

Linn-Mar hosts career fair amid staff shortages

Like other districts, bus drivers and support staff needed

By Grace King, The Gazette

MARION — Rob Taylor traded in his Linn County sheriff's deputy badge six years ago after he retired for keys to a Linn-Mar school bus.

Today, he drives students to and from Boulder Peak Intermediate and Wilkins Elementary schools every day starting around 7 a.m., making sure they feel safe and secure.

"I've got a heart for the young people," said Taylor, who also was a school resource officer for the county. "They're our future. I want to set a good example and be a trusted adult."

The district — like many in Iowa and across the nation — is in need of more school bus drivers, custodians and other support staff in the nutrition services department and student support associates, who work with students one-on-one or as a helper in the classroom.

A career fair is being hosted by the district from 5 to 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Learning Resource Center, 2999 N. 10th St., Marion.

There are three openings — plus substitution options — in the district's almost 80-person nutrition services department; five openings in the 70-person transportation department including bus drivers and

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Linn-Mar Community School District bus driver Rob Taylor shuts the emergency door Monday after following the last student out of the back of the bus during an evacuation drill at Boulder Creek Intermediate School in Marion. This is Taylor's seventh school year of being a bus driver. The district — like many in Iowa and across the nation — is in need of more school bus drivers, custodians and other staff. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

Job fair/ Official touts job's flexibility

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substitutes; 18 paraeducator positions open and substitute opportunities; and two custodians needed in the almost 60person department.

Starting salaries are:

- \$ 21.50 an hour for bus drivers, plus paid training and up to \$500 sign-on bonus;
- \$ 18.88 an hour for custodians, plus fulltime benefits and paid vacation and holidays;
- \$ 14.15 an hour for nutrition services, which includes paid holidays;
- And \$14 to \$15 an hour for student support associates, including full-time benefits and paid holidays. "Even at our best day, any transportation department will tell you there isn't an overabundance of people," Linn-Mar Community School District transportation director Brian Cruise said. About 3,800 students are transported to and from Linn-Mar schools and extracurricular events every

weekday. The last "normal year" was the 2018-19 school year before the pandemic, Cruise said. Since then, it's been an even bigger

"I hear all the time that the job quickly becomes much more meaningful than that supplemental income or for whatever reason they took the job," Cruise said. "People from a variety of professional backgrounds will tell you this is the best job they've had. The kids they transport and being able to interact with them is a reward." Drivers can choose to take extra shifts to transport students to extracurricular activities like athletic games and music competitions. Driver Rob Taylor says he enjoys going to volleyball, tennis, softball and baseball games in particular. Laura Whitson has been a student support associate for 20 years and now works at Novak Elementary School. Whitson has continued in this career for the same reason Taylor is a bus driver — because it's rewarding, she said.

"It's one of the hardest jobs you'll ever have," Whitson said, adding it's worth it when you see a child reach that "ah-ha" moment after struggling with something. "That's what makes my day, knowing I have made a difference," Whitson said. "When we're short-staffed, it's the kids who don't get the help."

To anyone thinking about applying to be a student support associate, Whitson said they have to love kids and have patience. "This job is not for everybody, but in the end you can make a difference in a child's life. There's nothing more rewarding."

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challenge to find employees with fewer people wanting to take the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and industries competing for workers.

Cruise said working in the transportation department is a great parttime job that's flexible and requires no nights, weekends or holidays. Bus drivers come from "all walks of life," Cruise said, including former engineers, police officers and plant managers.