

# Hitting the Road: Safe Student Transportation

*Selecting a motor coach company for off-campus activities requires attention to detail and commitment to safety.*

By Patrick Labriola



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**T**he focus on safety in the motor coach industry has increased significantly in the wake of severe accidents during the past few years. In 2007, a motor coach accident involving the Bluffton University (Ohio) baseball team killed 7 and injured 21 near Atlanta, Georgia. In 2009, a bus carrying a Utah high school band veered off a highway, killing the band director and injuring several students. In 2011, 26 band students were injured when their charter bus collided with an 18-wheeler in Texas.

Such accidents, and the recent government shutdown of several

motor coach companies for safety violations, highlight the importance of school administrators' taking an active role in selecting motor coach carriers for their school trips. School administrators must be able to prove due diligence in selecting safe motor carriers. If not, they risk significant liability exposure for neglecting this critical responsibility.

District officials should compare carriers on many different factors—not just on price. They should thoroughly investigate motor coach companies' safety policies, procedures, and records. Reputable companies have clearly written, easy-to-understand policies and procedures

regarding the operation and maintenance of their fleets and detailed records about each motor coach. Districts should ask potential carriers for their vehicle maintenance and inspection records and should verify the qualifications of vehicle maintenance personnel. If a carrier cannot or will not produce those records, beware! Ascertaining proof of insurance is also important.

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District officials should follow up on company' references and seek referrals from colleagues in nearby districts.

Acquiring the following information is essential: driver safety records, the company's drug and alcohol policy, policies regarding drivers' hours of service, driver qualification files, driver criminal records, and accident registers. Fortunately, districts can use a national safety rating service to help them select safer motor carriers.

Safety concerns do not stop after motor coach selection, however. Careful planning of the trip's activities will help ensure that a trip is as smooth and safe as possible.

Administrators and trip planners should consider the following information:

- **The number of participants.** How many students will be going on the trip and how many teachers or chaperones will be needed to properly supervise the students? How many motor coaches will be necessary?
- **The destination.** What's the best and safest route to the destination? Should any areas near the destination be avoided?
- **The rules.** Students should be aware of all safety guidelines that apply to travel to, from, and at the destination.

On the road, the trip organizer and chaperones must assume responsibility for helping the driver maintain safety throughout the journey by minimizing driver distractions. Students should be required to stay in their seats while the motor coach is in motion. If the motor coach is equipped with seat belts, passengers should wear them. Students should not be allowed to throw objects or horse around, pushing and shoving one

another. Keeping noise levels down—no yelling or loud music—is also important.

District officials must recognize that drivers cannot operate a motor coach for more consecutive hours than are legally allowed—the limit is 10 hours with proper rest between shifts. They should also consider questionable weather conditions before and during trips, exercising good judgment to protect the safety of the driver and students when determining whether to postpone or cancel a trip.

These efforts combined with clear and thorough guidelines beyond the transportation aspect of the trip—such as requiring students to stay with the group, having an adequate number of chaperones, and enforcing behavior expectations—can help ensure a safe and successful trip.

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