



SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY SURVEY REPORT

Family testimonies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The New Jersey [Regional Family Support Planning Councils](#) (RFSPC) were created by the Family Support Act of 1993 as the premier advocacy group for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). There are ten local councils across the state. In August 2023, devastated by the tragic incident in Somerset County on a school bus resulting in the death of a beautiful six-year-old little girl with I/DD, the Statewide Family Support Council sent an [open letter](#) to Governor Murphy, the Department of Education, and a few elected officials demanding high quality and safe transportation for children with special needs.

Soon after, many families started to share their experiences and concerns with the RFSPC. In collaboration with the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, the RFSPC launched an online survey to collect testimonies from families on their experience with transportation safety for their loved ones with disabilities. This report contains the findings and recommendations.

Survey Questions

This short online survey consists of the following 3 questions.

1. Are you concerned/have you been concerned about the safety of your child with special needs while they are on the school bus? (Not at all/ Somewhat concerned/ Very Concerned)
2. My child has experienced one or more school bus situations that have compromised his/her safety. (Yes/No)
3. Please provide example(s) of how your child's safety was compromised.

It was launched on August 22, 2023, and remained open until April 30, 2024.

Findings

Eighty-eight (88) people responded to our survey. Over 96% of respondents are concerned about school transportation safety for their loved ones with special needs. Seventy (70) respondents (80.5%) reported that their loved one has had at least one school transportation episode that compromised their safety.

Below are 6 common safety concern areas identified in this survey.

- Issues with transportation staff competence, resources, support, and conduct
- Vehicle safety or other equipment not used or broken
- Unsafe driving

- Lack of communication or coordination among families, schools, and transportation vendors
- Students left unattended or their whereabouts became unknown

Recommendations

- The use of cell phones by any transportation personnel must be for emergency use only. Any violation of this should be grounds for dismissal.
- All transportation staff must be trained for emergency response and prevention of such crises.
- Transportation aides should position themselves on the vehicle so they can best see all the students at all times.
- Transportation staff should position students on the transportation according to their needs.
- Transportation staff should be required to demonstrate competence in the use of wheelchair lifts and tie-downs. The use of these wheelchair lifts and tie-downs should be included in the child's IEP.
- Transportation companies must remain available by phone until all transportation routes have concluded for the day to respond to emergency or urgent communication. Staff should be proficient in the language the family speaks or have language support tools to facilitate communication.
- Transportation companies must have a way to reach their drivers at all times.
- Provide reasonable compensation and salaries for drivers and aides who complete the training and demonstrate high performance to protect the safety and well-being of students with special needs.

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The [Regional Family Support Planning Councils](#) (RFSPC) were created by the Family Support Act of 1993 as the premier advocacy group for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). There are ten local councils across the state. In August 2023, Council #4 (Essex) conducted its monthly meeting to discuss current issues affecting our families with a loved one with I/DD. 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 I/DD. This sparked an animated discussion of family members' 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 them to the School Bus Transportation Safety advocacy.

The Statewide Family Support Council sent an [open letter](#) to Governor Murphy, the Department of Education, and a few elected officials demanding high quality and safe transportation for children with special needs by improving training and enforcing accountability.

As the RFSPC continued the conversation, parents, grandparents, and professionals started to reach out to them to share their experiences and stories. The RFSPCs decided to launch an online survey to collect their testimonies and feedback on the school transportation safety.

The New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities engaged in discussions with RFSPCs and others to advance the advocacy efforts to improve school transportation safety by supporting surveys, listening sessions, and meetings with state departments.



METHODOLOGY

Format

The survey was conducted via an online survey platform. The survey invitation was sent to people who are on the email list of the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities and Regional Family Support Planning Councils. The survey was also posted on the website and social networking sites.

In order to collect more testimonies, an online survey was created. To include historically underrepresented communities, the survey was translated into NJ's top 5 Language Access Needs¹: Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Portuguese, and Gujarati.

Objectives

To collect concerns and feedback on school transportation safety from students with disabilities and their parents and family members.

Questions

This short online survey consisted of the following 3 questions:

- Are you concerned/have you been concerned about the safety of your child with special needs while they are on the school bus? (Not at all/ Somewhat concerned/ Very Concerned)
- My child has experienced one or more school bus situations that have compromised his/her safety. (Yes/No)
- Please provide example(s) of how your child's safety was compromised.

Survey period

The survey was open from August 22, 2023, to April 30, 2024.

¹ https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/NJ_Language-and-Demographic-Report_Dec-2020.pdf (retrieved, 6/4/2024)

RESULTS

Number of respondents by languages

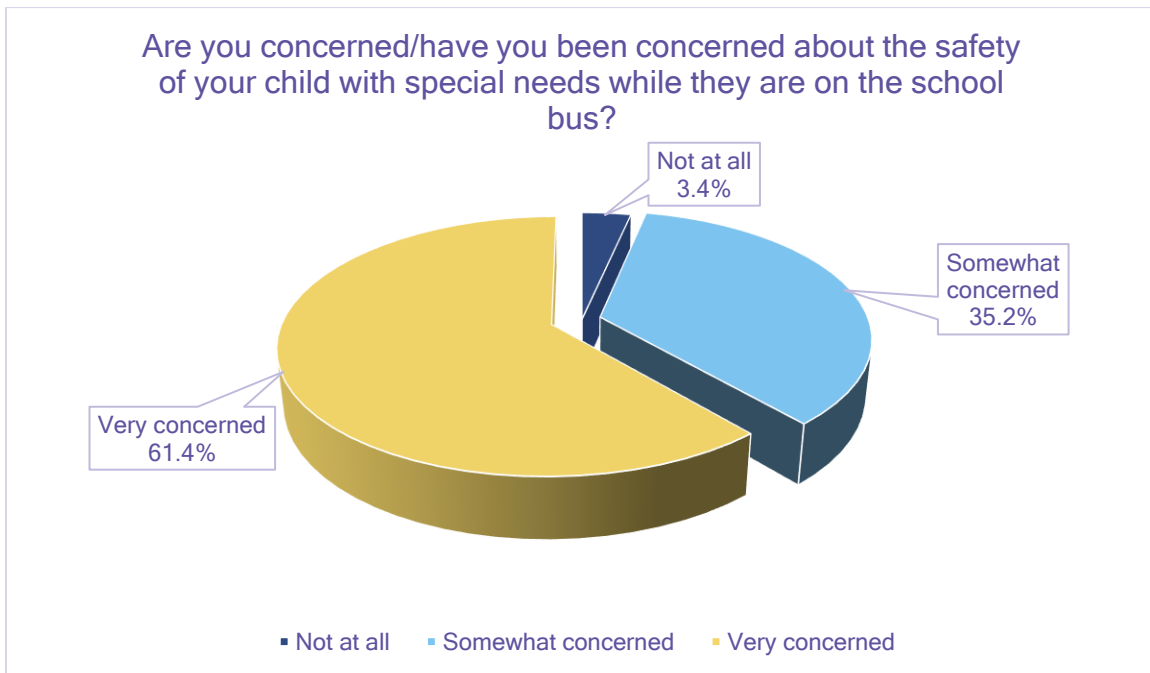
Eighty-eight (88) people responded to the survey. Out of 88 respondents, 82 people took the survey in English. Five (5) and one (1) respondents took the survey in Spanish and Gujarati, respectively.

Findings

Degree of Concern

Asked if they have ever been concerned about the safety of their loved ones with special needs while on school transportation, 54 (61.4%) respondents answered “very concerned,” followed by 31 (35.2%) respondents chose “somewhat concerned” and 3 (3.4%) stated “not at all.” (Figure 1).

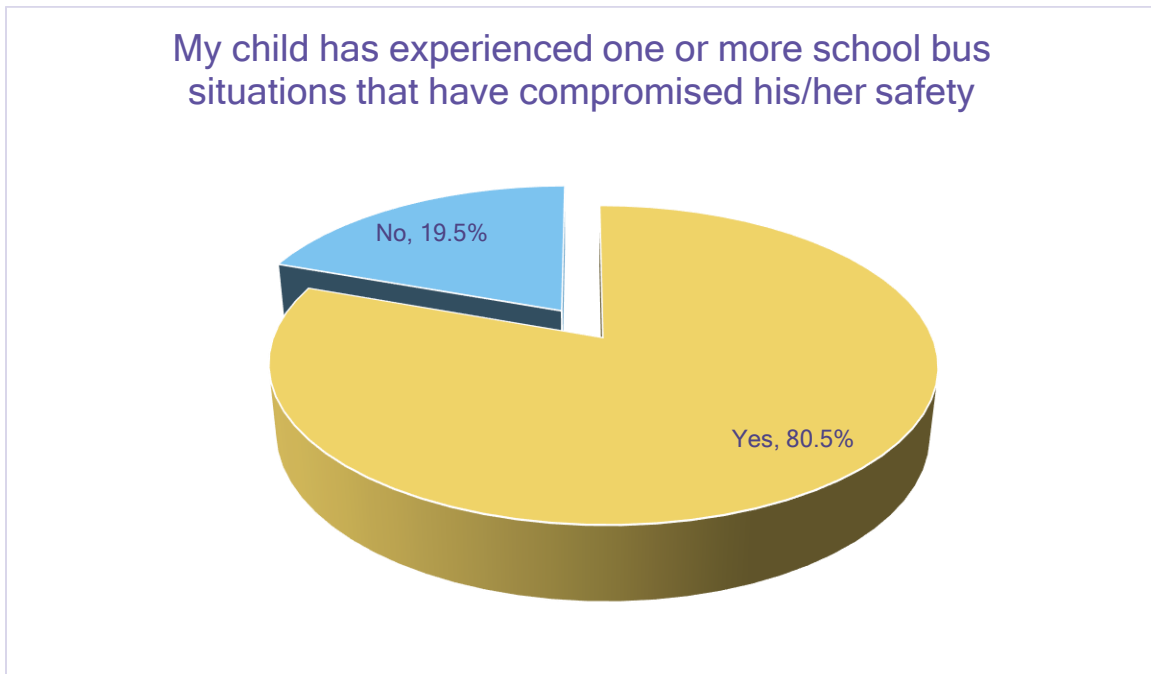
Figure 1: Degree of Concern



Experience of safety concern

Seventy (70) respondents (80.5%) reported that their child experienced one or more school transportation situations that have compromised their safety (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Experience of safety concern



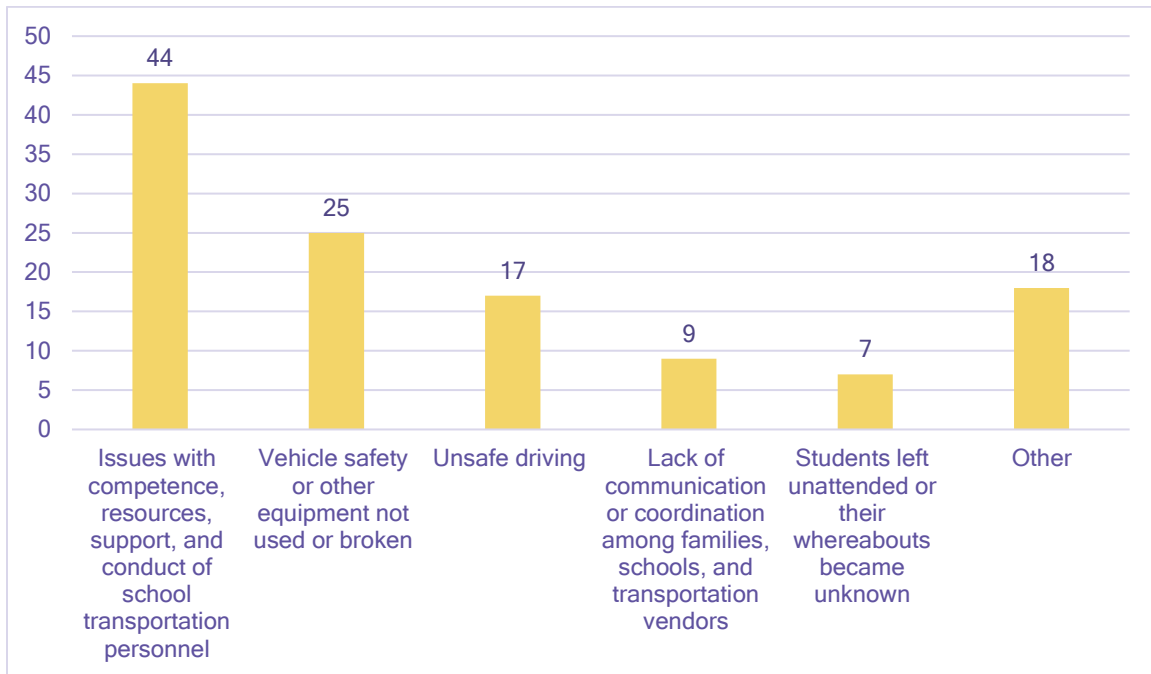
Area of concerns – Common themes

Fifty-six (56) respondents provided examples of how their loved one's safety was compromised. Two comments were eliminated from the analysis because they addressed transportation issues outside of the school system.

The following 6 common themes emerged. The total of the responses exceeds the number of respondents because some comments include multiple themes (Figure 3).

- Issues with competence, resources, support, and conduct of school transportation personnel (44 responses)
- Vehicle safety or other equipment not used or broken (25 responses)
- Unsafe driving (17 responses)
- Lack of communication or coordination among families, schools, and transportation vendors (9 responses)
- Students left unattended or their whereabouts became unknown (7 responses)
- Others (18 responses)

Figure 3: Area of concerns



Issues with competence, resources, support, and conduct of transportation personnel

A total of 44 comments were related to lack of resources and support in the vehicle as well as staff incompetency and professional misconduct such as:

- Aides are not attentive to students' needs. Transportation staff use their phones or headphones while on duty.
- Staff are unable to meet the behavioral needs of students.
- There is no aide on the vehicle, or their availability is inconsistent.
- Staff are not trained to meet students with intellectual or developmental disabilities

Below are the quotes from the respondents.

"My son reports there are many times when the bus aide does not interact with individuals on the bus and spends the entire trip looking at their phone."

"Bus aide fell asleep"

"Transportation service did not require the aide to sit with my child. They let my child sit unattended while the driver and aide both sit up front with headphones on."

“Mi Hijo era jaloneado de su camisa por una asistente del bus mientras el bus se mantenía en marcha.” (My son was pulled by his shirt by a bus attendant while the bus kept moving.)”

“One driver pinched my son's arm although we could not prove it.”

“I have had numerous safety concerns over the years...Abuse by driver (due to lack of training on autism behaviors)...”

Vehicle safety or other equipment not used or broken

Twenty-six (26) comments were related to malfunctioning equipment or safety gear not being properly used.

- Broken air conditioner, window, emergency brake, door handle and GPS
- Malfunctioning safety equipment such as harness and car seat
- Staff not using safety equipment though they are functional

Respondents submitted the following testimonies:

“One day my daughter was in the lift when the emergency brake gave out and the bus rolled backward. Luckily my husband was standing there and was able to stop the bus while the driver ran back to the driver seat and put the breaks [sic] on.”

“Vans were not maintained. I once pulled on the door handle and it came off in my hand. This caused me to fall to the ground.”

“A van picked up my daughter with the entire back window shattered where she was supposed to sit.”

“The bus company does not use seat belts with a wheelchair, busses have been sent without the proper straps for the tie downs for my child's wheelchair, busses have been sent without windshield wipers, one vehicle had a tire blow out on the highway, the driver has fallen asleep behind the wheel on the highway, the wheelchair ramp didn't work, the a/c didn't work during summer session, heat hasn't worked during the winter, etc.”

Unsafe driving

Fifteen (16) comments were related to the driver's dangerous driving including:

- Traffic violations such as
- Driver and staff with questionable safety record
- Unsafe driving that resulted in property damage
- Overtired drivers

The following examples captures the above-stated concerns.

"There have been multiple times where my daughter has been on the bus to or from school and the driver either got into a car accident or was pulled over by police for a traffic violation."

"My child's bus driver ran a red light and was hit by 2 oncoming vehicles. The bus ran off the road and wedges between 2 trees on the property of a private residence. Thankfully, she escaped severe injury. The driver was issued summons but returned to work to his same bus route within a week."

"Driver speeding"

"A friend of mine was waiting for her daughter to be picked up, bus never showed. Next day in the paper, the driver hit a guard rail bc she was DUI. Thankfully she never made it to pick up this child."

Lack of communication or coordination among families, schools, and transportation vendors

Nine (9) respondents expressed communication-related concerns.

- Language barrier
- No contact information
- Lack of communication and coordination between school and transportation company

"Aides assigned to ensure my child is strapped in properly lack education on how to do their job and often lack a common language to discuss concerns"

"My children have had drivers who could not communicate with them due to not understanding English."

“Each school year was a new transportation company for out of district placement and each year the bus got lost with my daughter arriving home up to two hours late with soiled undergarments and NO communication from transport company.”

“Due to the miscommunication between the school and aftercare provider, my then-6-year-old son with special needs was dropped off near our house when he was supposed to be in an afterschool program. Over an hour after he had been dropped off, our neighbors eventually found him standing alone in the rain. After the incident, he exhibited noticeable regression and heightened anxiety for days.”

Students left unattended or their whereabouts became unknown

Seven (7) respondents reported that their loved one was left on the bus, or dropped off without adult supervision.

“My child was left on a school bus because the driver did not check her bus to make sure that all students had been dropped off. He had a paraprofessional who did not notice that he had got on the wrong bus and was not with her because she was too busy chit chatting with the other paraprofessionals. It was during the ESY [Extended School Year] summer program and the bus had no air conditioning. The driver finally did notice when she parked the bus at her home.”

“My child was let off school bus without me to ‘receive’ him. The IEP stated ‘portal’ to ‘portal’ and with a 1:1 aide. He entered the house without me knowing. I was on the 3rd floor. Developmentally, he is/was equivalent to a toddler-5yo. The what if are numerous: if I wasn’t home, if the door was locked, if he consumed something poisonous, etc. ”
and my disabled son was also asleep on AM school drop off. He did not get off at school.

“Bus aide fell asleep and my disabled son was also asleep on AM school drop off. He did not get off at school. Driver left and drove on to his next route with my son still on board. I received a call from my son’s teacher asking why he was not at school. After several attempts to locate the bus the driver realized he still had my sleeping son on board and returned to the school to drop him off. Approximately 30 minutes had passed. Aide was subsequently fired.”

Other concerns

Ten (10) other types of concerns were collected through the survey with total of 18 responses. Each concern was submitted by one respondent unless stated otherwise.

- Extreme tardiness (4 responses)
- Unsafe vehicle stop (4 responses)
- Long traveling time - over 1 hour (3 responses)
- Getting up while vehicle in motion
- Vehicle does not wait when students are late
- Inappropriate personal use of the vehicle by the driver (unauthorized stops to buy food and pick up family members)
- New staff without introduction
- No protocol when emergency or accident happens
- Field trip transportation was not wheelchair accessible
- Driver asked student to come to his home

Below are the quotes from the respondents.

“My child left school at 2:30pm and didn’t come home until 5:30pm. We live 20 minutes away” (Extreme tardiness)

“We live on one of the busier streets in our town. There are no sidewalks in our area. The bus would often stop on the other side of the road and we would have to walk our child across a very fast two lane road. Drivers of cars don't always see school buses around a bend on the road where I live. Pretty scary...” (Unsafe bus stops)

“He was on the bus for almost 2 hours for him to get at school since he was the first one to be picked up in the morning (7am) then picking up the other kids in other towns...” (Long traveling time)

“A driver picked up my daughter with his 4 grandchildren in the car and when I questioned him about it, he got mad and took off with my daughter in the van. Apparently he dropped his grandchildren off in [name of the town omitted] with my daughter in the van. (GPS in backpack)” (Personal use of the vehicle)

*“Driver have accident hit mirror on other vehicle - no safe guard procedure in place when this happens...and driver stated for everyone get off and walk the rest of stops schedule the route!”
(No protocol when accident happens)*

“...my son told me the driver... asked him if he(my son) would like to go to his house with him...my son said no and the other question my son told me he said to him was if he (my son) would like then go to the park with him. Again, my son (thanks god) said no. ... When I called the owner of the transportation company to let her know of the situation she completely ignored my concern and said she has never had any problem and that she trusted 100% in her employee. It was not a yellow school bus he was driving a regular van.” (Driver asked student to come to his home)



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This survey shows that over 96% of parents or family members of students with disabilities are concerned about school transportation safety. Over 80% of respondents shared the incidents with the following common themes: Issues with competence, resources, support, and conduct of transportation personnel; Vehicle safety or other equipment not used or broken; Unsafe driving; Lack of communication or coordination among families, schools, and transportation vendors; and Students left unattended or their whereabouts became unknown.

Multiple respondents described issues with drivers or aides being distracted, not properly trained, or negligent. Examples include a driver asking a child to go to his house, drivers getting lost, not stopping properly, or having accidents. It was also reported that aides did not provide full supervision to children, were distracted by their phones, or not being proactive to prevent any injuries or accidents.

There were also many issues reported with a lack of proper equipment, such as car seats, harnesses, and seat belts. In some cases, children were injured when equipment failed or was used improperly. Issues were also reported with students hurting or distracting each other without proper intervention from untrained aides.

Several respondents described issues resulting from poor planning and communication between schools, transportation companies, and parents. Children were dropped off without supervision, at the wrong location, or without notification. One child with limited verbal skills was left on a hot bus for 30 minutes before the driver noticed.

One respondent summarized feeling their complaints were ignored by those in charge of transportation, and warned that without better training, enforcement and monitoring, tragic accidents will continue happening. Another pointed out that cameras on buses need to be monitored to keep students safe.

Recommendations

Based on the survey results and testimonies shared in our local meetings and listening sessions, we recommend that the following changes be made.

- The use of cell phones by any transportation personnel must be for emergency use only. This is not a time for transportation 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 transportation staff. Violations of this should be grounds for dismissal.
- All transportation staff must be trained for emergency response and prevention of such emergencies. The best strategy to keep students safe is to prevent crises from happening. All transportation staff should learn the general and also personalized needs of students with special needs. They should be certified in CPR. They should have the necessary information about the needs of the students on their route.
- Transportation aides should position themselves on the vehicle 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.
- Transportation staff should position students on the vehicle 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.
- Transportation staff should be required to demonstrate 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 available by phone so that should there be a problem like a vehicle that is late arriving home a parent can call and speak to a person who can respond to the concern. Transportation company staff should be proficient in the language the family speaks or have language support tools to facilitate communication.
- Transportation companies must have a way to reach their drivers at all times.
- Provide reasonable compensation and salaries for drivers and aides who complete the training and demonstrate high performance to protect the safety and well-being of students with special needs.