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Tribune editorial: DL school bus policy is misguided, discriminatory

DL-Online Published Saturday, January 12, 2008

Judging by all the online hits and comments, a Detroit Lakes woman hit a very sensitive nerve with her campaign to change the "front of the bus" seating policy for kids at a DL mobile home park.

A DL-Online Web poll on the issue received nearly four times as many responses as any poll we've run since the site opened.

At issue is the Riverview Terrace mobile home park in the Detroit Lakes industrial park.

The park is the last stop on the way to the Middle School, and the half-dozen or so kids

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Here's the gist of the story, as reported by Forum reporter Mila Koumpilova:

It began when Vickie Rudolph moved to Riverview temporarily last fall as her family waited for the completion of their new home. Days later, her son Jeff Windels, 16, who rides the bus with brother Blake, 13, complained to her about the seating arrangement. Unaware of the rule, Jeff had headed to the back of the bus to sit with friends. He says the driver yelled, "Hey you, trailer park kid, get back to the front."

When he flouted the rule a few days later, he says, fellow students joined in the name-calling.

Laurie Grotnes, a 30-year veteran of Olander Bus Service, which serves the route, says Rudolph is blowing the issue out of proportion. She says she's never heard taunts at Riverview students: "If something happened on my bus, I would hear about it." She points out no other parent has complained.

The bus company adopted the arrangement seven or eight years ago, Grotnes said. That's when Riverview replaced Highland Drive as the final stop on the route.

Neighborhood resident Nicole Johnson, 15, notes there are no similar arrangements for the back of the bus to speed up boarding at previous stops. She also points out other routes don't feature the same rule for their final stop.

"It's messed up because it's only happening to us trailer park kids," said Nicole.

That seems to be the heart of the problem. The policy is not enforced uniformly across bus routes, and the reasons

who board there are required to sit in the first three rows.

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given for the policy — efficiency and safety — ring hollow. Letting these kids sit where they choose, like all the other kids on the bus, won't hurt anything. If there is a problem with a student who lives in the mobile home park, the driver can deal with him or her individually, like students who live elsewhere, and make them sit up front for a reason.

The district isn't gaining anything by this misguided policy, which is discriminatory, hurtful and disliked by at least some students and parents at the park.

It's time for school officials to step in and tell the bus company to drop the policy and treat those kids like everybody else.

That should have happened months ago — perhaps even years ago — whenever the first complaints came to the district and bus company.

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