

Stranded!

Special ed kids endure turmoil



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Bus dispute forcing many to miss classes

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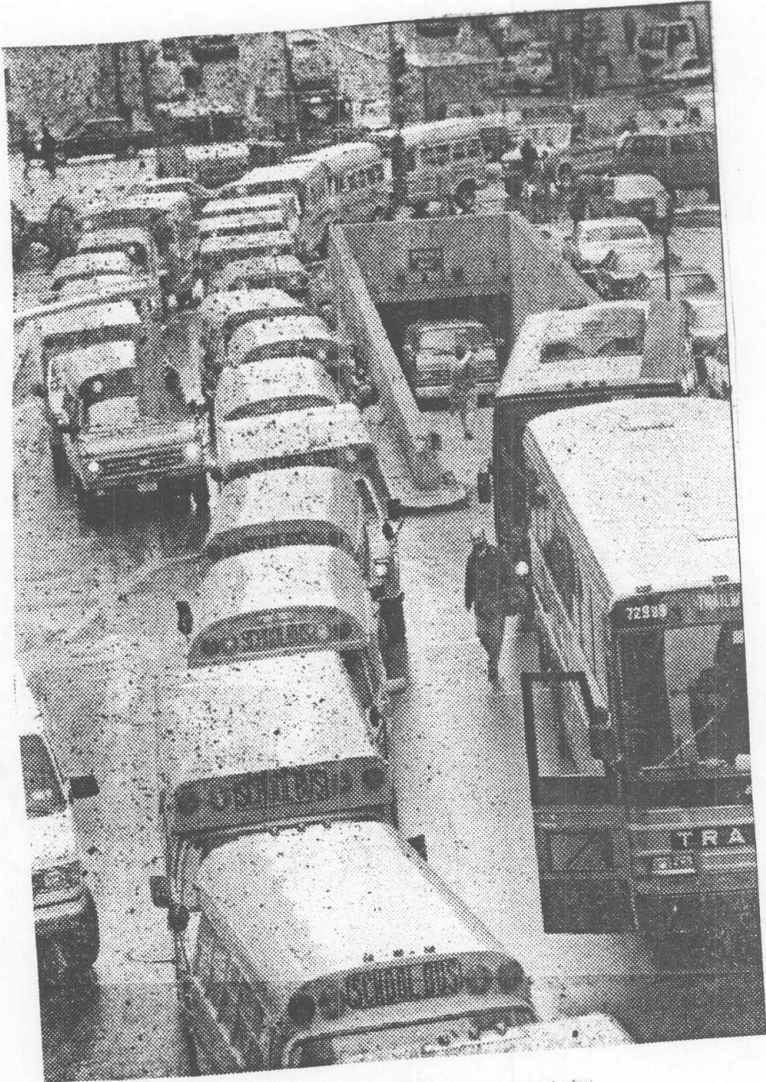
The stalemate over city contracts with bus companies that bring preschool children to special education classes has left parents and schools facing a host of problems.

The contract between the city Department of Transportation (DOT) and private bus companies expired last week. Since Friday, companies have been unable to transport children aged 3 to 5 to and from their programs.

Richard Steer, a Manhattan attorney representing the Pre-School Transportation Alliance, a group formed by the private bus companies, said the firms have no contract, and therefore no legal right to transport the children.

Steer said part of the problem is caused by a state requirement that the city engage in competitive bidding before entering into any contract. Legislation pending in Albany would lift that requirement in this instance, Steer said, and allow the bus companies to resume negotiations with the city.

City DOT officials could not be reached for comment. Frank Sabrino, a spokesman for the city Board of Education, said his agency would like to see the situation resolved, but that the contracts are the responsibility of DOT.



Above, Islander Joan Sterlacci and her son, John, try to cope with the turmoil caused in their lives by a school bus dispute.

At right, hundreds of school bus drivers circle the World Trade Center in Manhattan to present a petition to Gov. Mario Cuomo.

Meanwhile, Island schools and parents have found their children either stranded or disrupted by the lack of bus service.

Elizabeth Lynch, educational director at Our P.L.A.C.E. School, South Beach, said nearly 50 percent of the 104 students at the school have been staying home because of a lack of transportation.

"These children need therapy on a daily basis," she said.

The school has been trying to work with parents to help arrange car pools and other ways to get their children to school, but she said the lack of buses has been disruptive. Furthermore, the school is prohibited from hiring private buses because it receives state and city funding.

Problems caused by the lack of buses include increased traffic near the school, and confusion because of the large number of people in the school during the beginning and end of the school day.

"It's a zoo, it's just incredible," Ms. Lynch said. The kids are so mixed up, they can't figure out what's going on."

She pointed out that many children have difficulty saying goodbye to their parents at school, whereas they are comfortable leaving their parents at home.

John Sterlacci is one of the students who has been affected. The 4-year-old is being driven to and from school every day by his mother, Joan, but she said the change has disrupted the routine he depends upon.

Mrs. Sterlacci said her son, who is developmentally delayed, receives speech, occupational and physical therapy at the South Beach school.

"He's confused," she said. "Generally in the past if I've picked him up, it's to take him to the doctor because of a change in schedule." The past few days,

John has been anxious and not as receptive to his therapy, she said.

"I think any child can adjust to any situation but this is unwarranted," Mrs. Sterlacci added. "It's unnecessary and it's unfair in my estimation."

Like other parents, she wanted to know why the contract was allowed to expire before action was taken to renew it.

The schedule disruption is also affecting parents. Mariners Harbor resident Jeanette Robinson

has had to change her work schedule in order to get her 3-year-old twins, Robert and Roberta, to school. But, she said, the developmentally delayed youngsters are missing a lot of work, because she is unable to get them to their school and their 6½-year-old sister to her school on time.

"They really need the therapy in order for me to get them mainstreamed into the public school program," Mrs. Robinson said. Since her children were enrolled at Our P.L.A.C.E. in October, she has seen great improvement that

she now feels could be jeopardized.

"I've seen so much progress, and I'd hate to have a setback," she said.

While these children have been able to get to school, others have been staying home. Parents without cars or with jobs with hours that cannot be rearranged have had no other choice but to keep their children home.

Susan Raovfogel said she and her husband both work in Manhattan. While they would be able to get their 4½-year-old son, Ariel,

from their Westerleigh home to the school in the morning, neither could pick him up after school. The only alternative is to keep the boy home and arrange for baby sitters.

"He is certainly not getting the help that he needs," Mrs. Raovfogel said. Ariel, who was adopted from a Romanian orphanage about a year ago, receives occupational, physical and speech therapy to combat his slowed development.

"There are a lot of parents who have children who are more severely handicapped than my son," Mrs. Raovfogel said. "But even for my son, it's taking away a way of life for him. For a child, it's hard to deal with, and it's hard for me to explain to him."