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Cameras Will Help Baby-Sit Students



By Kris Antonelli August 23, 2001

Attention Anne Arundel school bus riders: You are being watched. Yes, you hanging out the window tossing wads of paper at unsuspecting drivers, and you, contemplating launching that spitball at the girl three seats ahead. You will no longer be able to duck behind a seat and claim innocence. Your every move can and will be used against you.

Starting Monday, 84 of the county's more than 400 school buses will be equipped with video cameras to record the behavior -- and misbehaviors -- of every rider. The cameras, contained inside vandal-proof glass globes about the size of a fist, have been mounted inside the buses at a cost of about \$120,000 total.

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Does this mean that Anne Arundel's 75,000 schoolchildren are so badly behaved that administrators need indisputable proof of their misdeeds?

Not at all, said Winship Wheatley, the school system's supervisor of transportation. Although school officials do not compile bus-related suspensions or disciplinary problems, Wheatley said most kids do fine on the bus. But others stand up while the bus is moving, stick their arms or heads out the windows or get into fights -- all of which can endanger their

safety and the safety of others.

"I think you have to appreciate what a school bus driver is faced with every day," he said. "Take a handful of kids and multiply that by 55. We are concerned that the driver cannot watch what is happening on the bus at the same time he is supposed to be driving a 26,000-pound bus in traffic."

Sometimes the kids are the problem, but other times it's the driver who can't tolerate routine children's play. It takes a "special" kind of person to handle a bus load of rowdy kids as well as all the "knucklehead" drivers on the road around him, Wheatley said.

Danny Simpson is up to the challenge. For 14 years, he has endured the twice-daily commute with students in middle and high school. The secret, Simpson said, is liking young people and being able to relate to them. In other words, keeping a balance between being their friend and commanding their respect.

"You can only be the authority figure if the kids let you," said Simpson, whose route includes Broadneck High School and Severn River Middle School.

His tricks to maintaining order: letting the children pick the radio station played on the bus and not embarrassing a student who needs to be disciplined by going after him in front of his friends.

But sometimes things just get out of hand. One day last year, Simpson found himself in the middle of a brawl. It started with two high-schoolers, a boy and a girl who had been arguing earlier in the day. The boy had apparently said something nasty to the girl during class. On the bus on the way home, the girl retaliated by "cussing him out," Simpson recalled. In seconds, there was a fight with a half a dozen other kids jumping in.

"It was wild," Simpson said. "I had to pull over and physically get into it and break it up. The girl was whaling on the boy's head."

But such chaos is unusual, Simpson said. On most days all he has to do is turn the radio down to get the kids' attention and make them settle down.

Will the cameras eliminate those kinds of fights and other rowdy behavior?




Simpson doesn't think so.

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"There are kids who have deep problems at home, come from broken homes or are neglected, and they will just make faces and laugh at the camera," he said.

Attracting and keeping 600 drivers like Simpson isn't easy, Wheatley said. The drivers, who have to pass a county background check but are actually employed by the private bus companies, make \$11.22 to \$14.36 an hour. Their work days are split in two. They do morning pickups from 5:45 to 9:30 a.m., and then return in the afternoon for routes that start at 1 p.m. and end around 4:30 p.m. This schedule does not work for most people, Weatley said.

Simpson said he likes it because he uses the down time to attend classes at Anne Arundel Community College. He wants to become a middle school math teacher.

"Most people don't aspire to be bus drivers when they are in school," Wheatley said. "I mean, in a kindergarten class when you ask kids what they want to be when they grow up, they say doctors or lawyers, no one says bus driver." For now, 84 county school buses have cameras but officials hope to outfit the entire fleet.

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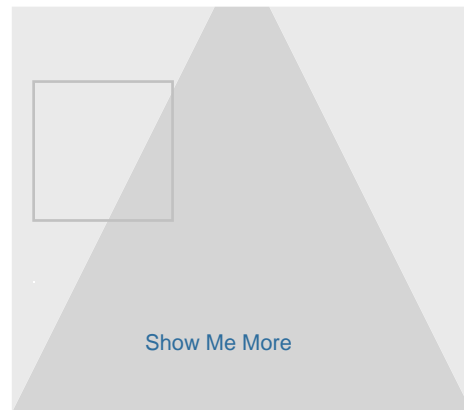
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