

Mentors to Work with Student Operators in Revised Metro Bus Training Program



ON-THE-JOB TRAINING—Operator-Mentor Luduvico Castro, a 27-year MTA veteran, shares a moment with student operator Miguel Contreras at Division 9 in El Monte. Contreras, a former restaurant worker, is in his second week of mentor-supervised training.

By Bill Heard, Editor

(October 4) Transit Operations this week launches a revised training program that promises to "improve the quality and caliber of our student bus operators and increase their readiness to enter public transit service," says Dan Ibarra, deputy executive officer, Bus Operations.

A major element of the modified operator training program will be the extensive use of mentors – experienced Metro Bus operators who will be paired with the fledgling operators for three of their five weeks of instruction.

"The operators we chose as mentors are top transportation professionals," says Ibarra. "They set perfect examples for our students in their appearance, their demeanor, their professionalism and commitment."

Ibarra's high hopes for the new training program are based on a test conducted during June in which 10 students were linked with mentors. Comparing records with students who did not work with mentors showed, that during their first 90 days on the job, the mentor-trained students performed measurably better, had less absenteeism, fewer accidents and customer complaints.

The 70 or so operator-mentors currently in the program were selected by their divisions based on exemplary work, attendance and accident records. They were expected to have excellent interpersonal and customer relations skills.

Each mentor candidate attended three weeks of classroom work

designed to whet the operators' ability to instruct, set goals and give directions. The training also gave the mentors an opportunity to refresh their ability to coach students in the driving skills and professional attitudes expected of a proficient operator.

"There's a big difference between being a driver and an operator," says Ibarra, who was a line instructor for four of the five years he drove a bus during the 1970s. "A driver steers the vehicle down the street. An operator drives safely and provides on-time service while interacting positively and professionally with our customers."

Transit Operations Supervisors Brenda Esquivel and Helen Perez of Central Instruction revised the operator training program to include a mentor-supervised training period. They also developed the mentor curriculum and a workbook for the program. Through the program, operator-mentors can gain federal certification as "behind-the-wheel" trainers.

Newly hired operators now attend 15 hours of lectures during their first week of training, then 20 hours of behind-the-wheel training before being assigned to a mentor. After three weeks on the road with a mentor, the students return to Central Instruction for 28 more hours of classes, final testing and DMV licensing.

"Spending three weeks on the job with a mentor gives the student operators a frame of reference for what they'll be taught during the balance of their hours in class," Ibarra explains. The classes include advanced lectures on operating policies and procedures.

Currently, the Bus Operations mentor program has 33 openings. Ibarra wants to maintain a cadre of about 100 mentors at all times in order that each division can have at least eight mentors on staff.

"We should pick the best of the best to be mentors," says Ibarra. "Then train and certify them to better prepare our students for the rigors of the job as Metro Bus operators."

Attributes of an Operator/Mentor

- * Commitment to customer service * Desire to teach others
- * Excellent interpersonal skills * Good supervisory skills
- * Ability to lead by example * Satisfactory work record
- * Satisfactory driving record * No customer complaints

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