



RI School Transportation Prevailing Wage: Frequently Asked Questions

Teamsters Local 251 won a major legislative victory that raised the pay for many school bus workers statewide and established minimum pay rates that all school bus employers must pay.

Overall, the Prevailing Wage law combined with aggressive bargaining by our union pushed wages and benefits upwards, and helped create more even standards for everyone. But implementation of this law has been messy and it created complications in negotiations.

We're publishing these FAQs to address frequently asked questions.

The bottom line is that by working together we've won higher and more equal pay for First Student Teamsters.

We are going to continue to build on these gains going forward. United, we win!

Background:

Rhode Island is one of the few states with a legal requirement for school transportation companies to pay prevailing wages and benefits to employees. This was a result of the legislative push in 2021 by Teamsters Local 251 and the RI Labor Movement, to create a system for school bus drivers, monitors & aides to be recognized for their service to the public within their communities, and prevent bottom-feeding companies from undercutting established bargained standards. This legislative effort was part of the larger push to provide school transportation employee funding for a minimum of a 180 day school calendar, and protect against unjust removal of school bus workers from their routes.

Teamsters Local 251 was ultimately victorious in turning this legislation into law in July of 2021. But the prevailing wage part was not implemented in a way that made any sense. Long established construction worker prevailing wages & benefits are based partly on a federal law called the Davis-Bacon Act. School bus worker prevailing wages & benefits implementation was based on a different federal law, called the McNamara-O'Hara Service Contract Act, that ultimately did not capture any realistic calculation for this industry. The Teamsters and other unions pushed for a real calculation and method for providing real minimum standards for wages and benefits in the industry. As a result of the gains made by union contracts over recent years, Prevailing Wages & Fringe Benefit minimums were published by the RI Department of Labor & Training (DLT) in 2026.

When were the Prevailing Wage rates posted and how did this impact school bus contracts with cities & towns?

Teamsters Local 251 first saw the DLT posting on May 7, 2026. A number of cities & towns had been in the process of posting and awarding bids for school bus transportation services with the companies involved for some time. Of the Local 251 locations with First Student contracts, this includes Providence, Portsmouth, Barrington, Smithfield, Lincoln and Pawtucket. As an example, bids on Lincoln & Smithfield were due by April 20, 2026. The Smithfield School Committee voted to award the bid to First Student on May 7, 2026. All of the other locations had awarded school transportation bids long before this date, with Barrington having been in process since July of 2025 to change companies. West Warwick is just starting the last year of a contract with First Student this school year (2026-2027). Out-of-District routes through the RI Department of Education (RIDE) were contracted beginning July 2024.



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Is additional funding provided for already-awarded school transportation contracts?

We are not aware of any requirement for additional funding to be provided to the companies involved to meet these minimum standards, outside of the customary budgeting process. Teamsters Local 251 is on record publicly to revamp the RI funding formula for education to include a fair funding process for school transportation. We will work hard towards those aims in order to protect school bus workers who have set labor standards in performing essential public service for our communities. But that remains a work in progress.

Did companies comply with the Prevailing Wage rates set earlier this year?

Some did, some didn't. There was major pushback on these published rates by the companies involved, as well as cities & towns. A supplemental survey was posted by RI DLT to review the 2026 rates. An update on that is due soon. First Student has complied with the posted wage rates, signing agreements with Teamsters Local 251 to adjust wage rates as required. Not all companies complied, namely DATTCO has refused to discuss the issue further pending results of the supplemental survey. Teamster members there have sought out wage complaints with RI DLT.

How did the Prevailing Wage publication impact negotiations with First Student?

The Prevailing Wages set minimum standards by county and job classification across our locations with First Student. These minimum standards have been set largely from hard fought union negotiations in the past. For instance, the CDL driver rate in Providence County is the equivalent of the First Student Providence rates fought for in the last negotiations between Teamsters Local 251 and the company. CDL drivers in Providence County have benefited from this previous victory, which includes junior Providence drivers, all of the Pawtucket drivers and all of the Lincoln/Smithfield drivers. But the overall impact has been uneven, affecting members differently, and thus presenting challenges in negotiations on how to go forward.

What is the bottom line for Teamsters at First Student?

Teamsters fought for and won the Prevailing Wage Law to raise standards for school bus workers. The initial implementation of the law created challenges and frustrations in bargaining.

The bottom line is the law combined with aggressive bargaining by our union pushed wages and benefits upwards and helped create more even standards for Teamsters at First Student statewide.

Going forward, the law gives us a great opportunity to solidify the wage and benefit gains we fought for and won as a union.