At approximately 2:33 p.m., NFTA bus #2118 arrived at the East High School to pick up students. The bus operator, while waiting for students, shut the engine down. The operator, when attempting to restart the engine, noticed white smoke and flames at the right rear corner of the bus and reported the fire to dispatch. The bus operator secured the bus and safely evacuated fifty students. The bus operator and passengers claimed no injuries. The NFTA Transit Police and Buffalo Fire Department responded to the scene. Bus # 2118 sustained major fire damage and was towed to the Cold Springs maintenance facility and secured.

The average wind speed on May 16, 2008 was 7.7 mph gusting to speeds of 15 mph intensifying the fire progression. This data was accessed by the National Climatic Data Center in Buffalo.

Bus #2118 is a 2001 forty-foot transit type bus with a seating capacity for thirty eight passengers. Preventive Maintenance Inspections (PMI) are conducted every 6,000 miles in accordance with the NFTA’s System Safety Program Plan and the manufacturer’s recommended service intervals. All NFTA buses undergo a critical safety inspection every 3,000 miles. The last PMI was completed on May 9, 2008 and the bus had traveled 275 miles at the time of the accident. A post accident inspection of bus #2118 was conducted on May 19, 2008 with the PTSB staff and NFTA maintenance staff. The most probable cause of fire determined to be an underinflated left outside rear dual tire. A visual inspection of the tire revealed a four inch slice in the tire tread (Picture 1). Further investigation revealed (Picture 2), after dissecting the tread, large pieces of glass that may have punctured the steel core causing an air leak, which in turn allowed the soft tire to over heat and catch fire. The fire spread to the rear engine compartment and may have been fueled by flammable residue in the engine compartment. A bus parked behind this bus also received fire damage.
The bus operator was hired by NFTA on March 30, 2003 and completed the standard bus operator and defensive driving training. A post accident drug and alcohol test was not administered to the bus operator due to the nature of the incident. A review of the driver's New York State Department of Motor Vehicle's records showed no violations or suspensions. Article 19-A records were found in order and up to date. A review of the driver's NFTA record for the last three years revealed six preventable accidents on the following dates 9/18/07, 8/2/07, 3/30/07, 11/12/06, 12/04/05, 6/8/05 and four non-preventable accidents on 4/4/08, 1/31/08, 6/13/07, and 8/5/05. The bus operator was retrained on 4/14/03, 6/25/03, and 11/29/06 in the Smith System.

In an interview with the PTSB staff the operator stated she did a pre-trip inspection and found no issues. The operator stated there was nothing unusual during her trip to East High School. She stated she arrived at 2:15 pm curbside in front of the school. The operator stated she shut the bus down and there were no problems. She loaded 50 students, turned the master switch on, pushed the starter button three times, but the bus wouldn’t start. The operator called dispatch and informed them there were no lights, no air pressure, and everything was dead. The operator turned the battery switch on/off twice. She then noticed flames and white smoke at the right rear corner of the bus when talking to a dispatcher. The operator stated she evacuated fifty students through the front door to safety. The operator stated she heard three loud pops seconds after alighting the bus.

The bus operator relieved a bus operator of bus 2118 in the afternoon. She stated she performed a pre-trip inspection at that time. Records indicate that she entered both pre trip and post trip information and the end time for her run ending at 4:30 pm. The accident occurred at 2:33 p.m., indicating the operator falsified the waybill/ bus defect report.

The Public Transportation Safety Board staff finds that the most probable cause of the bus fire was the large piece of glass which punctured the left dual outside tire tread and caused an air leak resulting in an overheated tire.

NFTA responded by charging the operator with falsifying company records which is a violation of company policy, procedures and rules. The bus operator was issued a 10 day suspension without pay. NFTA management reviewed the incident on July 10, 2008 and found it to be non-preventable.

Based on the actions taken by NFTA in this case, the Public Transportation Safety Board staff makes no further recommendations.

INVESTIGATOR: Mike Gluskin

_________________________________________  ______________________
CHIEF, ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION SECTION  DATE

_________________________________________  ______________________
DIRECTOR, PCSB, NYSDOT  DATE