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School Bus Driver Arrested, Fired

Man, 26, Accused Of Sexual Misconduct While Transporting Durham Students

By ALAINE GRIFFIN | Courant Staff Writer
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DURHAM — - A school bus driver accused of sexual misconduct with students had his bus-driving credentials pulled for three months last year after a periodic criminal history check by the state Department of Motor Vehicles showed he was charged with possessing marijuana in April 2005.

Anthony Mathre's employer, DATTCO Inc. of New Britain, put him back on the road by the fall of 2006 after DATTCO officials were notified that the drug charges — possession of less than 4 ounces of marijuana and possession of drug paraphernalia — were "removed from his record," Cliff Gibson, DATTCO's chief operating officer said late Tuesday.

Mathre in June 2007 petitioned for an upgrade in his "endorsement," or bus-driving credentials, that made him eligible to drive not only smaller student transport vans but also full-size school buses, according to DMV spokesman Bill Seymour.

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Authorities said it was on those buses that Mathre, 26, of 104 Lisa Lane, Middletown, allegedly touched students inappropriately. State police charged him Tuesday with fourth-degree sexual assault and two counts of risk of injury to a minor.

Mathre was being held late Tuesday in the lockup at the state police barracks in Westbrook, with bail set at \$250,000. He will be arraigned this

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morning in Superior Court in Middletown. A call to a relative's home late Tuesday was not returned.

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Susan Viccaro, school superintendent of Regional School District 13, said she sent a letter home last week to parents of students, informing them that "serious allegations" against a school bus driver were being investigated by police and the school district. She said she referred to the conduct as "wrestling games with some students."

Viccaro would not say how many students reported having alleged contact with Mathre but she said Tuesday, "We believe we identified all students involved." Mathre, who was fired from DATTCO Friday, drove three different bus runs, transporting students from the district's elementary, middle and high schools. The district serves the towns of Durham and Middlefield.

Viccaro declined to say the age of the students involved but said those affected are getting counseling. "We are providing appropriate support for those students," she said.

Viccaro said though the district is reviewing DATTCO's hiring policies, she is confident with the company's hiring policies and its ability to conduct thorough background checks on potential drivers.

"Obviously, the safety of children is my No. 1 concern," Viccaro said.

Gibson said background checks conducted on Mathre in late 2005 raised "no red flags" preventing Mathre from seeking bus-driving credentials. Mathre went to work for DATTCO in December 2005 driving small student transport vehicles, including vans and small buses.

Sometime in 2006, Gibson said DATTCO was notified that Mathre faced a DMV hearing and that his bus-driving credentials could be pulled because of the April 2005 drug arrest.

"Immediately he was off the road," Gibson said. Mathre was "reinstated" in the fall of 2006 after the arrests were "removed from Mathre's record," Gibson said. Mathre's court file was not available late Tuesday to determine the outcome of his criminal case.

Mathre's file with the DMV was also unavailable late Tuesday. Information about Mathre's arrest Tuesday was released shortly before the DMV and the courthouse closed.

Seymour did confirm that a preliminary check on Mathre showed his petition for reconsideration of his bus-driving credentials in September 2006 was granted.

"For reasons which I don't know, he was granted reconsideration," Seymour said. "It's not that we don't know, we just don't have access to the file tonight. Whatever caused us to reconsider had been dealt with in another venue, i.e. court."

Seymour said Mathre's background was checked again in June 2007 when he petitioned for an upgrade in his credentials. That background check "found zero, no history" Seymour said,

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no pending arrests or convictions.

Seymour said a criminal check conducted Tuesday also showed Mathre currently has no pending criminal cases. Seymour said his bus-driving credentials have been suspended.

Bus drivers have been under closer scrutiny since a law was passed in July requiring tighter background checks and checks of potential drivers against the Department of Children and Families' confidential child-abuse registry.

Bus-driving applicants must pass state and national criminal background checks and checks against the state's registry of people deemed to have committed child abuse or neglect. The new law requires the DMV commissioner to reject any applicant on that list.

The law was passed last year after a pedestrian was killed in West Hartford when hit by a school bus whose driver had a criminal record and cocaine in his system. Tougher legislation was proposed after the pedestrian's death exposed flaws in the licensing process and showed several reforms that the DMV had pledged to implement years ago were never enacted.

Seymour said that the DMV's 2006 discovery of Mathre's drug arrest showed "that even prior to the major reforms" the DMV was "vigilant" about monitoring bus drivers.

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