

SDFS NOTES

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SAFE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES SECTION

School Bus Discipline

School buses are one of the safest modes of transportation, but on-board discipline problems are on the rise. Disorderly students can threaten the safety of children by causing the driver to have an accident. The most important reason for having a discipline system on school buses is the safety of students. This issue of **SDFS Notes** explores maintaining order and safety on school buses through policy development and enforcement, driver empowerment and training, and utilization of safety equipment.

When students misbehave on school buses, the consequences can have a greater impact than when the misbehavior occurs in the classroom. Drivers must do what most teachers wouldn't dare: they must turn their backs on more than two classrooms of children, maintain order, and navigate a crowded vehicle through traffic or drive down a highway at a high speed.

Incidents of misbehavior documented on school systems include:

- Failure to obey the driver
- Teasing and annoying other students
- Shoving and pushing
- Objects thrown out the window
- Heads and arms out the window
- Profane or abusive language
- Vandalism
- Fighting
- Assault
- Extortion (money and other possessions taken from younger children)
- Use of tobacco, drugs or alcohol

Riding to and from school are times of transition. Backyard fights spill over into on-board disputes. Anxieties from a difficult day at school may be expressed in misbehaviors on the ride home.

Policy and Procedures

The first step in developing or improving a district bus disciplinary plan is to establish written policy and procedures for enforcing discipline. The policy should contain a philosophical statement which

- Identifies the school bus as an extension of the school itself
- Assigns responsibilities to student riders, parents, and drivers
- Declares riding a school bus is a privilege and not a right accorded students by a governing board
- A student code of conduct which describes expected student behaviors for boarding and riding
- A discipline code which describes procedures to be taken for dispensing disciplinary measures (These should be age appropriate and can range from 1) verbal warnings to 2) written warnings to be signed by parents to 3) suspension of bus riding privileges to 4) expulsion from the bus

Exemplary Rules for Riding a School Bus

- Follow directions the first time they are given.
- Stay properly seated in your assigned seat
- Keep you hands to yourself
- No spitting, spitballs, paper throwing ,or throwing anything out of windows
- No eating, drinking, smoking, or gum chewing
- No horseplay, wrestling, or fighting...

Disciplinary Plan: St. Vrain Valley School District - Longmont, CO**Actions for elementary students:**

1st offense: a written warning by bus driver is sent home for parent's signature The driver may request assistance of administrators or director of transportation. In lesser offenses, a verbal warning is sufficient

2nd offense: one-to-two day suspension of bus privileges. Bus drivers are responsible for notifying parents.

3rd offense: three-to-five day suspension. Both administrators and driver meet to notify the parents.

4th offense: suspension for 15 days or longer. A 4th offense usually involves drug, assault, vandalism, possession of a weapon or a related behavior. Law enforcement officials may need to be contacted In some cases, expulsion is the most appropriate action.

Actions for secondary students

1st offense: same as elementary students.

2nd offense: usually a two-day suspension with parents notified by bus driver.

3rd offense: five-to-fifteen day suspension of bus riding privileges.

4th offense: suspension for one semester or more. In cases of suspension due to vandalism, appropriate arrangements for restitution must be made prior to re-establishment of riding privileges.

Bus Incident Procedures: Suwannee County (Florida) School District

Step 1 - VERBAL WARNING: Students who do not correct their behavior after the informal warning or who demonstrate potentially unsafe behavior shall receive formal verbal warning on the Bus Incident Report form. The students signature in the provided space acknowledges the formal warning.

Step 2 - PARENT CONTACT: If the inappropriate behavior continues or another similar incident occurs, the driver shall telephone or visit the students parent to seek help in correcting the students behavior. The driver shall complete Step 2 by describing the students behavior in the comments section, and shall write the date, time, students name, name of the person talked to, and a brief description of the conversation in their log book. The students behavior must become acceptable immediately following the initial parent contact and remain acceptable for ten school days or the driver shall go to Step 3 - Written Notice.

Step 3 - WRITTEN NOTICE SENT HOME: A Step 3 - Written Notice shall be sent home if a student behavior has not become acceptable immediately after the parent contact or if the acceptable behavior fails to last for ten school day's . Students who have more than ten school days of acceptable behavior shall be processed again at Step 2 - Parent Contact.

If Step 3 is appropriate, the driver shall complete the front page describing the incident and have the student sign it. The driver shall sign the second page, then remove it, send it home by the student or mail it, and telephone the parent within 24 hours to verify the notice was received.

Step 4 - ADMINISTRATIVE REFERRAL: Students who continue to violate bus rules and jeopardize the safety of others shall be placed at Step 4: Administrative Referral. The bus driver shall describe the incident in the comments section and turn it into the Transportation Office with copies of all pertinent documentation. The Bus Incident Report for shall be reviewed and delivered to the students for school processing. The school administrator shall suspend the student

Driver Empowerment

Many districts are plagued by high driver turn-over rates. Finding someone to work part-time for low wages in a booming economy is only part of the battle. Keeping him or her content with the work when student discipline has plummeted is another challenge. Feeling disconnected from and unsupported by school staff is another battle.

To empower school bus drivers:

- Give drivers more authority over discipline
- Ensure that school administration fully support drivers and include drivers in policy development
- Offer drivers increased training in safety, student behavior, and student discipline
- Increase driver wages and benefits

Driver Authority

In the past, school administrator had sole responsibility for enforcing school bus discipline. Valuable time was tied up with sorting through bus incident referrals for minor infractions and dispensing appropriate disciplinary measures. Too often, the task was de-prioritized in a busy administrator's schedule. Now, in many districts, bus drivers and district transportation directors have primary authority for processing incident reports and maintaining student rider discipline. School administrators have been freed-up to address only the most serious of infractions.

District policies vary in the amount of authority drivers are given to enforce discipline. Some districts limit the authority to a verbal consultation with a misbehaving student and written parent notification. Other districts allow drivers to make telephone calls to parents. Others authorize drivers to suspend students from the bus. Increased authority encourages drivers to think about their actions. If they are responsible for making the call to a parent, they will want to make sure they are clear about the incident and their role in enforcing discipline.

Hernando County, FL, transportation director, Mark Tallent, says that just giving bus drivers authority to make initial contact with a misbehaving students is critical. He states, "At one middle school, we went from 800 discipline reports per year to 35-to-40. Just having the drivers *talk* to students helps a lot." Jolene Hawkins, transportation director in Ecotoer County, TX is adamant about developing relations between students and drivers. She say, "Drivers should build relationships with kids by saying hello, learning their names, getting to know things about them, and giving them high-fives."

In Volusia County, FL, the bus drivers were perceived as "the ones everyone can pick on," says Volusia County school psychologist, Mary Alice Myers. Volusia drivers reported that students did not respect their authority, mirroring the school administrations' attitudes toward the driver. "Kids aren't taught to respect the drivers as school professionals," says Myers. Volusia County now requires each school bus driver to write up their own rules, inform students of the consequences, and gives drivers a certain amount of authority to enforce the rules. As reinforcement, drivers are given complete assurance from school administrators that consequences administered by the school itself, will be carried out.

School administration support

Drivers are empowered when they are recognized as an extension of the school administration. They should be involved in developing school transportation policy and should be an involved in the development of any crisis management plan . When a bus incident referral is made, school principals and deans must commit to take decisive action. Some drivers may need support to make a telephone call to a parent. Administrators or school transportation directors should be there to assist. In some districts, principals hold monthly meetings with drivers.

Parent involvement

Parent involvement at the onset of an incident is critical. Many parents are cooperative and willing to take responsibility for the actions of their child, but some are unwilling to accept the reported behavior. "It's very important that parents understand what is happen right up front," says Suwannee County's transportation director, Hugh Mills. Notifying parents of an incident when it first happens can be instrumental in preventing the incident from escalating. Parents are also more prone to take responsibility for their children's behavior if they have been involved from the start. In Watkins Kentucky, parents receive a list of the rules and regulations of proper bus behavior. They sign the list acknowledging that they have discussed the rules with their children. Students in 7th grade and above sign form as well to acknowledge that they intend to follow rules.

Some buses have parent monitors who ride as volunteers to help maintain discipline. Monitors have proven to a be successful practice, but paid monitors are more effective than volunteers and few districts can afford the expense.

Driver Training

Driver training is essential. A good training curriculum instructs drivers on understanding children, maintaining discipline, de-escalating conflict, communicating with parents, and developing rapport with children.

The Florida Department of Education provides a X day training for trainer's and drivers. Teams composed of XXX are encouraged to attend together. The course covers and a large chunk of it is committed to *school bus passenger management*. Drivers learn effective communication techniques, the stages of human development and the nature of young people, methods for managing behaviors, and driver actions that affect positive student behavior. There is also a section that discusses the responsibilities of the *passenger management team members* composed of the driver, supervisor, school administration, teachers, parents, and students.

Teams benefit as well. Guidance is provided developing policy for student transportation. Two sample discipline plans are provided with exemplary rules, consequences, rewards for behavior. Guidelines for student conduct is provided and general safety guidelines (such as arriving at the bus stop five minutes

before he bus arrives, etc.) School bus incident report forms are provided and other useful items that districts may simply adopt as their own.

Interested districts should contact Kay Kanoff at the Department of Education, YY office to arrange training. The course is free and can be scheduled as requested. Need to bring a team to the training???

On February the DOE, office of Y help a training from Seattle-based Bob McCalister, co-founder of Strategies Training Systems has a two-day training session specifically addressing entitled, "Strategies: Dealing with Young Riders where aspects such as optimizing driver's skill retention is provided. McCalister's training module is recognized nationally. He states, "A lot of what we do is designed for brief contact. It's not a punitive system."

Safety Equipment

If affordable, buses should be equipped with two way radios, so that drivers can contact police in case of a crises. Another controversial piece of safety equipment is video cameras.

A growing number of school districts have reported success in using onboard video cameras to detect and document misbehavior. The cameras are useful in a number of ways, but are not to be considered replacements for teaching children self-discipline and social skills. Says Tom Winn, Lake county's transportation director, "Using video surveillance helps get students into the habit of behaving." But they are not a replacement for shaping behavior.

Cameras are mounted toward the front of the bus and are housed in a black box with a continuously blinking light. They cost approximately \$1,000 a piece. To save money, most school districts buy only a few cameras but install black boxes in *all* the buses and rotate the cameras around. Students are unable to detect, on any particular day, if a camera is in the box or not. If a bus is experiencing discipline problems, a camera can be placed on that bus for surveillance.

Blinking boxes serve as a deterrent to unruly behavior and vandalism. When parents need convincing of their child's misbehavior, a tape of the incident can verify this. However, a passage from the new standards for video surveillance, developed by the School Transportation Section of the National Safety Council reminds us that, "The video camera on a school bus should be used only as an aid to monitor student and driver behavior. It should not replace the discipline policy, the authority of the driver, or the responsibility of the school officials.",

Video-surveillance cameras have drawbacks as well. Someone must log videotapes, change videotapes, and view them on a daily basis. And not all incidents can be detected with a camera. Privacy issues continue to arise and fears linger that bus cameras will lead to cameras in the rest rooms, cafeterias, and hallways. This fear is countered by the argument that when there is a disruption in a school building, the teacher isn't driving 50 mph down the highway.

Video-surveillance cameras are considered security equipment and should be funded with Safe Schools dollars, instead of Safe and Drug-Free Schools dollars.

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This is one of many publications available through the Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, Florida Department of Education, designed to assist school districts, state agencies which support educational programs, and parents in the provision of special programs. For additional information on this publication, or for a list of available publications, contact the Clearinghouse Information Center, Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, Division of Public Schools and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, Room 622, Turlington Building, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400.

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The Department of Education, through the Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, funds the Florida Institute of Education's (FIE's) Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project. FIE is an institute of the University of North Florida. The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project offers technical assistance and support in the development and implementation of drug use and violence prevention strategies, including crisis management plans. For information about assessing crisis management needs, refining an existing crisis management plan, or developing a new crisis management plan, contact the FIE/SDFS Project as indicated below.

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