

August 3, 2023

The Honorable Governor Phil Murphy
Office of Governor
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Honorable Governor Murphy:

The Regional Family Support Planning Council was created by the Family Support Act of 1993 as the premier advocacy group for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). There are ten local councils across the state. Last night Council #4 (Essex) conducted its monthly meeting to discuss current issues affecting our families with a loved one with IDD. The first topic was the tragic incident in Somerset County on a school bus resulting in the death of a beautiful six-year-old little girl with IDD ([Click Here for Link to Story](#)). This sparked an animated discussion of their own experiences with their now adult children as they were transported to school. One of the members is a retired special education administrator who recounted the challenges she faced daily to ensure the safety of her students. The conversation led us to what needs to be changed not only in their region but throughout the State of New Jersey.

First and foremost, we feel strongly that cameras should be on every bus and should be monitored consistently. Employees must be held accountable to execute their job in a way that ensures safety for all. Transportation companies must monitor the cameras to ensure all is well.

Transporting students with disabilities can be challenging. These students present with wide-ranging needs that directly impact safety protocols. The drivers and aides entrusted with their safety must be well trained and adhere to specific rules of professional conduct as follows:

- Cell phones must be for emergency use only. This is not a time for bus staff to check email, text friends, or scroll through social media. Their full attention must be on the students they are transporting. Headphones should never be used by any bus staff. Violation of this should be grounds for dismissal.
- All bus staff must be trained for emergencies. They should be certified in CPR. They should have the necessary information about the needs of the students on their route.
- Bus aides should seat themselves on the bus so they can best see all the students at all times. This will allow them to immediately act should they see a student in distress. The

aide involved in the tragic incident listed above was seated in the front of the bus with headphones in use. She was not able to see or hear any signs of distress from this child.

- Bus staff should position students on the bus according to their needs. For example, if a child with autism engages in behaviors it is important to seat the child strategically to ensure that child's safety and that of other students.
- Bus staff should be competent in the use of wheelchair lifts and tie-downs. If a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) requires a car seat or harness, staff should be competent in the installation and use of these. The use of these must be in the child's IEP.
- Transportation companies must remain open so that should there be a problem like a bus that is late arriving home a parent can call and speak to a person who can respond to the concern.
- Transportation companies must have a way to reach their drivers at all times.

Transportation of students with disabilities is expensive and routes are often given to the lowest bidder. In some cases, a school district will contract transportation to a region as is the case in Bergen County's Region V, or to an Educational Services Commission as is the case for some districts in Essex County. This removes the accountability from the local district which should be responsible for the safe transport of their own students. It makes it difficult for parents to find the person responsible should problems arise.

Finally, bus drivers and aides are entrusted with our precious children, yet their pay does not match the responsibility they are given. The tragedy in Somerset County could have been avoided. The New Jersey Family Support Planning Council is compelled to advocate for high-quality, safe transportation for our students with special needs.

In solidarity,

/s/

Dotty Blakeslee, Chairperson

New Jersey Family Support Planning Council

/s/

Cathy Tamburello, Vice-Chairperson