

The Costs and Challenges of Transporting Students with Disabilities

By Craig M. Suttman



According to the Southwestern Ohio Educational Purchasing Council (2009), a school bus equipped to transport a student with disabilities, most notably a student who uses a wheelchair, can cost between \$80,000 and \$100,000. The specialized equipment can include but is not limited to a mechanical lift, a ramp, child restraints, and wheelchair restraints.

Mike Dolan, assistant supervisor of transportation for Centerville City (Ohio) Schools, explains that school buses equipped for students with special needs typically transport 6 students on average, with a maximum capacity of 12 students. In addition, an educational aide is present on every school bus equipped to transport students with special needs. In Centerville City, an employee hired as an educational aide on the school bus earns between \$10.80 and \$14.37 per hour, Dolan says.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that the annual cost per pupil transported in 2004–2005 was \$737. This cost is calculated by dividing the total expenditures for transportation (including the cost of any school buses purchased, the cost of fuel, and the bus driver's salary) by the number of students transported. However, the cost to transport a student with disabilities, most notably a student in a wheelchair, could surpass \$3,000 per year, not including the cost of a bus. This cost is higher because of the limited number of riders on the specially equipped school bus, the salary of an educational aide, the salary of the bus driver, and the cost of fuel.

Transportation Issues

The IDEA's regulations define the term *related services* as "transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education." Although transportation is deemed a related service, there can be additional related services associated with transporting a student with a disability to and from school. For example, some students with disabilities require an aide in the classroom. In that case, it may be necessary for an aide to accompany the student to and from school on the bus.

All services for students with disabilities should be discussed and determined during the individualized

Federal law does not require school boards to provide transportation for all students. But the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles students with disabilities to transportation to and from school if the students' disabilities make it difficult for them to get to school; from, in, and around the buildings where they attend classes; and between schools if they must change locations during the day.

Since school boards are responsible for transportation in and around the schools, school business officials share in the responsibility of ensuring accommodations for students.

education program (IEP) process. A student's IEP should identify the type of vehicle needed for transportation, any special equipment needed in conjunction with the transportation, the transportation schedule (e.g., normal school hours, to after-school intervention programs, pickup and drop-off points), and whether the student needs an aid (Siegel and Agins 2000).

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If possible, school business officials should be present during IEP meetings when transportation is being discussed so they can help ensure that the necessary transportation is available and can provide insights into costs.

Reflection

Although students with disabilities account for only about 13% of the student population, the total spending to educate students with disabilities, including regular education, special education, and other special-needs programs, “represents 21.4% of the \$360.6 billion total spending on elementary and secondary education in the United States” (President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education 2002). Much of that cost is related to transportation. The cost for transporting students with disabilities can be double that for transporting general education students.

Special-education services as required under the IDEA, most notably transportation, should be determined on an as-needed basis through the IEP process. School boards can avoid litigation and increased costs by properly training the special-education staff and IEP teams. It is thus essential that school business officials, other education leaders, and members of their boards educate themselves and their staffs about the federal regulations associated with transporting students with disabilities and the IEP.

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