



School bus service on for Monday during contract talks

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Three west suburban school districts are expected to have normal student transportation on Monday as two sides in a contract dispute resume negotiations.

But bus service could be completely shut down as early as Tuesday in Indian Prairie District 204 and affect up to 5,500 Oswego District 308 students should union drivers call a strike against the First Student school bus firm.

"Our next negotiation meeting is scheduled for Monday," Maureen [Richmond](#), a spokeswoman for Cincinnati-based First Student, said on Friday. "[Union](#) representatives have advised us that they will not move to strike prior to that meeting. All routes will be running as normal on Monday."

[Union](#) drivers rejected a tentative contract agreement with First Student earlier this week and threatened a strike that would affect bus service to all 31 buildings in District 204.

First Student, which employs 424 union drivers, also transports students to and from eight of 19 school buildings in Oswego 308. In Naperville District 203, it provides approximately 10 percent of student transportation.

Naperville District 203 officials said late Friday that it could still cover all routes in the event of a strike.

An Oswego 308 spokesperson said all schools would remain open, but parents should be prepared to provide alternate transportation.

Affected schools would include Oswego East High School, Bednarcik and Plank junior highs and Grande Park, The Wheatlands, Homestead, Wolf's Crossing and Churchill elementary schools. Elementary and junior high schools would be open with supervision from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. if there is a strike.

On Thursday, District 204 officials warned parents, guardians and residents that union drivers had rejected a contract with First Student, which was contracted by Indian Prairie for school bus services.

"First Student told us that its drivers may strike at any time," Supt. Kathy Birkett said in a statement. "I find this information disappointing, as I know it will impact so many of you and your children.

"It is important to remember that the dispute is between First Student and its drivers," added Birkett. "The district is not involved in their contract negotiations."

District officials said if drivers strike, parents, guardians and residents would be notified via the [district Web site](#), e-mail and telephone.

Students would need to find alternate ways to get to school, and Birkett said an extra 45 minutes of supervision would be provided before and following school.

First Student's [Richmond](#) declined to discuss contract specifics.

"We believe the compensation and benefits package we have offered to our employees is of fair market value, especially considering the current economy," she said.

Brian Rainville, executive director of the [Chicago](#)-based Joint Teamsters Council 25, said drivers seek a better resolution than the unspecified offer that was rejected.

"We were beginning to prepare for a strike and the company called and asked to have a negotiating session," Rainville said. "We hope they have something more than their 'last, best and final offer' that was voted down."

--Jack McCarthy