

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET)

The Practical Teacher



This Week's Topic

"School-Wide Strategies for Managing.....BUS CONDUCT"

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Traveling by school bus is one of the safest methods of transportation. In fact, according to the School Bus Information Council, children have a much lower risk of serious injury when riding the school bus than when traveling via passenger car, train, or airline. Bus drivers deserve a great deal of credit for maintaining such a strong safety record, especially when one considers the extreme challenges of supervising a school bus full of young riders. The driver must focus attention on the highly complex task of maneuvering the bus down a busy roadway at high speeds while at the same time monitoring and managing the behaviors of an often-unruly bunch of 40 or more students who are visible only through a rear-view mirror! There are two important principles to keep in mind when setting up behavioral interventions for buses. First, the bus should be considered an extension of the school environment. That is, the bus driver should be regarded as having the same authority as a teacher or other school staff member. And behavior on the bus should earn the student the same incentives or disciplinary consequences that such conduct would bring if displayed in a school setting. Second, bus interventions should emphasize the establishment of positive relationships between driver and riders and focus on teaching appropriate student behaviors instead of relying too heavily on the use of punishment. Drivers who know the names of their riders, greet all children as they enter the bus, and build a strong bond with their daily passengers will see reduced behavior problems and discover that even those challenging behaviors that occasionally do emerge can usually be dealt with quickly and easily.

- **Appoint Peer Bus Helpers** (*Carnes, 1996*). Older students can practice valuable service-industry career skills and provide useful assistance to drivers by serving as bus helpers to younger students. Older students can develop valuable service-industry career skills and provide useful assistance to drivers by serving as bus helpers to younger students. Create a 'service career' course or extracurricular program for middle or high school students that trains them in customer service skills. Recruit students from this course to serve on their bus as peer helpers. In the peer helper role, these students practice polite interactions with others by helping riders on the bus as needed (e.g., reminding an exiting student that she forgot her bookbag), mediating student disagreements, and assisting the bus driver during bus drills or as needed. The school should provide regular feedback to peer helpers about their 'job performance'-and also assist these students to document their helper duties in a work resume and write letters of recommendation on their behalf to employers, colleges, or work training programs.
- **Assign Seating for Misbehaving Students** (*Hopkins, 2003*). When students misbehave, assign them for several days to a 'time-out' seat near the driver where they can be kept under close supervision. Let all riders know that sitting where they choose on the bus is a privilege to be earned. If a student continues to misbehave despite reminders or warnings, the student is moved to the front seat near the driver. The student is informed that he or she will remain in this assigned seat until the student shows appropriate behavior for a predetermined number of days (e.g., 3)
- **Assign Seating for the Entire Bus** (*Gettinger, 1988; Martens & Kelly, 1993*). Assigning seats for all riders can help the driver to learn student names more rapidly, set a tone of behavioral control, and turn student seating into a familiar routine rather than a daily free-for-all. At the start of the year, create a seating chart for the bus. Next to each student's name on the chart, list that student's teacher or homeroom, to make it easier to communicate with the school about student behavioral concerns. If, after the first couple of weeks of school, students generally show positive bus behaviors, the driver may allow riders to sit where they choose—while reminding them that assigned seating will resume if behavioral problems emerge.
- **Invite School Authority Figures for Bus Visits** (*Gaustad, 1992*). When various adults who maintain effective discipline in school make periodic surprise visits to the bus, they can extend some of their behavioral influence to the bus environment. The school principal, classroom teachers, and school resource [police] officers are all good choices to make brief guest appearances on the bus as it stops at the school to load or unload passengers. Visiting adults should remind students of appropriate bus behaviors, praise them if their bus general bus conduct has been good, and convey the message that the bus driver possesses the same authority and should be obeyed as readily as any other adult in the school setting.
- **Link Bus Behavior to a School Reward System** (*Sugai & Horner, 2002*). Students' behavior on the bus will improve if they know that they can earn or lose school incentives as a result of their bus conduct. First, establish a classroom or school-wide system in which students are acknowledged and rewarded for good behavior (e.g., earning points toward prizes or coupons to be redeemed at the school store) and receive negative consequences (e.g., deduction of prize points, loss of privileges) for misbehavior. Then explain to students how bus behaviors are tied into this system. For example, your school may decide that a bus disciplinary referral carries the same negative weight as a teacher office referral while a good behavior report from the bus driver is regarded as equivalent to a teacher praise-note.
- **Match Interventions to Severity of Bus Misbehavior** (*Hopkins, 2003; Mayer & Ybarra, 2003; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003*). Interventions to address bus misbehavior can be administered more consistently and fairly when those interventions are systematically matched to the seriousness of that misbehavior. In a hypothetical 3-tier system, for example,

low-level (Tier I) misbehaviors could include spitting or using abusive language and might result in the student's meeting with the classroom teacher or principal and perhaps being assigned to bus safety class. Medium-level (Tier II) misbehaviors could include a rider hanging his or her arm out of the window or bullying another student and might require a meeting between the student, parent, and principal; bus safety class—and possibly the temporary suspension of the student from extracurricular activities. A high-level (Tier III) misbehavior could include physical fights or defacing the bus with graffiti and might result in the student's assignment to bus safety class, the temporary suspension of the student from extracurricular activities, and the requirement that the student make amends to the injured party or pay restitution for damaged property. Schools may want to notify parents of even minor incidents of bus misbehavior, though, and encourage them to intervene early by communicating to their child the importance of safe and civil behavior when riding the bus. Also, students who continue to engage in chronic low-level (Tier I) bus misbehavior despite intervention efforts will probably require stronger (TIER II or Tier III) interventions.

- **Promote a Positive Bus Environment** (*Bear 1990; Mayer & Sulzer-Azaroff, 2002; Mayer & Ybarra, 2003*). Drivers who have frequent positive interactions with students generally experience significantly better bus behaviors than drivers who primarily emphasize reprimands and punishments. When interacting with students, the bus driver should make an effort to maintain a ratio of at least 3 positive interactions for every reprimand or other disciplinary consequence. Examples of positive interactions include greeting each rider by name as the student enters the bus, giving a student a non-verbal signal such as a thumbs-up sign, and praising a student's bus behavior in front of a waiting parent as the student disembarks.
- **Pull Over to Collect 'Time Owed' for Misbehavior** (*Sprick, Borgmeier & Nolet, 2002*). If group behaviors on the bus become unsafe, the driver should pull over and wait until those behaviors are brought back under control (a version of 'time owed' for misbehavior). At the start of the school year, the school should inform parents and students that bus drivers are required to pull over whenever the behavior of riders presents a safety risk (e.g., the noise level is too great; riders are moving from seat to seat while the bus is moving, etc.). Determine a minimum amount of time that the bus will remain pulled over (e.g., 5 minutes). When, in the driver's judgment, the behaviors on the bus have become unsafe, the driver delivers one warning. If the behaviors do not improve significantly, the driver then pulls over and waits quietly for the minimum 'time-out' period. If bus behaviors are under control by the end of the wait-time, the driver resumes the route. If those behaviors are not yet under control, the driver continues to wait until he or she judges that it is safe to return to the road. Drivers should report to school administration if they are forced to use the pull-over technique often, as this is a likely sign that the driver needs outside assistance in managing riders' behaviors.
- **Send Misbehaving Students to Bus Safety Class** (*Gaustad, 1992; Srednicki, 1997; Sugai & Horner, 2002*). Riders who show a pattern of significant negative conduct on the bus may require reteaching of appropriate bus-riding skills and should be required to attend a bus safety class. Create a safety class of 30 minutes to an hour. Design a simple curriculum that teaches acceptable bus behaviors through demonstration, adult modeling, and student role-play. Decide on the threshold of misbehavior that will trigger a student's referral to bus safety class. For example, students might be referred to the safety class if they are issued two bus referrals within the same month or for any behavioral incident that presents a serious safety risk. After a student completes the class, send his or her parents a letter that lists appropriate bus behaviors and encourages them to talk with the student about the importance of following bus rules. [Optional but recommended] Schedule the safety class at a time when the student will miss preferred activities (e.g., after school, during sports practice, during

optional classroom free time) so that the student experiences 'natural consequences' for his or her problem bus behaviors.

- **Separate Older and Younger Students to Prevent Bullying** (*Olweus, 1993*). Seating older students apart from younger children will reduce the probability that bullying will take place on the bus. It is not uncommon for older students to victimize younger riders on the bus—just as they do in school. You can bring this problem under control by separating the riders by grade, requiring that younger students sit in seats reserved at the front and older students sit in the back of the vehicle.
- **Sign a Bus Behavior Contract** (*Hopkins, 2003; Kazdin, 2001; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003*). Requiring that every student sign a bus behavior contract is an effective technique to teach and review positive bus behaviors while instilling a sense of responsibility in riders. This bus contract should list no more than 4-6 rules. Rules should be stated in simple language and describe the positive behavior that students are expected to display (e.g., "I will stay in my seat whenever the bus is moving.") To have added impact, the contract should state that being transported by bus is a student privilege, not a right, and that students who violate the rules may be prevented from riding the bus for a period of time. Introduce the bus rules to all students in a behavioral assembly or in their classrooms and then distribute the behavior contract. Require that students review the contract with their parents and that both students and parents sign to indicate their understanding of the bus rules and willingness to abide by them.
- **Teach Appropriate Bus Behaviors** (*Bear, 1990*). Bus riders are most likely to engage in appropriate bus behaviors if they have been explicitly taught those behaviors. At the start of every year, students should have each bus behavior rule explained and demonstrated. If one bus rule is "Remain in your seat while the bus is moving", for example, the presenter should demonstrate examples of acceptable sitting behavior (e.g., student seated and facing forward) and unacceptable sitting behavior (student standing or hanging from seat into the bus aisle). For efficiency, consider first presenting appropriate bus behaviors to all students in a school assembly and then having drivers briefly reteach and review those behaviors on the bus. Another idea is to train older, responsible students on each bus to demonstrate positive bus behaviors to other riders.

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