

Coordination Is Key: Transporting Special-Needs Students

Collaboration across and within departments is key to ensuring adequate transportation for the district's special-needs students.

By Peter Lawrence, MS, CDPT



Transporting students with special needs can be a costly proposition. However, school business officials can help mitigate those costs by focusing on four specific areas: relationships, information sharing, safety, and time lines. Although these areas may seem a bit far removed from the numbers we love to crunch, they do affect your district's bottom line and can have a positive effect on your student transportation system.

Relationships

As a practitioner in three different school districts and a perpetual student during the past 25 years, I have learned that education leadership is all about relationships. The interactions (or lack of interactions) we have with others affect the way we do business. What's more, educators can achieve greater results working collaboratively rather than working in isolation.

School district leaders need to involve their transportation and special-education staffs in developing shared goals and creating a compelling vision for their departments that aligns with the district's mission statement. When everyone understands the importance of working together toward the district's and departments' visions, administrators can further develop relationships and encourage collaboration across the special-education and transportation departments, ensuring that staff meet regularly to discuss best practices and share feedback.

Information Sharing

Encouraging departments to share their processes and regulations allows everyone to synthesize how their actions and interactions affect others.

School districts can easily fall into the trap of doing things the way they have always done them. They take great comfort in knowing that all they need to do to open a school or develop a transportation plan is to follow the recipe that has been handed down over the past 20 plus years.

However, we need to constantly assess our processes and interactions and try to improve those functions. Promoting collaborative relationships and encouraging departments to share their processes and regulations supports open discussions about those processes. Encouraging departments to share with one another deters turf wars and silos that negatively affect programs and ultimately our students' education.

When special-education departments unknowingly or intentionally withhold critical information from their transportation departments regarding their classified students, they do a disservice to the students. Transportation departments must have specific information about their students in order to provide safe transportation for this special population.

Coordination among key special-education and transportation personnel is critical when new students move into or out of the district. Although an individualized education program (IEP) will carry over from one district to another, transporters need to know the specific details in order to meet the needs of the IEP. Failing to communicate can negatively affect programs, the district's image, and its bottom line if services are not delivered in a timely manner. Many lawsuits have arisen when transporters did not have the explicit knowledge to meet the IEP's requirements.

Moreover, communication delays can cost the district financially if it pays for specialized transportation for students who are no longer receiving education services. This situation occurs most often when a district contracts services through a private contractor or Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, thus breaking the communication circle.

Districts have another opportunity to save money when the special-education and transportation directors openly discuss student placement at specific schools if two or more programs are available. If the special-education department chooses the placement without consulting the transportation department, districts may be forced to use a bus, bus driver, and attendant for one or two students rather than being able to combine routes for students. Additionally, failing to collaborate may result in students' having longer bus rides to and from school.

Access to information can be a touchy subject for some special-education directors. The U.S. Department of Education—through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation, and individual states—has guidelines for sharing information with transporters. However, some special-education departments choose not to share information with transportation departments, which could endanger students with specific conditions. For example, imagine placing a student with brittle bone syndrome in the back of the bus where the ride is bumpier.

Another area that is often not discussed, but that can add cost, is the process by which students are coded and monitored for growth, leading to a least restrictive environment. Special-education and transportation



department personnel must work together to provide transportation services that increase students' independence while reducing costs.

In the same vein, terminology is also important to ensure that the special-education and transportation departments are on the same page. For example, *curb-to-curb* and *door-to-door* are more restrictive than *safest stop*. I have heard colleagues share that some of their IEPs state *special transportation*. When asked what *special transportation* means, they were unable to fully describe it, as the term is vague and misleading.

Pete Meslin from Newport-Mesa Unified School District in California (pmeslin@nmusd.us) has created a transportation rubric that can help students gain independence as they mature. This rubric is a major paradigm shift from the typical business-as-usual model and one that can help students achieve independence while helping districts control expenses.

Safety

School employees should be all about student safety, but is that always true? An often-overlooked point in the transportation process is the need for accurate, up-to-date information about the students we transport. Some students have serious medical conditions that require constant monitoring and special accommodations. Students with special needs should not be transported before having a specific plan to get those students safely on and off the school bus.

A staff person from the transportation department should have “read only” access to the special-education database to ensure that student information has been entered correctly. As an example, if a student has a severe medical condition that requires advanced life support, time is of utmost importance, and having informed transportation personnel can be the difference in a student's surviving a medical episode.

Additionally, students with mobility challenges need extra attention to ensure that their mobility device will work with the existing fleet. Years ago, we had a student in a specialized wheelchair that required a unique docking station. The student and her wheelchair arrived, but we were unable to properly secure her wheelchair without the specialized docking station. Special equipment can result in additional costs and time to properly secure students. Advanced coordination of student wheelchairs and school buses requires planning among families, the special-education department, and the transportation department.

Behavior management on the school bus is another area that can expose a district to liability if safety measures are not taken. Does the special-education department provide training and resources to the transportation department for students with special conditions? Are personnel trained in nonviolent methods to protect a student, other students, or themselves if a student gets out of control? Several courses provide staff training and train-the-trainer opportunities.

Timelines

It's said that "timing is everything" and that applies to our schools as well. School business officials should ensure that IEP meetings occur at appropriate times during the school year to give the special-education department adequate time to capture the new IEPs and amendments to meet transportation deadlines.

Transportation departments face two main deadlines when setting up summer school transportation and the beginning-of-the-school-year schedules. An IEP schedule that finishes late in the school year can drastically affect transportation costs if the department must rush to put the routes together.

Running a transportation department is similar to running a waste treatment plant. People may not understand the complexities of providing services, but they get upset when the system does not work properly.

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A transportation department faces many challenges in combining multiple runs into groups of routes. Multiple bell times and locations and different calendars pose a tough challenge unto themselves. However, the challenge becomes exponentially more difficult when programs and locations change at the last minute because of untimely IEP scheduling. Routes that were efficient with multiple tiers can suddenly become inefficient as single-trip routes.

Furthermore, in some cases, late information can result in the need to schedule a bus to transport one

student to a special program because the schedules have already been established and there is no way to absorb that student into existing routes. Some school districts allow their counselors to leave for the summer break before processing student shuttle requests with the transportation department. This practice affects costs negatively as runs are often already established, creating a less-than-optimal situation for students, their parents, and support staff trying to set up those shuttles at the last minute.

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Finally, time needs to be built into the calendar for putting the routes together so labor associations can review and approve routes and management can assign them to transportation personnel or conduct a bid day, or days. Transportation departments often have their staff conduct practice runs and then adjust their schedules based on driver and attendant feedback. After the routes are adjusted, schedules are printed, sorted, and mailed out before school starts.

Final Thoughts

Relationships, information sharing, safety, and timelines are critical to helping mitigate costs for transporting students with special needs. These suggestions should be considered as low-hanging fruit for districts to grab in these tough fiscal times. The effort spent in having these conversations has the potential to pay back a district for many years with improved service and cost savings.

Resources

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Meslin, P. 2010. The skills ladder and independence matrix: A new model of transportation service for students with disabilities. *Legal Routes* 8 (6): 6-8. <http://legalroutes.com/index.htm>.

U.S. Department of Education. 2012. Model notification of rights under FERPA for elementary and secondary schools. www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/lea-officials.html.

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