
Getting on board with students with special needs

Best practices for communication
& consistency during transportation.



Introduction

The trip to school is memorable. According to most grandparents, it always involved walking uphill both ways while a blizzard fell thickly around them. For today's kids, it usually involves a bus with tons of distractions - other kids, their cell phones or tablets, what's happening outside, what will happen at school, and so on.

School transportation is a massive operation, and students with special needs require special consideration. They may communicate differently, or become stressed by incidents that don't affect other students. A negative or stressful experience on the ride to school can impact the entire day, and make it hard for the student to focus when they arrive at school. This can take time away from their classroom experience, and impact other students as well.

With the hustle and bustle of a typical morning, and the number of riders on an average bus, how can you ensure all students arrive at school focused and ready to learn?

This whitepaper will outline best practices for drivers on communicating with and supporting students with special needs, including:

Why the school day starts with the ride to school

How to communicate and form connections with students with special needs

Why consistency on every trip is so important

How incorporating technology can add security and enhance the process

Incorporate these tips into your transportation plans and driver training.



Alternative Transportation for Students with Special Needs

The yellow school bus works for the majority of students, but every transportation director has students who need an alternative to this mode of transportation due to their special needs or location. For youth in foster care, McKinney-Vento students, students with IEPs, and other specific needs, this could mean using an alternative transportation solution, rather than the school bus, to get to school.

Students with special needs may require access to a school outside of their district or not on a transportation route that has the resources they need to be successful. Some students with special needs may require an alternative mode of transportation such as a private ride or curb-to-curb service. These specifics are often listed under accommodations in a 504 or in an IEP with transportation requirements.

There are many students who qualify for alternative transportation services. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, for example, the following disabilities are covered and educational access and accommodations are mandated by law. Students can attend their school of choice, even if it is out of their district, if schools in their own district do not have the resources they need.

- ✓ **Autism**
- ✓ **Deaf-Blindness**
- ✓ **Deafness**
- ✓ **Emotional Disturbance**
- ✓ **Hearing Impairment**
- ✓ **Intellectual Disability***
- ✓ **Multiple Disabilities**
- ✓ **Orthopedic Impairment**
- ✓ **Other Health Impairments**
- ✓ **Specific Learning Disability**
- ✓ **Speech or Language Impairment**
- ✓ **Traumatic Brain Injury**
- ✓ **Visual Impairment**

Since students covered under the IDEA act are able to attend any school of their choice that can accommodate their needs, having an alternative transportation option allows schools to comply with anything dictated by their IEP or 504.

In many cases these students are on an IEP that requires specialized transportation, such as a private ride to another campus for speech therapy. Their needs may require attending a school out of their district zone that has the resources to help them most effectively. This is an added component of the school of choice challenges many districts are facing.

Making this even more challenging, the population of special needs riders is growing. Nearly half of respondents to a recent School Bus Fleet survey reported that their population of special needs riders has grown. (Thompson, 2020)

And a recent survey from School Bus Fleet showed that for 24 percent of respondents, driver shortage is an issue. Additionally, more than half of respondents are using small fleets of less than 50 buses. (Thompson, 2020)

If a student's IEP calls for transportation, the transportation staff must look to see what is needed and if it can be safely provided. There are a lot of moving parts and additional experts may be brought in to help. However, it's necessary as all students deserve access to education and the access to the best transportation method possible for their needs.

The Ride to School is an Important Part of the Day

All children benefit from routine as they gain independence, and getting to school is an important part of their daily routine. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it can take 45 minutes to help a child focus after an upsetting incident or uncomfortable trip to school. This takes valuable classroom time away from the child, and potentially other students as well.

“ Student transportation can have either positive or negative impacts on students’ academic performance and access to high-quality schools. The logistics of travel to and from school influence a student’s ability to get to school on time, his/her number of absences, and the availability to participate in before- or after-school activities. ”

— *Urban Institute Student Transportation Working Group, 2017*

The need for a positive experience on the way to school is crucial for students with special needs, who especially need the structure and routine provided by a consistent ride to school, and a consistent experience on that ride. If their needs are not met, it can create a negative learning experience for the student.

The population of students with special needs, who need a little extra care during the ride to school, is growing: “For many student transportation providers, the fastest-growing populations are students who have extraordinary health or emotional needs, and preschool children. These populations are especially challenging for drivers, and require both skill and compassion.” (NSTA 2013)

With the special needs population growing, alternatives to traditional school transportation are needed on an even greater scale. Chartering a whole bus for a few students outside of the district transportation zone can be cost-prohibitive and difficult to manage. Particularly if the population grows each year, this may become unsustainable. Buying additional small vehicles for district use is one option, but this option also lacks flexibility.

Best Practices for Communicating with Riders with Special Needs

Transportation professionals want students to arrive safely, on time and ready to learn. For this reason, most states require in-school safety programs to emphasize safe riding, boarding and exiting behaviors as well as emergency evacuations. In addition, carriers often provide “new rider” orientation for entering kindergartners and their parents to ensure that their school journey begins and continues smoothly and safely. (NSTA 2013)

Here are guidelines to have the best experience transporting students with special needs.

✓ Bring Compassion & Empathy

Children with special needs may have different approaches or need alternative instructions (like pictures) to understand directions. It's important for anyone assisting them to be patient and compassionate. Even if the child is taking a long time to do a task, it's important not to interfere until asked, and to positively reinforce independent actions.

It's essential that anyone helping a child with special needs get to school understand that they play a vital role in setting the tone of the school day. They must build trust through consistency—being there at the same time, driving safely, following the same routine.

Experienced caregivers are best qualified because they're used to meeting kids at their skill level.

Caregivers may also need additional resources and training to guarantee the best care for each unique student. These resources may include ongoing training, guidebooks, laminated instruction photos, and other things to help them communicate with each student.

✓ Implement Technology That Offers Transparency

Alternative transportation solutions for students with special needs should use technology to provide end-to-end ride visibility for parents, caregivers, and transportation staff. This is only one key way that technology can help, though: Detailed rider profiles available to drivers, with information about the student like their picture, music preferences, favorite subjects or topics, and more, can help ensure the ride is comfortable and a consistent experience.

The picture of the student also helps the driver more easily find the rider at a crowded school pickup, and the ride tracking technology can alleviate anxiety and allow the student to know when their ride is coming, so they can be ready to go.

AI technology can also be used to send ride reminders, fill rides, and more to keep things moving swiftly.

GPS Technology also provides peace of mind to parents and school administrators. Ride tracking and visibility allows parents and transportation staff to know the status of each trip. Yet, a recent School Bus Fleet survey showed that only nine percent of respondents use tracking for their special needs transportation. (Thompson 2020)

This isn't ideal. Tracking technology can improve the experience for all, including the student. Imagine you're waiting for your ride, and you have severe anxiety about being late. Tracking the ride and seeing it is a few minutes away automatically eases the students' worries.

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Efficient special-needs transportation requires up-to-date information, including a robust data system that can pinpoint pickup and drop-off locations, plot the most efficient bus routes, highlight the specific disability of each student, and ensure that the proper equipment is on board.

— Bluth and Martin, 2010



BUCKLE UP!



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✓ Maintain a High Ratio of Adults to Children

School bus drivers are often in charge of dozens of students at once, making it hard to intervene successfully and appropriately when behavior challenges arise. This is made even more difficult if a child has special needs. “For example, when a student with autism needs assistance, oftentimes a sequence or combination of interventions is necessary. The sooner someone can begin the sequencing of appropriate responses, the better.” (Bluth and Martin, 2010)

A higher ratio of adults to kids would help. Bus drivers are often the only adult in charge of 20 or more students. In addition to being in charge of dozens of children, they’re also driving an oversized vehicle and must pay close attention to the road.

Instead of a 1:20 ratio, it’s much more beneficial to have a 1:1 or 1:2 ratio if possible when working with students with special needs. With fewer children to care for, it’s easier for the adult assisting with transportation to react to any issues and assist any child who needs it. In some cases, it may be beneficial to have a ratio of two adults for every one child, and have an aide ride along to assist.

For some children with special needs, a bus environment is difficult or even impossible to successfully navigate, and an alternative should be provided in those cases. Possible alternatives could include riding in a private vehicle with fewer children and one driver, riding one-on-one with a driver in a private vehicle, or riding with an aide and a driver in a private vehicle if necessary.

Examining the ratio of adults to children can improve the ride experience for a number of reasons, including the fact that it’s easier for drivers to react, and allows them to give those students who need it individual attention.

✓ Allow Extra Time for Students

Students with special needs may have physical or cognitive differences that require additional time getting onto the bus or into a car, or difficulty in understanding directions. It’s important to allow for any additional time these students may need. Add this additional time to your trip estimates.

It’s also important to show patience and employ appropriate communication methods. Visual images showing how to buckle up, for example, can be more clear for a special needs child than verbally explaining the same instruction.

✓ Create a Consistent Experience

Many parents want their child to have the same driver each day, which can be difficult to provide. However, providing a **consistent routine** is achievable, and very beneficial for the child. All drivers should strive to make the travel routine consistent for each child.

Consistency helps to foster a sense of independence and confidence in their ability to perform the activities of daily living. Students become accustomed to meeting their driver at a designated pickup spot and going through the routine of getting buckled up and safely settled into the vehicle. Consistent repetition helps them feel secure about riding alone, waiting to meet their driver, and making the trip to and from school. Rider notes can really help in these situations too, by providing drivers with the information they need for a successful trip.

Training all drivers and transportation staff to operate in the same consistent manner will make a difference. The routine is comforting and while students may still develop attachments to specific staff members, they will also benefit from having a consistent experience on each trip, regardless of who is driving.

✓ Provide Resources to Drivers

Ongoing education and resources are necessary for anyone working with students with special needs, regardless of their level of experience.

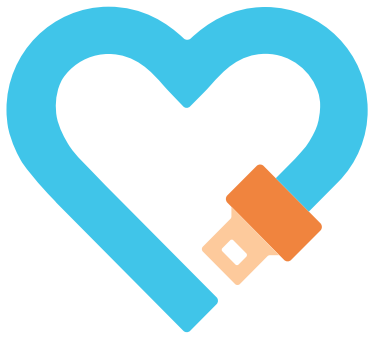
The best way to ensure transportation staff and drivers are making the proper allowances for special needs youth is to provide ongoing training. Reminding them of different communication methods, providing resources and feedback, can help maintain consistency throughout every ride experience.

In addition to training drivers on communicating with students with special needs, trauma-informed care is an important part of driver training that can help drivers engage with all students.

Trauma-informed care advises caregivers to approach those in their care with the assumption that they are likely to have a history of trauma. Trauma-informed care helps kids feel safe and comfortable because those with the training know how to recognize and respond appropriately to trauma signs and symptoms, and they know how to not re-traumatize a child who exhibits these signs. For example, even something as simple as asking about the parents of a child in foster care can be upsetting for the child.

Providing ongoing training and resources on helping kids compassionately will not only improve experiences for those kids who have undergone trauma. A calm, empathetic approach will benefit every student.





HopSkipDrive

We Can Help with Non-Routine Student Transportation

HopSkipDrive provides the safety features, flexibility, consistency, and ongoing training to help students with special needs get to school safely and ready to learn.

The HopSkipDrive Platform connects riders with caring, qualified CareDrivers. Only approved CareDrivers who have been thoroughly background checked have access to claim rides in the Platform.

Safety

Safety is HopSkipDrive's number one priority.

All CareDrivers are required to have at least five years of childcare experience. Many CareDrivers are parents themselves, or have worked with kids as teachers, nannies, and classroom aides. This gives them a sense of what is most effective when working with children, enabling them to handle even difficult situations with empathy and kindness.

While drivers are on the road, our proprietary Safe Ride Support system works to monitor each ride in real-time, with multiple points of contact throughout. Ride Organizers and anyone added to the Rider's account, receive text messages when the CareDriver is on the way, arrives, meets with the child, departs, and when the child is dropped off.

Our technology alerts staff to various issues with rides, such as a late pickup so that we can proactively solve issues. The team can immediately communicate directly with the CareDriver and Ride Organizer, so they maintain full visibility.

HopSkipDrive also records events of risky driving

like cell phone use and speeding. CareDrivers are provided with a driving safety score on a weekly basis, for iterative improvement.

Consistent Experience

It's important that drivers understand how important consistency is for children with special needs, such as being on time and driving smoothly.

HopSkipDrive works to create a consistent experience for each Rider. The routine is also the same. Ride Organizers can include a photo of the Rider and detailed ride notes so CareDrivers will know where to meet and how to best help the child. For example, a student who is non-verbal may have instructions about how to communicate with them, how to make them feel included, and share which music they enjoy listening to on the trip.

Generally, students will have one to three different CareDrivers during a 90-day period, which allows them to get comfortable with a small group of trusted adults.

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Students will know what to expect and each trip will get easier for them, hopefully resulting in a more positive day at school.

Training and Resources

More than half of HopSkipDrive's staff comes from the education space. As a result, they have deep knowledge of school transportation and student needs. Staff experienced in education developed the CareDriver Curriculum, which provides ongoing resources and training on best driving practices, how to connect with students with special needs, trauma-informed care, and more.

During the HopSkipDrive orientation and in ongoing training materials, we share various techniques for CareDrivers to use with special needs and vulnerable populations, so they behave in ways that encourage healing and do not create additional trauma.

Training covers communication methods and ideal approaches. CareDrivers can access training online to refresh themselves, and they are provided with ongoing additional resources for success.

Flexibility to Book Rides By the Next Day

Transportation personnel are busy, especially if you're working with populations that change overnight. Directives and needs for these populations can change rapidly, and providing an immediate solution is key to ensuring academic progress isn't lost.

Flexibility is key to fleet optimization, because as your needs change so does the cost.. HopSkipDrive's model is able to manage fluctuations in demand with ease. Whether your needs increase or decrease, HopSkipDrive is able to provide the solution that fits.

We can add new students and book new trips with only eight hours notice. HopSkipDrive is also able to provide aides on rides if necessary (meaning there will be two vetted CareDrivers on a trip, one driving and one serving as an aide).

Want to know more about how HopSkipDrive can help with your alternative transportation needs?

Learn more about HopSkipDrive:
hopskipdrive.com



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