



# First Student Bus Drivers Strike In Hinds County Only

*Bus Drivers Began Strike Thursday At 4 A.M.*

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**JACKSON, Miss.** -- First Student bus drivers in Hinds County began a strike Thursday morning, according to Hinds County school officials.

School officials are asking as many parents as possible to take their kids to school; if not officials are asking for parents to car pool.

School officials are planning to run all of the bus routes with the bus drivers who do show up to work. Students and parents can expect delays up to a hour and a half.

There are 107 Routes in Hinds County that are affected. Those school are Gary Road Elementary & Intermediate Schools, Main Street Restart Center, Raymond Elementary and High Schools, Terry High School, Utica Elementary and Middle schools, Bolton Elementary, Byram Middle, Hinds County Career Center, Carver Middle School, and Raymond Freshman Academy



The bus drivers, who are represented by Teamsters Local 891, have been in negotiations with First Student over salaries and benefits. The drivers said they make, on average, \$12,000 a year. The teamsters said drivers in central Mississippi are paid much less than drivers who work for First Student in neighboring states.

"A strike is not what we want, but we are being forced to do this by First Student and Hinds County School Board," said W.C. Smith, president of Teamsters Local 891.

Smith added that the Teamsters will not strike in Madison and Yazoo counties at this time. Smith said the counties have indicated they are going to be able to assist in reaching an agreement between First Student and the union.

WAPT checked to see how much bus drivers were making in these districts. In Madison, drivers make \$9.25 an hour. Hinds drivers make \$10.20 an hour. WAPT is still working to get information regarding drivers' wages in Yazoo County.

First Student spokeswoman Maureen Richmond said the company had planned to meet with the union on Friday.

"It is inconceivable to us that the union would choose to call a strike before meeting with us to hear our new proposal," Richmond said. "We are extremely disappointed the union has chosen to strike in Hinds County, effective Thursday morning. Not only does it show disregard for our scheduled negotiation meeting, it also puts unnecessary pressure on parents."

The Hinds County School District released a statement Wednesday saying that for the Teamsters to state or imply that their current stalemate with First Student is somehow due to any actions or inactions by the Hinds County School District is not true.

"We anticipate the majority of our routes will run as normal because it is our belief that the majority of our drivers understand that you cannot use children as pawns in a game between the Teamsters union and First Student," Hinds County Schools Superintendent Dr. Stephen Handley said. "There are some bus drivers -- I'm not passing judgment on them -- who feel like their cause justifies their strike. For those routes, we'll have to double and triple the route."

Handley also said striking bus drivers were putting children in jeopardy.

"There are so many legal ramifications plus the moral and ethical responsibilities of this company to get these children to school," Handley said. "So we can meet our state mandated requirements ... to educate and take care of these children. These children have been put in jeopardy and we have no control."

The school district meantime expressed concern that the strike would also affect their funds. School districts get a certain amount of money for the average number of students who attend school, not the number enrolled.

"Not only will we not have kids at school, not only do we have kids we cannot teach, but it is now affecting the amount of money our schools can receive because the loss of our average attendance," one school official said.

Despite the concerns, a Hinds County school bus driver said he would likely join the strike,

"It's kind of hard to say but most likely I will (join). Because something needs to be done and we united we stand," said one driver who identified himself only as Mr. Kinzy.

First Student advised parents within the Hinds County School District to seek alternate transportation for their children Thursday. School officials said the buses could be delayed up to 90 minutes. Parents are asked to take their children to the normal school bus stop, but drivers may have to make more than one trip, which could mean that children could have a long wait. Parents can also drop their children off directly at school or carpool.

Hinds County parents said the strike is putting them in a difficult spot and that they were trying to band together to make sure everybody's children got to school on time.

"I'm blessed that I can do that (drop children off at school) but I have neighbors that can't so I'll be offering help to them as much as I can," said parent Michelle rice.

The buses will most likely be delayed Thursday afternoon as well, school officials said.

Bus drivers will drop students off at home if it gets dark, school officials said. The school district is providing updates for parents on its [Web site](#).

While First Student provides bus drivers for West Point, Yazoo, Madison and Hinds counties, the contract with each district is different and contains unique considerations and obligations, Hinds County School officials said.

First Student is in the fourth and final year of its current contract with Hinds County Schools. The school district does not have a provision in its contract with First Student that covers employee strikes, school officials said. Therefore, should the drivers strike in Hinds County, First Student would be in violation of its contractual obligations, school officials said.

Richmond said First Student has been negotiating with the union in good faith.

"The negotiations are between First Student and the union only. The school districts have not been involved in the union negotiations," Richmond said. "It is unfair for the union to place the students of Hinds County in the middle of a labor dispute between First Student and the Teamsters Local 891."

Handley stressed that the schools will be open Thursday, regardless of the strike.