In the aftermath of a crisis that left some of the city’s most vulnerable students without a ride to school, Seattle Public Schools officials told the public that it was their contractor’s fault.

Just a few months after the height of a bus-driver shortage at First Student that delayed routes by up to two hours, an external review dated January 2019 also found many critical and longstanding problems with oversight and communication in the district’s transportation department, little to no reliance on data to drive decision-making and an overall “lack of urgency to change.”

The district had asked the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), a coalition of large urban school districts based in Washington, D.C., to review its transportation department. The group interviewed dozens of district staffers as well as the employees of First Student, the district’s primary busing contractor. Auditors also visited Seattle Public Schools headquarters, reviewed local, state and federal policy and had the district’s transportation department manager complete a survey.

The audit found that:

- The contract with First Student does not include a definition for what constitutes a bus accident, and if no one is nearby, the district doesn’t require staffers to be present on-site after a crash to ensure compliance with district procedures.

- The department uses the number of students eligible for transportation services rather than actual ridership to determine its routes, a missed opportunity to reduce its costs and consolidate routes, an important function during a driver shortage.

- The drivers of contract buses, cabs or vans are not required to display I.D. badges that signal they’ve received background checks and training from
district staff. The contractors perform the background check, but the district does not verify them.

• Communication was poor between the transportation department and district leadership.

• The district engaged few other companies besides First Student in its most recent bid request for a school-bus contractor.

• There was no clear plan for when contractors fail to perform their duties.

• There was an overreliance on taxi cabs to transport students, costs that the state won’t reimburse. The district pays for cabs without ensuring the students actually received the service.

The report did commend the department in some areas. In just one year, 7,000 additional students received free ORCA cards as a result of a partnership between the district and the city that began last fall. First Student and the department now have regular weekly meetings to improve communication and the district requires GPS tracking and video cameras on all contract buses.

The report marks the second time in just over a decade that the coalition has reviewed the district’s transportation procedures. In 2008, the organization discovered similar problems and issued a set of recommendations to help steer the district back on course. Since then, the 2019 report found, the district made “little progress” following those recommendations.

For parents, the report confirmed what they’d already experienced — missed routes for special education students, a rudimentary system for handling multiple calls from families and no formal process to gauge customer satisfaction — but some information still came as a surprise.

Learning that the district does not have a policy in place to verify background checks for bus drivers was troubling for Bao Ng, whose 3-year-old daughter just began riding the bus to a developmental preschool at Thurgood Marshall Elementary.

“We have a great relationship with her current bus driver,” said Ng, but after reading the report, “I’m concerned about putting Clara on the bus.”

The district’s deputy superintendent Stephen Nielsen said in an email that he requested the review because “improving transportation” is the “number one operations goal.”

“The report gives us many topics to pursue,” said Nielsen. The district is still reviewing the report, he added, and the recommendations will be brought to the superintendent’s transportation Think Tank, a group of business, city and district leaders tasked with brainstorming more efficient transportation options.