Two days before New York City school bus drivers walked off the job Jan. 16, Mayor Michael Bloomberg emphasized the impact on the city's schoolchildren. The strike involving more than 8,000 bus drivers and matrons stems from a dispute over job protections in future bus company contracts.

"It would necessarily jeopardize the education and safety of the more than 150,000 students who take school buses every single day, in a year when our students have already missed a week or more of school because of Hurricane Sandy," Bloomberg said during a press conference Monday. "We certainly don't need to make it more difficult to get to school."

In an effort to rein in transportation costs ranked among the highest in the nation , the city recently put contracts with school bus companies up for bid. The mayor said the city's hands are tied because privately contracted drivers are demanding employee protections provisions (EPPs) that are not allowed in bus contracts.

Yet, Michael Cordiello of the ATU's Local 1181 disputed the notion that EPPs are not allowed and said the 2011 Court of Appeals ruling was based on the fact that the city did not give the judges enough evidence then to show that the EPP job-security clause does not drive up costs.

The mayor acknowledged that student transportation costs have spiraled out of control, with the city spending an average of $6,900 per student as compared to Los Angeles, which pays just $3,100 per student. Back in 1979, the city paid $100 million to transport students and now it spends $1.1 billion — more than 10 times the money for only about 25 percent more students.

In addition, a Citizens Budget Commission report found the state spent $1,100 per student in 2010 as compared to $559 per student in Illinois and $238 in California, two states that have similar school-age populations.

Critics contend the busing costs have risen largely because of Bloomberg's own policies, which they said expanded school choice and allowed parents to send children to schools outside of their area. *The New York Times* reported that some school buses carry only a few students at a time. Another factor is the burgeoning special education segment that makes up a third of all

students receiving bus service.

Catching Another Ride

Now that the strike is underway, the NYC Department of Education is providing free MetroCards to students and parents who need to accompany children, according to DOE spokeswoman Marge Feinberg. It is also providing reimbursements for parents who take car service, and for those who are driving, the reimbursement is 55 cents a mile.

Parents of the 54,000 students with disabilities who depend on the yellow bus are upset because their children face extra hardships in trying to find alternative transportation. Many of these students have noise and touch sensitivities that make it impossible for them to ride public transit.

Although overall student attendance declined slightly the first day of the strike, Feinberg said attendance in special education programs dropped by half.

"Citywide, the attendance rate was 90.5 percent on Thursday compared with 87 percent on Wednesday," she told *STN*. "For special education, the attendance rate was 62.7 percent on Thursday compared with 49.1 percent on Wednesday."

The DOE website provides information on private transportation options and recommends parents coordinate with neighbors and classmates whenever possible. Its Office of Pupil Transportation is the largest school transportation department in the country.