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## **Getting to School Safely: Implications of School Transport for Children with Special Educational Needs**

The Irish educational system supports the holistic development of the child with special educational needs (SEN). Central to this is the provision of support services including school transportation. There is a need to ensure that transport services for children with SEN are improved. Areas of concern include the efficient operation of the school transport scheme to ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children. The focus of this article is on presenting research undertaken with the key stakeholders in the transportation of children with SEN so as to inform a programme of training for bus escorts.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A child's ability to participate in school is influenced by the events and conditions of the journey to and from school. Children with special educational needs (SEN) face a journey of some form every day whether they are educated in their local mainstream school or a specialised setting. Irish legislation and policy support and promote the holistic development of the child with SEN (Education Act, 1998; Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN), 2004; Equal Status Acts, 2000 and 2004; Disability Act, 2005). Children are entitled to receive an appropriate education in an inclusive environment with their peers unless it is not in their best interest or that it interferes unduly with the effective provision of education for children with whom they are educated (Ireland, 2004). The holistic development of children must be central to the expansion and improvement in the provision of support services, including school transportation. A significant factor in providing such services for children with SEN is the role of the bus escort. Diligence, care and commitment to safety begin with knowledgeable transportation personnel (Pupil Transportation Safety Institute (PTSI), 2009).





## THE SCHOOL TRANSPORT SCHEME

The purpose of the school transport scheme for children with SEN is to provide a reasonable level of transport service for children with a diagnosed disability and/or SEN, who, because of the nature of their disability, may not be in a position to avail of a regular school bus service which would be time-tabled to pick up other children along a route of service (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011a). The school transport scheme is an interesting example of interdepartmental and interagency collaboration. Those involved include the DES who run the school transport scheme, Boards of Management (BOM) of schools who employ bus escorts on an hourly basis, Bus Éireann who employ bus drivers and issue the school transport contracts, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) who allocate resources through the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) who advise on the selection of appropriate resources, for example, wheelchairs. The *School Transport: A Value for Money Review of the School Transport Scheme* strongly recommends that the roles and responsibilities of the State, in conjunction with the HSE, are clarified in respect of the school transport system (DES, 2011b). This report also recommends that there is a need for a coherent and coordinated involvement of the SENO in relation to transport for children with SEN (DES, 2011b).

Other areas of concern regarding school transport highlighted by national and international policy include cost effectiveness, health and safety, link between home and school environment and provision of a holistic educational experience for children (Wales, 2006; Welsh Local Government Association, 2010; DES, 2011b; Department of Education and DFP, 2012). The Department of Education (2011) in the United Kingdom advises that appropriate training should be provided for school transport personnel for students with SEN. The National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT) in the United States stresses that school bus transportation is a vital component in every successful educational enterprise and is the direct link between a neighbourhood and the classroom. However, decisions and discussions about school transport do not happen in a vacuum. The NAPT also contend that other elements of the education system are major factors that can have a dramatic impact on transportation services to and from school and school-related events (NAPT, 2011).

In the Irish setting, children with SEN are supported on the journey to and from school by the services of a bus escort. The role of the school bus escorts is to help children with SEN while travelling on school transport services to and from special schools and special classes. In general, one escort is shared by all pupils





on the service. There has been a marked increase in the number of bus escorts employed in the education system with some 1,300 escorts used in the school transport system compared with 600 in 2004, and expenditure on escorts is now the single highest expenditure item in relation to transport for children with SEN (DES, 2011b). With this increase in the number of bus escorts employed, a need to research and clarify the perceived roles and actual responsibilities emerged. The findings of research presented in this article aim to address this.

## **RESEARCH**

In partnership with the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE), St. Angela's College, Sligo, recognised the need to ensure that transport services for children with SEN are improved. Areas of concern include the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and the efficient operation of the school transport scheme. Training, tailored to meet the specific needs of the bus escort, was highlighted as an important issue to ensure a better service.

Information to support the development of such training was gathered from stakeholders using both a questionnaire survey and follow-up focus group interviews. A questionnaire was issued to principals of special and mainstream schools at the NABMSE Conference in October 2011. This focused on the importance of training for bus escorts, training received to date, and possible programme content. Follow-up consultative focus group interviews were held with key stakeholders including bus escorts, parents and principals. The purpose of these interviews was to ascertain views so as to best inform the design and content of a training programme so that it meets the needs of all involved. Invitations were also issued to members of BOM, personnel from the DES, NCSE, HSE and Bus Éireann who were unable to attend.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Key findings of the research undertaken are presented here. Of 120 questionnaires issued, 72 were returned, yielding a response rate of 60%. All responses returned indicated that bus escorts should receive training regarding their role. Some 30.5% of the principals who responded indicated that their bus escorts had not received any training at all, while 69.5% indicated that bus escorts had received varying levels of training in areas such as manual handling, health and safety and child protection. With regard to funding in-school training for bus escorts, 23.6% of respondents indicated they had a budget for training. However, 12.5% indicated that they did not know if a budget was available. This suggests that while





principals support the training of bus escorts, it is given varying levels of priority.

Bearing in mind the lack of a comprehensive role description by the key stakeholders, the research wished to discover what was the understanding of the role of the bus escort. Bus escorts themselves showed varying levels of understanding of their role: “We are there to assist them and just in case there are any issues on the bus, we are there for their protection and the protection of other children as well on the bus for their safety”. Principals identified roles with regard to health and safety, communication and the public image of the school: “The bus escort has a very important role as the face of the school”. Parents supported this: ‘The whole thing for most of the children who have long journeys, the bus escort is actually the school to the parent’. Parents were also concerned with the role of the bus escort with regard the welfare of their child:

*If he gets on that bus, she knows everything about him, she knows all his little ways, what to do, what not to do, when not to say anything, his likes and dislikes, she knows how he thinks. Sets him up in good form for the day and he comes home the same way.*



Implications of the bus journey in relation to the child’s ability to engage with the school/home environment were addressed in the focus group interviews. Areas highlighted by the stakeholders included communication, duration of bus journey, change in established routines, sensory issues, medical issues, wheelchairs and challenging behaviour.



Communication emerged as a vital component of the bus escort’s role, for example, the transfer of information from home to school and vice versa:

*To give me as much information is vital, between the parents from the time they get on the bus in the morning if they gave us any kind of information; it is amazing how a word could just settle a child. Information, I find, is the key element between parent, school and escort. (Bus escort remark)*

The duration of the bus journey was problematic; it emerged as a contributory factor in behaviour and management issues as well as highlighting the isolated nature of the role of the bus escort. One parent remarked: “Child is on the bus and strapped in. Made me feel uneasy, children on the bus for at least an hour on country roads in the morning and again in the evening. Country roads are lonely places”.





Changes in routine, personnel, bus and route also impacted on behaviour management, although many of these issues were outside the control of either school management or individuals:

*Then towards the end of August, you get to know what children are on the routes. Children with autism need a social story to let them know if there is going to be a change. Parents need to know, they have built up a trust in the driver and the bus escort and now suddenly there is a new bus arriving bringing them to school, they don't know them, their child won't get on the bus, it is a new bus, new driver. (Principal remark)*

Sensory issues emerged as a challenge when dealing with children with SEN on the bus journey. Noise was especially highlighted by a bus escort: "The other thing is the radio – some children want it, some children don't, they are noise sensitive, and it can be a big problem and knowing when to put earphones on children if they need them".

Medical issues such as the emergency administration of medication, suctioning, use of the respirator and the transfer of medication emerged as particularly challenging for the bus escort. Principals acknowledged the complexity of the role of the bus escort in this regard: "I suppose what we ask bus escorts to do is quite challenging, for example, the use of the anti-seizure medication. We have bus escorts suctioning children who have tracheotomies on their way to and from school, the use of the respirator in case there is a difficulty".

Wheelchairs were identified as potentially leading to cramped conditions with ensuing safety and behaviour concerns: "And there are lots of problems there because as children grow older, they get a bigger chair and the bus can't take the wheelchairs and then suddenly all hell breaks loose – how are they going to get to school" (Principal remark). Issues such as overcrowding and proximity to other children were also highlighted: "I have to climb over chairs to get at kids if they have seizures. Some chairs are big and awkward and others are not so big and awkward but at the end of the day sometimes, it is just for the contractor to get the contract". (Bus escort remark)

The ripple effect of challenging behaviour was raised by all stakeholders as leading to management issues. One principal commented: "The challenge would be if kids have challenging behaviour that you bring it under control so that it does not start affecting other children". Parents highlighted the difficulty of children with challenging behaviour hurting other children because of lack of space: "If





they lash out at another child in a wheelchair – simple things, what to do, what not to do, having a cushion, an hour is a long time...”

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Children with SEN are entitled to the same rights as those enjoyed by all children and these include the right to accessible, appropriate education and related support services. This implies that parents, professionals, para-professionals and support personnel, including bus escorts, need to be adequately prepared by having an understanding of SEN and an awareness of approaches to care and education that are appropriate (Centre for Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and Diversity (CSENID), 2011).

Parents have a right to select the school their child attends be that the local mainstream school or a specialised setting. Research has shown that accessibility of schools in light of a child’s SEN made proximity and transport important reasons for choosing a school (Bagley, Woods and Woods, 2001). A parent in the study carried out by Bagley *et al.*, (2001) expressed the view that: “Accessibility is very important because once you have chosen to send your child out of the area you have to make sure that they can get there and back...” (p. 296). It is important for parents to be confident and secure in the knowledge that their children are being transported safely to and from school in the care of competent personnel.

This research has confirmed and consolidated the very complex role of the bus escort in practice. Responsibilities of the bus escort that emerged include safe transportation of children incorporating assistance on and off the bus, safe clamping of wheelchairs and management of the children on the bus particularly with regard to challenging behaviour. Communication between home and school is also an important responsibility. Diplomacy, trustworthiness and confidentiality are integral elements of the bus escort’s ability to develop effective, reassuring and positive working relationships with parents and schools. This element is particularly important for parents whose children attend a specialised setting some distance from their home. In these cases, the bus escort becomes the face of the school. Awareness of disabilities and SEN is also an essential component in enabling the bus escort to carry out their responsibilities competently. Combined knowledge of the individual children and the SEN facilitates the bus escort to holistically support the children on the bus. Bus escorts also have a responsibility with regard to the safe transportation of medication and the management of emergency medical situations. Equipment for transporting children with SEN is evolving constantly and bus escorts need to be aware of such developments.





School policy, safety procedures and protocols to manage critical incidents are crucial in supporting and informing bus escorts of what is expected of them. Policies should be devised to ensure safe and smooth transportation to and from school as well as to clarify duties and responsibilities for all personnel involved (School Transport with Children, 2010). It is suggested that the development of a standard transport profile would assist bus escorts in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. This transport profile could contain contact and medical details, likes and dislikes of the child, communication and information regarding specialised equipment (School Transport with Children, 2010). This would promote better management of the transportation of the child. It is also suggested that where necessary the bus escort should have input into Individual Education Plans where appropriate (PTSI, 2009).

Children with SEN are the beneficiaries when systems of joined-up thinking are put in place (School Transport with Children, 2010). The unique position of school transport is that workers have two different employers, who must both work together to ensure the safety of the vulnerable children with SEN. There is a need for clear and constant communication to ensure that awareness is raised and understanding of responsibilities is increased. Agreed practices and specific protocols between all parties involved in transportation of children with SEN would result in safer transportation. Further clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the bus driver and the bus escort would facilitate the development of agreed practices and procedures at both local and national level.

It is essential that every effort is made to ensure that those working with, teaching, supporting and caring for children and young people with SEN should have access to appropriate training and education to meet their needs (DES, 2001). The *Summary Report of the Inter-Departmental Collaboration on School Transport for Students with Special Needs* (School Transport with Children, 2010) recommends a series of training seminars and support for bus personnel which focus on the specific issues relevant to their role. This is in line with research and good practice from other jurisdictions. St. Angela's College, Sligo, is responding to the complex nature of school transportation for children with SEN with a proposal to design, develop and implement a programme of training for bus escorts in line with the School Transport Scheme (DES, 2011a; DES, 2011b). The programme of training for bus escorts must be cognisant of the current social, educational, health and welfare, political and legislative context, the organisational and professional milieu in which bus escorts operate, and the stakeholders with whom they collaborate: "Working with children with SEN is a rewarding but challenging job and it is important that we continue to raise





awareness and increase understanding of the responsibilities of those who work in the area of school transportation” (School Transport with Children, 2010, p. 9).

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