resorted to buying another state's hand-me-down buses.

Even those who favor scrapping the state-operated bus system altogether in favor of privatization say replacement cycles are a basic requirement for any fleet. In January 2005, a General Assembly committee recommended a median bus age of seven to 10 years. That same year, the state bought just 50 new buses.

Some lawmakers fear that more delay in addressing the bus crisis could have deadly results. If a child is seriously injured or killed in a bus accident as a result of its age, people would point fingers at the General Assembly, Walker said. "Everybody will say you should have done something."

# The Post and Courier

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Monday, March 12, 2007 · Page A1

## A MECHANIC'S NIGHTMARE

*Aging school buses take a punishing toll on the workers who struggle to keep them running*

**BY RON MENCHACA AND MINDY B. HAGEN**

March 12, 2007

Glance around the yard behind many of the state's school bus shops and you'll see rows of devoured bus carcasses, their wiring exposed, engines missing and headlights lifted.

As the state's school bus fleet ages, spare parts no longer exist or aren't readily available. Shop supervisors either wait weeks for delivery of a part or cannibalize from bus graveyards. In South Carolina, these hulks are priceless. Without them, the state can't find enough spare parts to keep its aged fleet carrying children to school.

A mixed fleet with nearly a dozen different models of buses, some as many as 23 years old, is a logistical and mechanical nightmare. Most bus parts from different makes, models and years are not interchangeable, meaning employees at the 46 school bus shops in the state are faced with the challenge of scouring spare buses or calling junk yards in other states. Some parts can be found only in Latin American countries that buy old American school buses.

If parts can't be found quickly, a bus that could be transporting students sits idle in the shop. That can be risky: Bus drivers and mechanics in several counties say that if a bus sits for even a few hours, chances are a mechanic will raid it to get another bus back on the road. Robert Hoffman, who oversees the Beaufort County bus shop, said the shops have to make tough calls like this every day. "It's robbing Peter to pay Paul," he said.

The cost of keeping old buses on the road is staggering. While the size of the state's bus fleet has remained roughly the same for the past decade, the annual cost of major bus components such as engines has skyrocketed during that period, from about \$700,000 in 1997 to more than \$4 million this budget year. That's enough money to buy about 56 new state-of-the-art school buses.

### **Old shops, mechanic turnover**

Beleaguered mechanics serve as front-line soldiers in the battle to keep these creaky vehicles healthy enough to transport children. Yet they often are forced to do this out of school bus shops that are more than 40 years

old and lack modern technology and equipment.

Many of the service vehicles that mechanics rely on to rescue broken-down buses are themselves cobbled together from retired buses. Some bus shops still use service vehicles from the 1970s; they sometimes break down when mechanics take them out on the road to fix buses.

The state recorded nearly 12,000 bus breakdowns in the 2005-06 school year. With nearly three out of four state school buses running at more than 150,000 miles — and more than one in five with more than 250,000 miles — the existing maintenance crisis is likely to mushroom.

Overworked mechanics quickly become fed up with poor working conditions, starting pay around \$27,000 and the pressure of servicing a dying fleet. That has led to a turnover rate as high as 34 percent in recent years. State school bus officials say recent salary increases for mechanics have improved the situation, but each year the state still loses as many as one out of every four mechanics.

Chris Bishop has fixed state school buses for more than two decades, and he's still repairing some of the same buses that were around when he started. He's easy to spot when he's working under a bus. His work shoes are so worn that the steel plate shows through a hole in his toe leather.

The Beaufort County bus shop mechanic said dealing with old buses is made worse by having to work in aging shops built in the early 1960s. At his shop, the roof leaks and an awning that once covered its fuel pumps now lies in a field after a stiff wind blew it off its supports.

The ceiling-mounted electrical cords that carry power around the shop broke years ago. With no money for those repairs, mechanics now snake extension cords across the floor to power their tools. When some of the state's shops run out of storage space for cannibalized parts, they convert old bus carcasses into makeshift storage sheds.

Many bus shops also lack service pits such as those motorists see at most oil change franchises. The bus shop mechanics shimmy under buses on rollers and spend hours working on their backs. Instead of using fluid hoses hanging from the ceiling at easy reach, mechanics wrestle 55-gallon drums from bus to bus.

Hoffman said mechanics don't expect luxury; they just want shops outfitted with basic equipment. "In my opinion, we have not come up to the new century," he said. "We don't work efficiently because we don't have the newest equipment."

The state's bus shops essentially have become training schools for diesel engine mechanics. New mechanics gain experience fixing school buses, then jump to better paying jobs with other state agencies or private shops. A state school bus mechanic can start in the mid- to high \$20,000 range but can earn in the mid-\$30,000s at a truck dealership or other private company.

The constant turnover drains shops of institutional knowledge, a critical asset when dealing with buses that are older than some of the mechanics. "I really don't think the state cares about us," Bishop said. "I kind of wish John Q. Public could come out and see what sort of problems we have to deal with on a daily basis."

Recruiting qualified mechanics is difficult. Melody Bullman, supervisor of a shop in Greenville County, received two applications the most recent time she advertised a position. "A mechanic can work at a car dealership, where he wouldn't have to work outside in cold conditions in the snow or sleet fixing a bus on the side of the road," she said. "There's always so much to do and no catching up."

Some shops rely on veteran mechanics who have been in the system for years. Rick Anthony has worked as supervisor of the bus shop in Pickens County for 29 years. Nine out of Pickens' nearly 120 buses have been driven more than 400,000 miles. "More than 400,000 miles is just a lot of miles on any vehicle," Anthony said. "If we parked it in the shed and called it a collector's item, that would be one thing. But we aren't doing that yet. We are out there running them every day like they are new."

Pat Drake supervises maintenance at a Richland County bus shop. "The parents don't know that it has 480,000 miles on it or that it's a 1986 bus," she said. "If I knew that as a parent, I would have been able to take my kids to school myself. Some parents don't have that choice."

### **Questionable safety inspections**

Efforts to stay on top of a bus shop's pressing needs are complicated by a requirement that all buses receive and pass six-week inspections and comprehensive annual inspections. The state recently started plastering brightly colored stickers on all of its school buses to certify that the annual inspection took place.

The stickers don't reveal that those inspections are done by the very same mechanics who work under tremendous daily pressure to get buses back on the road. This self-inspection program runs contrary to recommendations by the National Association for Pupil Transportation, which urges each responsible party to establish a neutral third-party inspection program.

A 2001 Legislative Audit Council report found that the state Department of Education failed to adequately monitor its school bus inspection program. It found that nearly one-third of the required six-week inspections never took place, and one out of every five of the required annual inspections were not completed.

Jim Wilkins, a school bus consultant who studied South Carolina's bus fleet in 2001, said he has no doubt that the state's mechanics are dedicated, but he said the state's inspection system creates a conflict of interest. "That's the fox guarding the henhouse."

The lack of independent oversight can have disastrous consequences. In 2002, state education officials traveled to Clarendon County to investigate a bus fire. Investigators discovered that the maintenance shop responsible for the 1995 bus had failed to fix a known brake problem, which was suspected of sparking the fire. The flames devoured the bus's passenger compartment, leaving only the charred remains of bare seat frames.

Investigators pulled the shop's maintenance records and found numerous falsified inspection reports and more than 50 instances of buses remaining in service without having undergone the required annual safety inspections. "There were numerous inconsistencies with the records," the state's investigation report said. "The greatest concern was that the inspection indicated a problem with the rear brakes and no one was instructed to make repairs."

### **Cannibalizing buses**

Georgetown County bus shop parts clerk Tressie Lambert is a detective of sorts. She's one of dozens of bus shop clerks around the state charged with hunting down spare parts. The parts clerks see the battle unfold through receipt tallies and work orders. They track every failed component, every faulty wiper blade, every broken heater.

Lambert's days are spent scouring parts warehouse inventories for rare bus parts, ordering new components that sometimes cost more than the buses are worth and stocking an endless stream of tiny o-rings, gaskets and bulbs that flow off the shelves as fast as she can unpack them. "We throw nothing away," she said.

Lambert recently encountered an alarming problem with the 1995 buses that account for nearly half the state's fleet. The metal track that allows the buses' windows to slide up and down is no longer being made. So she's now forced to order entire window assemblies to replace broken window tracks. That's akin to undergoing a root canal to fix a loose filling.

Lambert said that because the state provides the buses, parents assume they must be up to the job. "I think that parents just look at school buses and trust," she said.

Lambert's boss, Georgetown shop supervisor H.L. Moree, said scavenging for spare parts in the bus graveyard out behind his shop is becoming a less viable option. "Any part that could be reused had been reused," Moree said. "It was just scrap metal. That was all that was left."

### **New buses, more problems**

In recent weeks, brand new school buses purchased in 2006 began arriving at state bus shops. The new European-style buses are noticeably different from anything else in the fleet. Their shiny paint and plethora of automated driver controls stand in stark contrast to the ratty and worn buses that make up much of the fleet.

Veteran Beaufort County mechanic Rusty Wright, who recently attended maintenance training for the new buses, worries that their computerized diagnostics may be too advanced for mechanics accustomed to fixing old buses. "We are getting buses that are too modern for our employees."

The state bought 630 new buses, which accounts for a little more than 10 percent of the fleet. But even that \$37 million purchase is not enough to retire all of the state's buses that are more than 20 years old. And there's no guarantee the state will buy new buses again soon without a law that mandates a replacement cycle.

Donald Tudor, the state's director of school bus transportation, said the new buses actually had two problems, one involving the brakes and a second defect with the buses' drive shafts. The buses had to be sent back to the manufacturers of those components for repairs. Tudor said he is confident that the new buses are safe.

The problems with the new buses remind Bishop of the state's last big bus purchase, in 1995. The 2,000 buses the state bought that year have developed a bad reputation among shop mechanics and supervisors, who consistently complain about the 1995 buses' oil leaks, electrical wiring hazards and fire-prone engines. Bishop worries that problems with the new buses is history repeating itself. "That tells me we are getting a new batch of lemons."

# The Post and Courier

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Tuesday, March 13, 2007 · Page A1

## AGING BUSES CREATE FIRE HAZARD FOR KIDS

*A pattern of bus fires exposes dangerous flaws in the state's aging fleet — and the officials who missed them*

**BY RON MENCHACA AND MINDY B. HAGEN**

March 13, 2007

Sixteen-year-old Kaitlyn Metts thought for a moment that she might die on her morning bus ride to school.

She was sitting near the back of a 1995 rear-engine school bus when it caught fire in rural Berkeley County last May. Margaret Ayers, a long-time Berkeley County bus driver, was finishing her morning pick-ups near Cooper Store Road outside Moncks Corner. The bus was loaded with some 60 elementary and high school students when Ayers, a volunteer firefighter, caught a whiff of a familiar odor. "I smelled smoke and looked in my side mirror and saw the flames. I said, 'Oh my gosh.' "

She yelled for the children to rush out the bus' front door, because the rear emergency exit window was now blocked by flames. Kaitlyn and the rest of the older students knew the drill: In an emergency, they should help look after the younger children. The elementary students were screaming.

Once outside, the students clustered a safe distance from the bus as flames licked the sides, melting engine and tire rubber and sending a thick, pungent cloud of black smoke into the morning sky. The ubiquitous yellow paint job turned the color of a spoiled banana. "The flames were above the bus about six feet," Kaitlyn said.

Ayers tried calling for help on her radio, but it was out of range. Then she dialed her cell phone. Same problem. So she reached inside the bus's front door and grabbed the fire extinguisher. She ran back around to the fire in a futile effort to fight the flames. The bus burned until firefighters arrived.

The younger children would have been in more danger if the older students had not been there to help get everyone off the bus, Ayers said. "It was scary. The kids were hollering, saying the bus was going to explode. It was traumatizing for them."

**A pattern of fires**

An investigation by the state Department of Education found that the fire started after an improperly installed battery cable rubbed a hole in an adjacent hydraulic fluid hose. The cable, which connects the starter to the battery, shorted and ignited the leaking fluid. State maintenance records show that Ayers' bus was serviced for a problem with its starter the day before the fire.

But the state's investigation ended there. State officials didn't immediately order checks for similar problems on other buses in the state's fleet, even though more than half the fleet consists of rear-engine buses nearly identical to Ayers' 1995 bus.

Berkeley County School District transportation supervisor Cynthia Cogdill gasped when she saw Ayers' burned bus after it was towed to the county bus shop. "The back of it was black. It just gave me cold chills to look at it."

State school bus maintenance director Marshall Casey didn't consider the damage to be substantial. He recommended that the bus be fixed and put back on the road to carry children. "Since the damage was not significant I recommend that the bus be repaired utilizing components from a wrecked bus in Dorchester (County)," Casey wrote in his investigation report.

A little more than one month later, another 1995 bus on a summer field trip in Columbia caught fire from the exact same problem. The driver barely managed to evacuate students before the bus burst into flames. This time, state officials immediately ordered a recall of the more than 2,000 buses built in 1995 to check for wiring problems.

Cogdill said she believes the state should have acted sooner after the Berkeley County fire to order inspections on other buses. She points to the fact that the recall order came only after a bus caught fire in the capital city. "It had to happen up there before it got any attention."

The state had just completed its review in August 2006 when another 1995 bus caught fire in Anderson County. Flames seared the inside of the bus just minutes after students evacuated. At least a dozen more bus fires occurred around the state through the rest of 2006, on buses other than the 1995 models and from a variety of other causes.

In October 2006, a 1995 bus assigned to Hampton County caught fire on a return trip from having a defect repaired at a bus manufacturing plant. In December 2006, leaking transmission fluid ignited a fire on a 20-year-old Georgetown school bus just as children boarded for their afternoon ride home. Last month, a 17-year-old bus caught fire in McClellanville after another bus driver noticed flames coming from its engine and told the driver to get off the bus.

### **Lack of trust**

State officials couldn't say if last year's string of fires was unusual, because they didn't know. They had no system for tracking bus fires. Had such a system been in place earlier, the state might have picked up on a trend of bus fires involving a disastrous combination of improperly secured electrical cables and flammable fluids.

The state recently decided to create a database for tracking bus fires by asking bus shop staff to recall any bus fires in their districts. The list eventually grew to about 34 fires, most occurring in the past few years. The vast majority involved 1995-model buses.

But the state's compilation missed dozens of fires recorded by its bus shops around the state. Instead of relying on the memories of bus shop staffs, The Post and Courier used a computer database of bus maintenance records from as far back as 1996 and did a simple word search for "fires." The newspaper identified more than 100 fire-related incidents on state school buses, three times higher than the state's count.

Donald Tudor, who directs bus transportation for the state Department of Education, said his staff could have missed other fires because it did not search the state's own bus maintenance records to check for other instances of fires.

The newspaper's analysis found entries for dozens of fires on 1995-model buses, several of which occurred years before the state temporarily sidelined those buses last summer over fears they could catch fire.

Kaitlyn's mother, Nancy Metts, wishes she could drive her daughter to school but can't because she has to be at work too early. She no longer trusts that the buses are up to the task. "They need to do away with some of these old buses," she said. "I hate my child being on a bus. It makes me worry."

# The Post and Courier

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Sunday, March 11, 2007 · Page A7

## Peculiarities of S.C. Fleet Rooted in Segregation

BY RON MENCHACA AND MINDY B. HAGEN

March 11, 2007

The civil rights movement resulted in the eventual integration of schools in South Carolina and across the nation. The push for equal rights also led to the merger of South Carolina's two school bus fleets. The state operated separate buses for white and black students from 1951 until the late 1960s as a means of thwarting a lawsuit over the lack of buses for black children.

The state's bus fleet remains the only state-owned fleet in the country today. In other states, individual school districts mainly are responsible for buses, while state governments help pay for them and mandate a replacement schedule.

In South Carolina, the state Department of Education's transportation division has controlled and financed school buses since 1951 when it managed fleets for both black and white students.

Critics blame the creation of a statewide bus fleet for the decrepit condition today of many of South Carolina's school buses. They say buses would be newer, safer and less polluting if individual districts were in charge of the vehicles and could find funding sources to pay for them.

Donald Tudor, director of the state Department of Education's transportation office, said the state's bus fleet was designed with equity in mind. Lawmakers realized poor, rural and high-minority districts lacked money to purchase adequate buses, so the responsibility for all buses was handed to the state.

Tudor said it's unfortunate that one of South Carolina's more "progressive" moves — intended to bring equal bus services to all — is criticized by some for backfiring. But he believes making each district responsible for its own buses is no solution.

"You have some districts with really top-quality classroom facilities, and other districts still using facilities that are 75 years old in questionable quality for their instruction," Tudor said. "If those poor districts also were responsible for school transportation, you'd see those differences also emerge in school transportation vehicles."

Before 1950, the state's 1,800 local school districts provided transportation. White students generally had transportation to and from school, but many predominantly black schools lacked bus service and students were forced to walk to class. After the General Assembly passed the 1951 law, the state acquired 3,696

vehicles from school districts, contractors, dealers and manufacturers. The total cost was \$8.8 million.


With the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, South Carolina began integrating its schools and consolidating the dual transportation system that served black and white schools separately.

Roughly 40 years after the merger, Tudor said school buses are still allocated in a way that does not take into account whether a district is low-income, high-income or high-minority. The state's transportation department attempts to equally distribute old and new buses — and high-mileage and low-mileage buses — among schools stretching from the Pee Dee to the Upstate to the Lowcountry.

While the average age of a South Carolina school bus is 14 years old, Tudor said the situation could be far worse in some districts without the state's intervention.

"Half of the districts in our state would probably have a newer fleet than the state provides now, and half of the districts would have a much older fleet than what the state provides if they were responsible for it themselves," he said. "It's all based on ability to pay."

# The Post and Courier

FOUNDED 1803  WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

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## Other States Impose Replacement Plans to Cycle Out Old Buses

BY RON MENCHACA AND MINDY B. HAGEN

March 11, 2007

South Carolina school bus officials express a certain pride about owning the oldest bus fleet in the country. But that has more to do with their mechanics' herculean efforts to keep the buses running all these years. South Carolina's average school bus is 14 years old compared to the national average of 9. Some of the state's buses are more than 20 years old. It's the only state-owned fleet in the country.

In other states, individual school districts mainly are responsible for owning, operating and maintaining school buses. But many state governments help districts pay for new buses and mandate a bus replacement schedule to cycle old buses out of their fleets before they become expensive and unsafe maintenance nightmares.

Delaware, for example, retires buses from regular service when they reach the age of 12. The money the state provides to school districts is generous enough that many districts opt to sell their buses years ahead of the age limit. As a result, Delaware has among the newest buses in the country, with an average bus age of less than 5 years.

Ron Love tracks the age of the more than 1,600 public school buses in Delaware. "We'd rather have our kids on a safe bus," Love said. "Logic will tell you that your chances are better with something that is new."

Several states, including Alabama and New Jersey, as well as individual school districts across the country, mandate bus retirement. The federal government does not mandate a bus replacement age, but the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services recommends a 12-to-15-year age limit.

Donna Alosa oversees roughly 500 buses in Charleston and Beaufort counties for First Student, one of the nation's largest private student-transportation firms. The First Student buses are relatively new, ranging from 1997 to 2005. The state's buses break down regularly, and Alosa faces a logistical chess game nearly every day, dispatching spares and re-routing drivers to pick up stranded students.

Alosa said the company's 1997 buses are set to be replaced soon because "that's just the industry standard." But she has no control over the buses that the state supplies or the phone calls from angry parents asking why their children are late to school. "They only know that the yellow bus didn't come. They don't know where it came from. I apologize all day long."

South Carolina considers its 1995 buses its "new" buses. In Alabama, 1995 buses are mostly used as spares. Because the state enforces a 15-year replacement plan and gives school districts financial incentive to replace buses even earlier, most of the 8,500 public school buses in Alabama are 10 years old or less.

Joe Lightsey, administrator of pupil transportation for the Alabama Department of Education, said replacing buses is not just a safety and education issue. The amount of time and money required to keep older buses running simply doesn't make business sense, he said. "Fourteen or 15 years is where you start spending an inordinate amount to keep it running."

# The Post and Courier

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## Older Buses Lack Safety Features

BY RON MENCHACA

March 11, 2007

More than 2,600 of South Carolina's school buses — nearly half of the state's total fleet — are so old that they lack modern safety features such as anti-lock braking systems, emergency roof and window exits and passenger crash protection seats with high backs and strong padding. Federal regulations require all of those items for new buses.

According to the state Department of Education, only buses purchased after 2000 contain alarms that make sure sleeping students are not left on the bus at the end of an afternoon shift. 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.

School buses rolling off assembly lines today also have warning lights, rollover protection, swing-out stop arms and additional mirrors that help drivers see blind spots immediately in front of the bus.

But one bus expert said parents of children who ride outdated vehicles shouldn't fear a catastrophic accident. Bernie Smith is the president of Palmetto Bus Sales, a Midlands dealer of Bluebird buses. Smith said the older buses are still safe, but modern features provide some extra safety for both passengers and other motorists.

A new bus, for example, contains side panels that are much lower and closer to the ground. This prevents young children from crawling under the bus. Several years ago, the front bumper of a car that collided into a bus would physically disappear under the bus. Now, with the additional side paneling, the car would hit the side of the bus with a softer impact than before.

"The old buses are still very, very safe," Smith said. "But the technology is certainly better on the new buses."

Rick Anthony, who oversees nearly 120 buses as supervisor of the Pickens County bus shop, said he understands why people remain leery of older buses without modern safety components. "The public perceives that old is bad. The buses aren't unsafe, but they are still old. You take an old bus with 400,000 miles and you sit it beside a brand new bus, and I know which one I'd want to ride on."

# The Post and Courier

FOUNDED 1803  WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

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## 543,987 Miles and Counting

BY RON MENCHACA

March 12, 2007

KINGSTREE — EmmaLee Guest turns the ignition key on her 1988 International school bus. The engine rumbles to life, enveloping passengers in a deep drone.

"I call my bus an antique," Guest said. She's been driving the special-needs bus for about nine years. She knows her bus is loud — and old. But she didn't know it holds a notorious distinction. As of this school year, it has traveled more miles than any other school bus in the state's fleet: 543,987 miles.

Guest knew her bus "had a lot on there," but she's more focused on transporting about a dozen special-needs students to and from school along rural stretches of Williamsburg County roads. Out on the road, the bus's wheelchair lift rattles in its brackets. It sounds as though it might fall off at any moment. The bus creaks with every bump, and the worn suspension does little to absorb the jolt from driving over a pothole. The seats offer little cushioning.

Guest used to drive three routes a day, spending nearly eight hours behind the wheel. Now she's down to two routes, but the prolonged roar still wears on her senses. "I would like a bus that's a little less noisy. When you turn it off, it's like 'phew!' "

She's not likely to get a new bus anytime soon, Williamsburg County bus shop Supervisor Franklin James said. Despite its high mileage, Guest's bus is one of the more reliable of the roughly 130 buses assigned to the shop, he said. Any new buses that arrive will replace buses with bigger problems.

"We don't foresee pulling this bus off the road," James said. "We can't afford to pull it off the road because we need it."