



Title: **loom over bus services**  
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 Size: 73.47 square inch  
 Topeka, KS Circulation: 47801

**UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT 501**

# Questions loom over bus services

District: Private busing doesn't limit disclosure of info to public

By Celia Llopis-Jepsen  
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The Topeka Unified School District 501 administration says outsourcing bus services to a private company doesn't pose problems in terms of the district's ability to communi-

cate with the public about bus-related matters. USD 501 communications director Ron Harbaugh confirmed Friday his district knows which bus route was handled by a driver who was arrested this past week, but he said

USD 501 won't be making it public. "Whether or not that information is disclosed is the decision of Durham (Bus Services)," Harbaugh said. Earlier this week, Durham said it doesn't publicly disclose the routes of drivers. Harbaugh said the district doesn't have any concerns that privatizing ser-

vices has limited its ability to answer questions from the public. "We allow them to respond concerning their employee," he said of Durham. "They have the pertinent information, it is their employee, not our employee."

**PUBLIC continues on 6A**



Harbaugh



Hooper

# Public: 'No one will say anything'

Continued from 1A

On Sunday, police arrested Kelly Shane Hooper, who was wanted in Texas on child pornography charges. In response to media questions on Monday and Tuesday, Durham confirmed Tuesday afternoon that Hooper was driving school buses for USD 501 and had been hired in mid-April. Warrants for Hooper weren't issued until this month.

The Topeka Capital-Journal also had sought via USD 501 to check whether Hooper had been driving students in USD 501, but Harbaugh said information must come from Shawnee

Durham and that the district doesn't receive lists of Durham bus drivers. The Capital-Journal then filed an open records request. The district disclosed it does receive such lists and provided one to the paper. The list shows names and assignments, but doesn't show Hooper's because it dates back to March. USD 501 said it is the most recent list in its possession.

Doug Anstaett, executive director of the Kansas Press Association and a board member of the Kansas Sunshine Coalition — which advocates for government transparency — said contracting

services to private companies can pose an obstacle to public information. "Since workers of these firms aren't 'public employees' under the Kansas Open Records Act, no one will say anything, so you encounter a black hole of information when you try to find out what is going on," Anstaett said. On Friday, a Durham executive said in a letter to The Capital-Journal — responding to an editorial — that answering media questions about Hooper was Durham's responsibility, not USD 501's. Bob Ramsdell, Durham's chief operating officer-west, said his company's

first priority in situations involving student safety is "ensuring our customer is informed of what has transpired and the steps we are taking in our investigation." Durham strives to answer media questions promptly, Ramsdell wrote, but this can be delayed because "it is important to us that we share accurate information and facts." Harbaugh said Friday that Durham is notifying parents of all USD 501 students who ride Durham buses of the situation. USD 501 currently doesn't have a written policy or agreement that governs procedures for

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answering media inquiries relating to Durham bus drivers. Its contract with Durham doesn't contain clauses concerning the disclosure of information about drivers.

The district didn't make an administrator available Thursday or Friday for an interview on the matter, but answered questions via email. Asked whether there are legal or contractual reasons USD 501 can't disclose Hooper's route, Harbaugh didn't provide one.

Asked about any advantages of outsourcing bus services, such as for taxpayer savings or student

safety, he said the decision to privatize was made under a prior administration. Benefits, he said, include allowing USD 501 to focus on education.

"Durham has transportation capabilities that we don't have, which includes handling routing, expertise in maintenance and ongoing driver training," he wrote.

Harbaugh praised Durham's professionalism and said the company "transports tens of thousands (of) students across the country every day" and "has been nationally recognized for safety and security in transporting

students."

According to the National School Public Relations Association, there can be legal reasons why a school district can't answer questions surrounding outsourced services, and this can lead to a difficult situation for administrators when the public has questions.

Karen Kleinz, the association's associate director, said each situation is different, but she suggested school districts ask themselves what information they could provide without stumbling into a "legal morass."

She said this might in-

clude releasing information to the effect that the district is:

- aware of the situation;
- reviewing its contract, or;
- working with the company on certain steps.

Kleinz said this could include public assurances of the district's commitment to student safety.

"We believe there's always something that can be said," she said. "When things happen, people want to know what's going on."

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