

## Tornados and Student Transportation in Florida

At times, certain weather conditions may necessitate the cancellation or delay of school bus routes, school athletics, extracurricular activities, or field and activity trips. This document provides suggested safety protocols and procedures related to tornados and student transportation.

As with any procedural policy, transportation departments should coordinate with the appropriate department or agency within the district that creates policies and procedures for emergency preparation, survival, and recovery.

### Procedures Prior To Any Emergency

It is said that the only thing more difficult than planning for an emergency is explaining why you did not. Prior to being involved in any emergency situation, whether it is a crash, a medical emergency, or a weather related event, it is important that basic procedures are in place and practiced. Best practice suggests that:

- Each school bus should carry an up-to-date roster of passengers, whether the function is a daily route or a field or activity trip.
- Each school bus should carry an up-to-date contact list for school officials and emergency responders containing land-line and mobile telephone numbers. To the extent practical, similar information should be available when traveling on out-of-county trips.
- Students who regularly ride in school buses must participate in school bus evacuation drills at least twice a school year, as specified in State Board of Education rules<sup>1</sup>. Bus operators must instruct students and other passengers who ride in school buses on field and activity trips in the locations and proper use of school bus emergency exits prior to each such trip.

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<sup>1</sup> The following excerpt from State Board of Education rules (Rule 6A-3.0171, Florida Administrative Code) specifies the requirements for evacuation drills and instruction pertaining to Florida public school buses:

**6A-3.0171** Responsibilities of School Districts for Student Transportation.(2) The school district shall exercise additional specific powers and responsibilities, as follows:(g) To adopt, after considering recommendations of the superintendent statements of policy in harmony with law and with rules of the State Board necessary for maintaining the requirements of adequate transportation. Such policies shall include at least the following responsibilities of the director or supervisor of transportation, the school principal or other designated staff and the bus operator for uniform school bus operating procedures:

1. Responsibilities of the director or supervisor of transportation:

c. To instruct school bus operators in procedures to be followed in conducting school bus emergency evacuation drills and to confer with each school principal regarding scheduling, conducting and documenting school bus evacuation drills. These procedures shall include a requirement that all operators of school buses transporting students, teachers, or chaperones on field and activity trips instruct all passengers in the locations and proper use of school bus emergency exits prior to each such trip.

2. Responsibilities of the school principal or other designated school staff:

d. To direct school bus emergency evacuation drills on each bus serving the school during the first six (6) weeks of each semester, and to maintain documentation for all students.

3. Responsibilities of the school bus operator:

n. To participate in emergency evacuation drills at least once each school semester under the direction of the school principal or the principal's designee.

## Tornado Preparation and Survival

According to the National Weather Service, tornados can occur any time of day or night, any time of the year.

1. The school district or charter school should have a written severe weather policy that includes school transportation procedures for regular bus routes, activity trips, and field trips.

2. Prior to the threat of severe weather, school bus operators must:

- Be thoroughly familiar with all roads adjoining their routes in the event they are needed to seek shelter. For field and activity trips, the school bus operator should have a map available to determine alternate routes to safety;
- Have pre-determined shelter options such as buildings, schools, businesses, and homes along various parts of the route, should evacuation be necessary. To the extent practical, similar options should be pre-determined for field and activity trips. In emergency situations most people will offer others shelter when asked;
- Know the difference between a tornado watch and a tornado warning. A “watch” means tornados are possible in the area; remain alert for approaching storms. A “warning” means a tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar.

3. School administrators and school bus operators should routinely monitor weather reports for the prediction of severe weather or announcements of weather advisories. The school district should have a means to communicate this information to the school bus operator while en route, whether for a daily route or a field or activity trip.

4. When a **‘tornado watch’** is issued, the school bus operator should be prepared for a sudden change in weather conditions and be alert for the appearance of violent wind, rain, hail, or a funnel shaped cloud.

5. When a **‘tornado warning’** is issued, the school bus operator should promptly seek shelter for the passengers.

- If the warning is announced at or near the end of the school day, students should remain in the building in a designated safe area.
- If the warning is announced while en route, the school bus operator should proceed to a pre- identified shelter or building closest to his or her current location, depending on the immediacy of the tornado threat, in accordance with district policies and procedures.
- If caught in the direct path of a tornado or if a tornado is sighted and a pre-identified shelter is not accessible, the school bus operator should:
  - a. Stop and evacuate the passengers. Do not attempt to ‘outrun’ the tornado. Do not remain on the school bus. If the bus is radio-equipped, advise the school district of your bus number and location.

- b. Seek safety in an area below ground level, such as a ditch, ravine, or depression, in a location away from the bus and, where practical, on the side of the road without power lines, utility poles, trees, etc.
- c. Avoid locations higher than ground level for shelter (e.g., road or bridge overpasses).
- d. Instruct passengers to lie flat, face down, and to protect their heads with a jacket or other clothing, or their hands and arms. Advise passengers not to 'sneak a peak' at the tornado.

6. After the emergency:

- Account for all passengers, check for injuries, and provide first aid if needed. Obtain medical attention if needed.
- Before leaving a shelter or the immediate area if out in the open, the school bus operator should monitor the local sky for a few minutes in the direction the tornado came from to determine whether a second tornado is following a similar path.
- Be alert for continued storm activity, downed power lines, ruptured gas lines, or structural damage to trees, buildings, roads and bridges.
- Complete any reports or other protocols required by district policy.

*Note: School district policies and procedures should always be followed when they differ from or exceed the guidelines contained herein.*