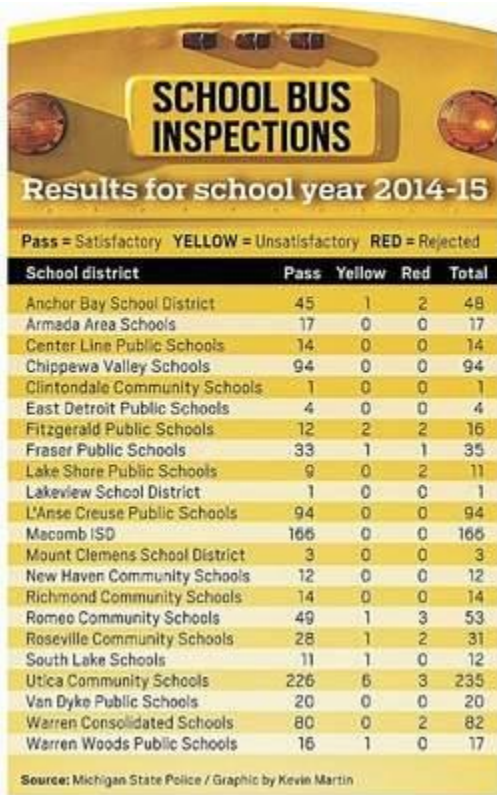


Macomb school districts get excellent grades on bus inspections



School district	Pass	Yellow	Red	Total
Anchor Bay School District	45	1	2	48
Armada Area Schools	17	0	0	17
Center Line Public Schools	14	0	0	14
Chippewa Valley Schools	94	0	0	94
Clintondale Community Schools	1	0	0	1
East Detroit Public Schools	4	0	0	4
Fitzgerald Public Schools	12	2	2	16
Fraser Public Schools	33	1	1	35
Lake Shore Public Schools	9	0	2	11
Lakeview School District	1	0	0	1
L'Anse Creuse Public Schools	94	0	0	94
Macomb ISD	166	0	0	166
Mount Clemens School District	3	0	0	3
New Haven Community Schools	12	0	0	12
Richmond Community Schools	14	0	0	14
Romeo Community Schools	49	1	3	53
Roseville Community Schools	28	1	2	31
South Lake Schools	11	1	0	12
Utica Community Schools	226	6	3	235
Van Dyke Public Schools	20	0	0	20
Warren Consolidated Schools	80	0	2	82
Warren Woods Public Schools	16	1	0	17

Source: Michigan State Police / Graphic by Kevin Martin

By [Norb Franz](#), The Macomb Daily

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Chippewa Valley bus technician Jay Hunt works on replacing the injectors on this school bus. Hunt has more than 22 years experience with working on buses for the Romeo and Chippewa Valley school districts. (Ray Skowronek/The Macomb Daily)

The report card on Macomb County's school buses is in, and for most districts, the grades are excellent.

Twelve of the 22 public school systems in Macomb County earned perfect marks during the annual state inspections conducted by the Michigan State Police, according to state data. That's up from seven districts a year ago.

The districts earning flawless scores were: Armada, Center Line, Chippewa Valley, Clintondale, East Detroit, Lakeview, L'Anse Creuse, Macomb Intermediate School District, Mount Clemens, New Haven, Richmond and Van Dyke.

“We really do a great job maintaining our buses and keeping them up,” said Brendan Wagner, director of pupil transportation for the 16,500-student Chippewa Valley Schools. “Every now and then, there is an issue the State Police tends to focus on.”

A year ago, that issue was the deterioration of foam in bus seats.

“We’re able to teach the drivers what to look for when they do their pre-trip inspection. There are (maintenance) things that come up that aren’t inspection related,” Wagner said. “Right now, we’re replacing a lot of (fuel) injectors. That’s not an inspection issue but it’s a cost issue.”

State inspections

The state police annually inspects every school bus in Michigan. For the 2014-15 school year, that totaled 15,987 buses in use across 810 public school districts, charter schools and private schools.

The team of inspectors uses a color-coded system. Buses with malfunctioning equipment or other serious problems are red tagged, meaning the bus is unsafe to transport students and defects must be repaired before it can be used again. Examples could include a cracked axle, worn brakes, inoperative emergency door, broken defroster, unsecured battery and inoperative tail lamps or stop lights.

A yellow tag deems equipment is unsatisfactory but the bus is still safe to transport kids to and from school, sporting events and field trips. Yellow violations include broken hood latches, crashed or clouded mirrors, a broken sun visor, and a loose or missing seal on emergency doors. The problem must be fixed within 60 days.

Buses that meet all safety points receive a green tag.

Statewide, the failure rate averages 9.54 percent. For all of Macomb County, the number of buses that failed inspection was far below that, at 1.7 percent. Seventeen public school buses in Macomb were slapped with red tags during the 2014-15 school year, down from 63 in the previous year.

In Oakland County and its 1,393 buses across 28 public school districts, the failure rate was 2.3 percent.

In the latest report card, 14 buses in Macomb public districts graded yellow, or 1.4 percent of the on-road fleet in the county. The state average was 5.18 percent.

One district that has rebounded sharply is the Romeo Community Schools. In the 2013-14 round of inspections, 23 out of 44 buses passed on first inspection, but 15 scored red and six got yellow tags. Most of the red tags were due to two or more tears in seat covers or problems with seat foam. Two rigs had faulty warning lights for anti-lock brakes although the breaks operated well, according to the district.

In the latest inspections, three of the Romeo district’s buses received a red tag, and one got yellow. The three red tags tied with the Utica Community Schools for the most within a single district in the county, although the UCS district – the second-largest in Michigan -- has a fleet of 235 buses.

New buses can certainly boost an individual district’s inspection scores.

In Romeo, the district received 10 new buses in May at a cost of approximately \$89,000 each, purchased with proceeds from a bond issue. Overall, nearly one-third of the district's fleet has been on the road for 18 months or less.

"The older buses do the unexpected," said Frank Rydquist, transportation director in Romeo Community Schools.

But newer buses can also land on the wrong side on an inspector's report. One of Romeo's 2015 model buses, with only about 3,000 miles on the odometer, had a cracked shock absorber.

The crack was barely visible and surprised the district's mechanics and the state police inspector.

"We pulled it off road when he found it. We called the dealer and they were more than happy to replace it," Rydquist said.

In Chippewa Valley, which includes northern Clinton Township and much of southern Macomb Township, transportation officials await delivery on the last of five 2016 model buses. The district's fleet includes four 2015 models and five from the previous year. Nearly two dozen 2012 models are in use, all financed by bonds approved by voters.

"They sort of age together, so we end up doing a lot of brake replacements in one year. Or engine issues come up," Wagner said.

"Some of those things become inspection issues – like the seat backs. Some things are predictable and sometimes we can budget ahead of time, like for exhaust systems."

Chippewa buses are driven an average of 8,000-11,000 miles a year. Buses designated for transportation of special education students traverse the district, logging between 19,000 and 23,000 miles a year, Wagner said. A 2006 model year bus used for special education students has 123,000 miles.

Generally speaking, transportation bosses at public school districts in Michigan operate on a 10-year replacement schedule for buses. Weather and corrosion from road salt can impact the optimal period of use.

"The problem in Michigan, you don't put the (high) mileage on before the body becomes a problem," Wagner added.

Up close information

For the first time, parents quickly can check for themselves how the buses their children are riding scored during inspections by State Police.

The inspections completed this year included the attachment of QR codes to the service doors of each school bus in Michigan.

QR stands for "quick response," and the code allows parents – or anyone – with a QR code-reading app on their smartphone to see how a bus fared in its latest inspection. Each bus has its own unique QR code that looks like a small square with black blotches on it.

"We want to make our process as transparent as possible," said state police Sgt. Michael McLaughlin, who supervises the school bus inspection unit of the Commercial Vehicle Enforcement Division.

McLaughlin said another use of the data the inspections and feedback generate is to identify recurring problems so that bus manufacturers can possibly make changes that will gradually reduce inspection failures.

Local student transportation directors urge parents at bus stops to refrain from approaching a school bus during the morning pick up or afternoon drop off in neighborhoods. They say it could pose a sudden safety concern if a parent steps into the road as a bus driver arrives or is about to continue on the before- or after-school route.

Officials suggest parents should call a district's transportation office to make arrangement to scan a QR code at the school, perhaps best at the end of the school day but before kids step on board.

For state police, the codes also are a way to do a little crowdsourcing.

“Once people get used to scanning, they might come up with different things they'd like to see available,” McLaughlin said. “We're open to suggestions on how to improve that.”

Michigan State Police bus inspection manual can be found at www.michigan.gov/msp

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About the Author



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