

# EAST JEFFERSON

SECTION

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## Board wants to stop bus leasing

*80 drivers would have to buy vehicles*

By Jenny Hurwitz  
West Bank bureau

For Dollinder Valcius, a bus operator with the Jefferson Parish public schools, the thought of losing her job has gone from distant prospect to harsh reality.

Valcius, who has driven a bus leased by the district for nearly two years, was originally lured to the system by the promise of a five-year grace period before she would have to take steps to purchase her own vehicle.

But, sometime this fall, she was told by district officials that she must buy her own bus for the next school year, an investment of about \$30,000, she said.

Valcius of Algiers said her options for remaining with the system are dismal. She could stay on as a substitute driver and lose her health benefits. Or she could buy a bus and plunge into debt, an option she has almost certainly ruled out.

"When I look at the economy and the money I'm making now, it just doesn't add up," she said. "I know I'm not going to be able to afford to buy a bus. I'm trying to pay my bills just to live."

Valcius isn't the only one grappling with this financial quandary. About 80 bus operators, who drive leased buses provided through the system or on loan from other drivers, will be affected by the district's ultimatum. And despite repeated attempts to reach a compromise, union advocates say the district has resolutely refused to deviate from the current policy.

"There have been no accommodations by the school district to come up with a solution a little more charitable," said Helene O'Brien, president of the local Service Employees International Union, which includes bus drivers. "Most of these drivers

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### METRO



SUSAN POAG / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Originally lured to the system by the promise of a five-year grace period before she would have to buy her own bus, Dolinder Valcius has driven a bus for the Jefferson Parish public schools system for two years. She was later told by district officials that she must now buy her own \$30,000 bus for next school year.

## Buses are offered for \$30,000

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are women, and they came to the district because they were told they had five years."

Jefferson Parish School Board member Ray St. Pierre acknowledged that the district was forced to renege on its five-year pledge. But he argued that the decision was justified.

The change, which downgraded the grace period from five years to three, came about to prevent bus drivers from achieving tenures, which is granted after three years. If operators were tenured, the district would be obligated to provide buses for them and continue leasing buses indefinitely, St. Pierre said.

In addition, leasing expenses have proved more costly than

originally thought, prompting the board to get out of the agreement as soon as possible, St. Pierre said. It costs about \$14,000 per year to lease a new bus, school system officials said. Currently, the district is leasing 62 buses.

To help operators start down the ownership track, the district has devised an incentive program that officials have called more than fair.

The school system is offering to sell leased buses to drivers for about \$30,000 — less than half of what it would cost to purchase a new vehicle. The district is also offering various bonuses for new bus owners, although detractors argue that additional insurance costs would offset those incentives.

In the meantime, officials are

projecting a shortage of about 64 drivers next year, due to the loss of operators and the fact that some are planning leaves of absence, St. Pierre said.

Officials have acknowledged that First Student, the Ohio transportation company that has filled driver vacancies since the storm, could address the shortage. St. Pierre said he would prefer not to use First Student but the drivers have given him little choice thus far.

"We're not running them out of business. They're running themselves out of business," he said. "They have an option. There is a job for them."

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