

# Training Considerations for Special Needs Drivers & Aides

The number of school children with special needs has increased over the past several years, so it has become increasingly challenging to train the drivers and aides who make sure these students get to school and back.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 6.69 million students with disabilities attended American schools during the 2006-07 school year—up from 4.71 million during the 1990-91 school year.

Bob Riley, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, said the school transportation industry has made a big effort over the last decade or so to improve training for drivers and aides. Now, each driver that transports children with special needs learns about a wide variety of special needs these children might have, he said.

“In the old days it was more, if you had a child with a disability, you learned what his problem was,” Riley said.

### Bus Education Training

Much of the training for drivers and monitors in the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Suwanee, Georgia, focuses on evacuating buses in an emergency.

People training to drive special needs buses are given two training scenarios, said Charlene Majors, a training specialist for Gwinnett County. In the first exercise, the driver can see and smell smoke and has to figure out how to quickly evacuate students with a variety of conditions, including osteogenesis imperfec-

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ta, better known as brittle bone disease. Drivers also have to map out where each student should sit.

In the second scenario, students with conditions such as cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy are riding a bus that catches on fire.

Bus monitors go through training along with drivers, Majors said.

Not only do drivers and monitors learn how children with spe-

cial needs should be seated and how to evacuate them, but also they learn how to seek help from bystanders in case of emergency. That's important because bystanders often want to help but don't know what to do, especially with a bus full of children with special needs.

Some of Gwinnett County's special needs training is required of all bus drivers because about 13,500 of the district's 17,500 students with special needs ride regular buses, Majors said.

“It doesn't matter that they are assigned to a large bus, because the majority of them ride large buses,” she said.

All of Gwinnett County's drivers learn emergency procedures for working with children with special needs, how to deal with these students when they misbehave and basic laws that apply to transporting this group of children.

### Continuing Education

Continuing education is also emphasized, Majors said, because the special education field is constantly changing.

That's also the case for the Charlotte County Public Schools in Port Charlotte, Florida. That district has about 60 drivers and aides for students with special needs, said Herb Phillips, safety

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and training coordinator. Each year they complete a three-hour recertification session, and the district offers extra training three times each year.

This year drivers and aides have attended training sessions about evacuating buses in an emergency and working with children who have autism. Charlotte County transports about 8,700 students, about 450 of whom have special needs.

Phillips said his office invites outside experts and officials from the district's Exceptional Student Education department to speak to transportation employees about situations they might encounter with children with special needs.

And Charlotte County tries to learn from employees' experiences.

Earlier this month, district dispatcher Sandy Leek said a student had a reaction from low blood sugar levels as he was preparing to board a school bus. Later a school nurse talked with the transportation department

about what low blood sugar means and how to treat children having reactions.

Drivers and aides who work for First Student of Cincinnati, Ohio, which has bus transportation contracts in 40 states, are required to attend additional hours of training if they want to work with children with special needs, company spokeswoman Bonnie Bastian said. Two of those hours are spent learning how to operate equipment, and the other four hours focus on topics such as sensitivity training, working with parents and recognizing the characteristics of different disabilities.

Last year two First Student drivers and two company bus monitors in Minnesota earned statewide awards for their work among the special needs population. Criteria for the awards included concern for students, proper communication with students and parents, job skills and volunteering.

But Bastian said the training First Student's drivers and aides go through isn't what makes them exceptional. Employees who work with children with special needs tend to be experienced professionals who ask to transport those students.

"They're really, sincerely concerned with the welfare of the children," Bastian said.

*By Rebecca VanderMeulen*

## In the News . . .

### Human Rights Complaint Leads to Road Fix in Calgary

For years, there have been complaints about a bumpy gravel road in southwest Calgary. Students in wheelchairs travel that road regularly to get to school.

So, the parent council at Emily Follensbee School and the Calgary Board of Education decided to file a human rights complaint last month. The road was fixed in mid-October.

"I think this is a lesson for the City of Calgary that accessibility is important for people with disabilities and you can't deny accessible roads or sidewalks for these individuals. They're just as important as typical people," Susan Shaner-Cortes, chair of the parent council, told CBCNews.ca.

**Source:** CBCNews.ca, 10/19/09

### By the Numbers

2006-07

Number of students ages 3-21 covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: 6.69 million

Percentage of public school students: 13.6

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

### H1N1 Tip

As you purchase supplies and services to combat H1N1 on your buses, consider saving receipts in case reimbursement becomes available.