

Quarter of buses had safety violations

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The state police inspect all public and private bus fleets, giving the districts' overall rating of excellent, good, fair or poor, Schembri said. Districts are only given a day or two notice before inspection. Red tags mean a serious problem that could include defective brakes, tires, starting systems, faulty lighting as well as either exhaust or fuel leaks.

Yellow tags are usually an aesthetic problem with the bus, Schembri said.

IN FARMINGTON'S CASE, some of the problems during last year's inspection included burned-out flashers and dashboard lights, a brake chamber problem and adjustment to steering pressure. The most serious problem took half an hour to fix, Terry said. State inspectors have

never had to return on a different day to re-inspect a bus, he added.

Schembri came to Farmington this year to discuss the most recent figures with Terry, because of the district's concern with the increased number of red tags. Schembri said officials had "a few complaints about our inspection process," but that the decision was made not to revise the inspection report.

"I'm not saying there wasn't any intention of making any changes," he said. "We decided not to make any. I guess it didn't turn out the way they wanted it to."

Districts across the state are already undergoing the 31-category, 179-item bus safety inspection by the Michigan State Police for the 1989-90 school year. It takes the better part of a school year to inspect and

re-inspect all public and private school buses. Farmington's fleet is considered large.

THE CLARENCEVILLE School District was rated "poor," the lowest rating, and Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, which includes northwest Farmington Hills, was among 28 Michigan school districts recognized for outstanding bus maintenance.

During the past school year, no Walled Lake buses were tagged. The district won a "most improved" citation for upgrading overall maintenance of its school bus fleets over the past year.

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Bus safety an everyday item with schools

Despite last year's increase in violations on Farmington school buses, bus garage supervisor Malen Terry and his crew and bus drivers inspect buses daily for problems — and handle them immediately.

Terry and his people also developed and custom installed special mirrors last spring, now on nearly every bus, to give drivers better visibility.

"The drivers were complaining about visibility," Terry said. "It made their job a lot easier and it made me happy too."

Drivers use daily check lists when inspecting their buses, including a visual vehicle check, interior and exterior bus check, safety equipment, passenger compartment details and a vehicle operation check. These forms are turned in daily and help the department's five technicians monitor basic safety.

"We try and fix the small things before they become big things," Terry said. "Anything that looks serious, we junk the keys right out."

Routine maintenance is also done regularly. Oil is changed on buses every 4,000 miles and they are lubricated every 2,000.

"WE'VE COME a long way," Terry said, recalling days when the district didn't have any spare buses, and mechanics had to repair them along the side of the road. The Farmington fleet currently has 98 buses total, and 16 spares.

The district regularly purchases nine new buses each year, retiring the oldest ones in the fleet, according to Beverly Hausman, who manages transportation operations and purchasing. That was not done last year, because of the increased routes generated by the addition of the Highmeadow Common Campus program, she said.



RANDY DORST/staff photographer

Malen Terry, supervisor of the Farmington Public Schools bus garage, adjusts a mirror on one of the district's fleet of 98 buses. Terry and his employees custom-designed the mirrors for each bus last spring, after drivers complained of vision problems while driving.

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