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Defined: Alternative Student Transportation

Student transportation is considered “alternative” when a student is transported in anything other than a traditional yellow school bus. It includes vehicles from a district owned white fleet, or a contracted smaller capacity fleet consisting of SUVs, minivans, wheelchair accessible vans, and/or sedans.

The student populations most consistently transported in these types of vehicles include:

- Special education students
- Children with behavioral disorders
- Medically fragile students
- Homeless/displaced students covered under the McKinney-Vento Act
- Foster youth who fall under the ESSA
- Students with IEPs dictating that they ride alone

Different Models

There are typically four different alternative transportation models. Each of these models poses its own benefits and risks.

In-House

A completely in-house transportation model consists of district owned vehicles, facilities, staff, etc. The district employs the fleet drivers, mechanics, routing and dispatching staff, they utilize their own insurance, and run the entire operation from district facilities. This model is typically very high cost and it's difficult to scale up or down quickly. Sometimes the district will utilize some supplemental transportation providers for one or two students, but for the most part, they run the entire program with district employees.

Employee Only Contractor

This model mirrors that of the completely in-house one except that it is contracted with one provider. The provider employs the fleet drivers, mechanics, routing and dispatching staff and they utilize their own facilities. They have the insurance required and they own all the vehicles necessary to run the entire program. Usually, the provider in this case provides only buses or alternative vehicles – not both. Just like the in-house model, this model is high cost and difficult to scale up or down quickly.

Partnering with a Student Transportation Management Company

An outsourced model utilizing a transportation management company means partnering with a company that uses subcontracted service providers with employee drivers. Employee drivers means that the service provider employs all their drivers. They must follow federal, state, and local employment laws, and are covered by the Department of Education when it comes to transporting students.

Transportation management companies are not brokers. The contractor is responsible and accountable for ensuring that all service providers and drivers are qualified to transport students as regulated in that area. They must have proper insurance and are also regulated by the Department of Education. They must meet or exceed all student transportation standards.

The flexibility of this model allows for scaling up and/or down quickly while keeping routes efficient and costs down. Districts pay by trip and only pay for the trips actually run. Districts can usually save between 20-30% over the in-house and employee only contractor models.

TNC, Taxi, Traditional Transportation Brokers

The fourth model type typically utilizes independent contracted drivers. They're regulated by the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) rather than the Department of Education (DOE). The nature of using independent contractors is such that in many states consistency is difficult (if not impossible) to guarantee. Because independent contractors are not employees, they cannot be treated as such. Training, dress codes, and hours are difficult to enforce and regulate. This can cause inconsistencies in the driver and/or vehicle utilized to transport students.

Because the drivers are not employees, this model is usually inexpensive. The district pays by the trip and only pays for the trips actually run. Insurance is held by the driver and can vary. Also, because these companies aren't regulated by the DOE, they are not always completely compliant with student transportation regulations.

Understanding Best Practices

Student transportation is different than transporting children. There are certain requirements that must be met in order for any vehicle to be considered compliant for transporting students. Those requirements vary by state, and in some states it varies by county. Below are some best practices to follow when determining which of the four models above is best for your district.

- Continually review and adjust your current minimum contractor qualifications for passenger vehicles (not just school buses)
- Stay on top of the insurance required by the DOE and enforce those requirements with your contractors
- Enforce background and motor vehicle record checks
- Require vehicle inspections and identification
- Include driver training in your requirements that mirrors that of your bus drivers without bus specific training. Sensitivity and behavioral trainings are examples of those to include, while behind the wheel bus training isn't applicable.
- Provide or require driver training that covers all of the services you know you're going to need
- Require that drivers permanently be assigned to the same route whenever possible

Minimum Driver Qualifications Could Include:

- Hold a valid driver's license for the type of motor vehicle being utilized
- Be at least 21 years of age with two years' professional driving experience
- Satisfactory criminal background and motor vehicle check which is subject to ongoing record monitoring
- Be enrolled in a drug and alcohol testing program responsible for pre-service, random, post-accident and reasonable suspicion testing
- Negative TB screening
- Adopt District safety, confidentiality, and COVID-19 policies

- Complete initial and ongoing annual training related to student transportation and special needs. Trainings could include defensive driving, CPR/First Aid, pre-trip vehicle inspections, safe loading and unloading, proper use of seat belts and child safety restraints, handling accident, incident, and emergency situations, customer service, ADA, disabilities and certain behavior, mandated reporter.

Minimum Vehicle Attendant Qualifications Could Include:

- Hold a valid form of ID
- Be at least 21 years of age
- Satisfactory criminal background check which is subject to ongoing record monitoring
- Negative TB screening
- Be enrolled in a drug and alcohol testing program responsible for pre-service, random, post-accident and reasonable suspicion testing
- Adopt ALC and District's safety, confidentiality, and COVID-19 policies
- Complete initial and ongoing training. Training could include CPR/First Aid, Customer service, ADA, disabilities, certain behaviors, mandated reporter.

Minimum Vehicle Qualifications Could Include:

- The driver and each passenger shall be properly secured with the appropriate seat restraint
- Contractor must provide real-time GPS for all vehicles
- Properly licensed and registered with liability insurance coverage in accordance with law, and as required by the local board of education
- Vehicles shall be identified easily, cleaned regularly, and be free of odors and defects
- Unless district approved, vehicles must be ten (10) years or newer at the start of service
- Vehicles shall be inspected by a qualified mechanic before providing service, upon request, after an accident, and once per year.
- First aid Kit for 10 people including synthetic vinyl gloves (No Latex)
- Body fluid clean-up/spill kit
- Fire extinguisher, charged and in the green zone on the indicator
- Seat belt cutter

Critical Questions

- If your district decides to outsource your alternative student transportation needs, there are some critical questions you should ask the contractor you're considering.
- What is your experience in working with students with disabilities?
- What training programs do you have and what do they cover?
- Do you provide driver consistency - the same driver daily on routes?
- How do you define incidents/accidents and how do you handle and report them?
- Why should we pick you over others?
- What do you understand about our needs? How are you going to meet them?
- If our district's needs for transportation were to rise or fall throughout the year, are you prepared to handle the fluctuation? And how would you do it?