

BUS DRIVERS' RECORDS STILL AREN'T OPEN ENOUGH

PATRICK HENRY ONCE SAID THAT LIBERTY IS NEVER SECURE AS LONG AS GOVERNMENT DOES BUSINESS IN SECRET.

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(Wichita Eagle, Mark McCormick commentary) The chairwoman of the Kansas Senate Education Committee plans to schedule a hearing on reforms to give the public more information about disciplinary action against school bus drivers who work for private companies.

Sen. Jean Schodorf, R-Wichita, indicated that she will hold hearings on this issue this summer or early fall and see if the committee can't recommend some legislation for next year.

"I believe that the public does have a right to know if there are people who have been fired for misconduct regarding a child (or) drugs.

Schodorf said she has followed The Eagle's campaign for greater transparency involving information about drivers and attendants working for Durham School Services. The Wichita school district pays the company roughly \$18 million a year to transport children.

When I asked a Durham official late last year how many employees had been fired for misconduct with children or for a failed drug test, he said he didn't have to divulge that because Durham is a private company.

District officials have said that they don't get this information from Durham, although they have gotten access to driver files when they requested it.

My question has been: How could the district exercise sufficient oversight over Durham without keeping a tally of who has been fired or disciplined?

Last month, a district official said my questions had caused him to review procedures. The district asked for more information from Durham, and the company agreed to allow limited but regular access to driver files.

"We're working to finalize outcomes and processes from our most recent discussions about oversight upgrades," said Wendy Johnson, spokeswoman for the district. "Positive changes are happening."

She added: "I don't want people to think for one minute that those files were closed to us. The only difference is that there will be more regular, routine checks

of those files."

I wasn't able to connect with a Durham spokesperson, but the company has said it does exhaustive criminal and driving background checks. Johnson said the company repeats the checks annually.

A House bill introduced this year would have legally obligated the district to release driver names, salaries and length of service-but not this kind of disciplinary information.

Lawmakers shelved the bill, opting for a compromise giving parents access to bus driver names. Durham opposed the bill, concerned about competitors knowing what it paid drivers.

After The Eagle requested and received the names of 574 bus drivers, it found that nine drivers had two or more accidents from 2001 to 2005 at the wheel of their bus. One had five school-bus accidents in five years.

I've applauded the district's pursuit of more oversight and its release of bus driver names.

Still, if neither parents, nor the public, nor even the district gets to know how many Durham employees have failed drug tests or been disciplined for misconduct involving a child, there's a lot more work to do.

I'm not suggesting the school district has done a poor job of keeping kids safe. Delivering 20,000 students to school and back home can't be easy.

But I am saying that knowing all they can about drivers and attendants on those buses will only make that job easier.

We have a right to know this -- even if it takes a law.

Unfortunately, events do occur in Kansas that our Founding Fathers would deem unacceptable. So, from time to time, you will be receiving "The Liberty Sentinel," an article about open government that may be of interest to you. If you have questions regarding the following information, please contact the contributing newspaper or Kansas Press Association at rgannon@kspress.com.