

Aid staff & save cash

Pro: Benefit to restoring school bus worker protections

MICHAEL GARTLAND NEW YORK DAILY NEWS – March 6, 2019

The city stands to save at least \$288 million if it adopts employee protections for school bus drivers that lapsed more than a decade ago, a new analysis released Tuesday revealed.

The report, conducted by former White House economist Benjamin Harris, predicts those savings would be realized over a five-year period through reducing costs associated with turnover and labor unrest, saving on unemployment insurance and increased tax revenue based on higher wages.

It contradicts previous studies that predicted the city would lose money by instituting employee protection provisions, which guarantee drivers and bus matrons retain their seniority rights, salary and benefits when the city Education Department signs or revises contracts with private bus companies.

"This report makes clear what we've been saying for years, which is that hiring unskilled, low-wage workers only perpetuates the crisis in our city's school bus system," said Michael Cordiello, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181. "If the governor and Legislature enact employee protection provisions in this year's budget, taxpayers actually will save money."

Labor leaders have pushed for the protections to be reinstated since 2006 when the city started removing them from contracts with bus companies -- a decision based in part on a state Court of Appeals ruling that found the city couldn't fiscally justify including them. In 2016, Gov. Cuomo vetoed a bill that would have brought back the protection provisions, citing that court ruling as justification.

This year, the Driving Our Future coalition -- which commissioned Harris' report and is made up of unions, bus companies and parents -- is hoping to persuade Cuomo to change his mind by including the protections in his next budget.

The group delivered the report to the governor's office, state Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie on Tuesday.

The push to include the job protections comes a year after the Daily News revealed how people with serious criminal histories were permitted to work on yellow buses. It comes six years after drivers went on a five-week strike to protest the removal of protections from contracts.

One assessment at the time put the cost of the strike at \$21.27 million. According to the study, legal expenses alone would cost almost \$23 million in the event of another strike.

The Citizens Budget Commission brushed aside the report and said it overestimates the benefits of bringing back the protection provisions.

"The report understates the potential contract savings from eliminating [employee protection provisions] and competitively bidding all pupil transportation contracts, while also overstating the benefits of mandating EPPs," said Ana Champeny, the group's director of city studies.