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Surprise snowstorm highlights bus monitors' vital role

By [Jessica Ladlee](#) on December 20, 2018

Yonkers School District Unit President Lionel Turner and 3rd Vice President Yvonne Couto, outside the William Boyce Thompson School, discuss building greater awareness of the valuable services our school bus monitors provide. Couto was one of many district bus monitors safeguarding children during a November snowstorm with when unexpected snowfall left hundreds of school buses stranded on city streets.

‘We’re here to make sure they are safe’

YONKERS — “They’re the first eyes in our district that see the children every morning and the last to see them each afternoon,” said Yonkers School District Unit President Lionel Turner of our CSEA-represented school bus monitors.

Turner and other unit officers have worked to highlight bus monitors' efforts to district and city leaders. However, monitors' heroics during a recent snowstorm have given CSEA leaders the chance to broadcast this message to a larger audience.

Stranded for hours

While snow was forecast, the projected accumulation wasn't enough for district leaders to dismiss students early, something that can cause upheaval for working parents.

The snow came more quickly and heavily than expected, which led to a nightmare commute that stranded many drivers for hours.

Some students remained in district buildings past dismissal, waiting hours before boarding buses. Others became stranded on buses across the city, where thousands of motorists were also stranded.

"We left here around 4 p.m. and my last stop was around 10:30 p.m.," said CSEA member Juana Jiminez, a bus monitor who also works as a school aide at the William Boyce Thompson School.

With children as young as 4 riding the bus, it was up to Jiminez to keep students calm.

What was normally a relatively short drive home for students turned into hours without access to bathrooms, dinner and the comforts of home. Jiminez used her own cell phone to make contact with parents, where possible.

"The kids were crying, saying, 'I want to talk to my mom,'" Jiminez said. "I was able to call and put some of the kids on the phone with the parents. The parents were upset, so I was able to reassure them that the kids were safe, and the children were able to speak to their parents."

Bus monitors remaining at the schools pitched in, helping distribute food from the school cafeteria until they were finally able to depart. Dr. Taren Washington, principal at the William Boyce Thompson School, said the last bus monitor from her school notified her that she'd finally arrived home herself after getting students home.

By that time, it was past 1 a.m.

Spotlight on the job

Yvonne Couto, 3rd vice president of our Yonkers School District Unit, is one of the bus monitors who was stranded on a bus with students. While the incident was far from the norm, Couto said her goal that night was the same as it is with each workday.

"I'm a true bus monitor, because if I'm there, I'm going to stick it out to the end," Couto said. "While the children are on the bus, we're here to make sure they are safe."

Couto said many people don't realize how crucial bus monitors are to student safety, especially with the increase in distracted driving resulting in drivers passing stopped buses.

“I get out at each stop,” she said. “If someone other than the parent is picking up a child, I make sure they have proper ID. I’m there to monitor behavior on the bus. I’m there to make sure they’re safe as they’re getting off the bus.”

For students with special needs, Couto noted that bus monitors are extra important. Stable route assignments help build relationships between monitors and students for whom inconsistent staffing can be upsetting, she said.

With more than 600 monitors in the bargaining unit, Turner said he hopes the spotlight on bus monitors caused by the freak snowstorm results in them getting greater respect on the job. In recent years, route reassignments have caused hardship for some monitors and upset for students.

“They’re not chess pieces,” Turner said of the monitors. “You have to look at the big picture with staffing and realize that moving people has consequences. It’s time for our bus monitors to receive the respect they deserve.”

— Jessica Ladlee

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Jessica Ladlee is the communications specialist for CSEA's Southern Region. A graduate of Boston University, Ladlee is an award-winning journalist who worked as a newspaper editor before joining the CSEA communications team in 2004. She is passionate about the opportunities unions provide for people to join the middle class, something her grandmother did as a Rockland County CSEA member over 50 years ago.

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