

# Connecting the Dots: Keys to a Successful Special-Needs Transportation Program

By Linda F. Bluth and Michael J. Martin



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**S**ince transportation expenses constitute 7% to 10% of a typical school budget, it is not surprising that transportation departments have been under a microscope lately.

Everyone on the district's decision-making team, from the school board and school superintendent to the managers who oversee each component of the transportation department, is searching for cost-effective ways to address the daily challenges of getting thousands, if not tens of thousands of children to and from school safely.

One of the most expensive aspects of school transportation is that of transporting children with special needs. Unfortunately, there is no best, most efficient way to provide transportation to these children. There are,

however, a few essential elements and key components of every cost-effective, efficient, and successful special-needs transportation operation.

## Equipment

Never underestimate the importance of proper equipment. A team of qualified individuals must make decisions about the purchase of new buses and specialized equipment. This team will consider the students' ages, the length of their school bus ride, and the need for specialized equipment according to each student's disability to determine whether the transportation equipment (including the buses themselves) is commensurate with the students' individual needs.

When making decisions about possible cost savings, district administrators will put the needs of the students first. For example, air conditioning is an option that seems easy to forgo on school buses. Yet, air conditioning may be vital when transporting children with special needs who participate in a 12-month education program that requires their traveling during hot weather. Not only might the students' health be at risk, but staff members who work in extreme heat may become fatigued and impatient when handling students with challenging behaviors or needs.

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Problems that arise in these circumstances can have dire consequences and serious repercussions.

### Student Information

Another area that may seem ripe for cutback is technology—especially software. Accurate data are essential to ensuring that the driver, bus assistant/monitor, dispatchers, and school-based personnel make logical, timely

decisions. 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.


Management software can be expensive, but it offers a first-rate return on investment. Such programs are capable of helping meet all the complex aspects of service delivery for students with special needs and will help you avoid mistakes that may cost you in the long run.

### School Bus Management





Another essential consideration for successful special-needs transportation is effective student behavior management. School bus drivers' primary job is to operate the vehicle safely, which is challenging enough in itself. But they must also supervise dozens of children seated behind them, using only their voice and a rearview mirror. This situation provides many opportunities for student mischief, misbehavior, bullying, and harassment.

Transporting students with special needs often requires the help of a bus monitor or aide to ensure student safety. Eliminating these jobs may seem like a logical way to save money, but don't do that without really thinking it through. These folks are worth their weight in gold in emergencies, which can arise frequently

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in special-needs transportation. Monitors can respond almost immediately when something goes awry. 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.

Parents also play an integral role in behavior management on buses. Be sure to save the budget line that allows your transportation staff to communicate bus behavior expectations, rules, and consequences to parents of special-needs students before the beginning of each school year.

### Inservice Training

Professional development is often on the chopping block when budgets get tight. District administrators should use caution when considering cuts for special-needs transportation. Helping your transportation staff understand the characteristics of children with special needs is a cost-effective way to manage risk and provide efficient service. Drivers and monitors/aides who have the greatest depth of understanding about the special needs of the children they

transport are more in control of their school buses and are better able to ensure their students' safety on the trips to and from school.

Don't overlook the importance of professional development for other service personnel as well. Many people are responsible for the safe transportation of children with special needs, including psychologists, school nurses, and physical and occupational therapists who work together in a school-based setting.

These school-based personnel cannot assume that their responsibility for special-needs students stops when these children leave the school building. Rather, they should consider themselves members of a team that includes the school bus drivers. They also should participate in professional development activities to help drivers understand the challenges of and strategies for transporting students with special needs.

The good news is this type of training and education is not only readily available, it is also very affordable. Look for courses that explain the legal basis for special-needs transportation, including definitions of transportation and related special-education terms. Search out

instructors who discuss the characteristics of children with special needs and explain special considerations for transporting these children, including a discussion of the individualized education program in relation to the related services transportation.

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Courses designed to discuss behavior management strategies that work with preschool and school-age students, particularly courses that explain the different disability populations and best practices for supporting a safe school bus environment, will likely be a good investment.

### Focus on the Essentials

Transporting children with special needs is a complex undertaking, but it is also manageable, especially when there is a focus on the essential elements and key components of the infrastructure, including professional development.

Successful school bus operations use best practices and teamwork to help these vulnerable children access the learning opportunities that prepare them for adulthood.

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