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December 5, 2007 - 6:46PM

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## Few pay attention to school bus drivers until something goes wrong

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### Tribune Editorial

It's pretty easy to take school bus drivers for granted, until something happens to remind us our children's lives are in their hands every school day.

As long as everything is going smoothly, there seems to be little reason to give bus drivers much thought. The bus arrives each morning and carts our loved ones off to the classroom. The bus returns in the afternoon and our children return home to share their day and to start their homework. When the current bus driver leaves the job or moves to another route (which happens frequently), the school district assigns a temporary fill-in until it finds a permanent replacement, and the bus keeps rolling along.

Parents and taxpayers tend to give more attention to our bus drivers only when something goes wrong. On Friday, some parents in east Mesa suddenly wanted to know more about a new driver who had stopped the school bus but refused to let any children off until sheriff's deputies arrived.

Tribune on-air reporter Nicole Beyer wrote for Saturday's editions the bus driver apparently was trying to deal with some loud and unruly junior high students. The Mesa Unified School District was still investigating what exactly led to this unusual confrontation. But with parents pounding on the front door and students escaping the bus through the emergency exit at the back, the bus driver clearly had lost control of the situation.

There have been other issues this school year, including accusations that former bus drivers for Queen Creek and Higley school districts sexually assaulted teenage girls who had been student passengers. While isolated and extreme cases, they also highlight why we need bus drivers to be as reliable as teachers.

Education officials point out that East Valley districts are struggling to recruit qualified bus drivers. The part-time nature of the work and relatively stagnant wages turn many away from the challenge of navigating busy streets while dealing with kids who display varying degrees of self-discipline.

We all need to show appreciation and support for our good bus drivers throughout the school year to make the intangible aspects of the job more rewarding. Perhaps that would also make it a little easier to find more drivers just like them.

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