

## The Longest Ride! Are Bus Associates Needed on Special Needs School Buses?



Lets start with two questions. Are bus associates (para's) needed on special needs school buses in your district? Does your district require them or do you rely on the recommendation from the IEP team on a case-by-case basis?

Now that you have answered those two questions, I believe that we can all agree that when students are placed in our care, school transportation staff work very hard to keep children safe. To do that, would having an additional adult riding the special needs school bus route help ensure riders safety?

Before we answer that question it might be a good suggestion for all school bus drivers, transportation directors, superintendents, and special needs coordinators to review a very disturbing report of an incident that occurred in 2018, by the Queen City News, Charlotte North Carolina. The report pertains to a non-verbal, 4 year old student that was violently attacked repeatedly over 96 times by a 9-year old male student on a special needs school bus.

At the time of this incident, Autumn Angle rode the school bus from her home to Ruby Elementary School, which is within the Chesterfield County School District. The South Carolina district located about 65 miles southeast of Charlotte, North Carolina. The news report provides information on the attack and includes video clips from depositions of the former superintendent, and the special education director of Chesterfield County Schools.

The substitute driver said on several occasions that he did not understand why she was crying. He never saw what was happening to her during the 45 minute ride from her home-to-school, and then back home in the evening. The driver was arrested and charged with unlawful conduct with a child, and later indicted on that charge that is still pending today. In April 2019 the state of North Carolina revoked his school bus driving certificate.

The family of Autumn Angle, who was 4 years old at the time of the attack, recently settled a lawsuit with Chesterfield County Schools and the South Carolina Department of Education for \$2.2 million.

The television news aired a 30 minute segment called: "The Longest Ride" and the video from the report contains graphic scenes of violence, and shows the child's injuries. Viewer discretion is advised.

To view: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNXT7vew2dl&t=1737s>.

Medical and aggressive behavior can potentially endanger the other students, the driver, and the general driving public. Districts can have a behavior plan without an IEP, but it should not be the recommended practice. During the IEP staffing conference, the IEP team had access to extensive school records of the type of behaviors exhibited by this 9 year old student. That important behavior information should be shared with the transportation department under FERPA, which seemed like one of the breakdowns in this situation.

For available guidance you can reference the (DE) Iowa Department of Education Transportation: Transportation Issues in Special Education: Questions and Answers (Second Addition) July 24, 2015.

<https://educateiowa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2015-07-24TransportationIssuesInSpecialEducation.pdf>

In the opening paragraph it states: Transportation also includes personnel, such as bus monitors, aides, nurses, and others who may provide needed direct supervision and support during the ride to and from school.

In section 9, it says: As a general rule, the use of alternative vehicles that do not provide the students with opportunities to interact with nondisabled peers may be permissible when a student's disability prevents the child from riding safely on a regular school bus, or poses a safety threat to other students.

It is a good idea, or a best practice to have transportation personnel present during an IEP that will require specialized transportation. This keeps the individuals that are working with these students on a daily basis informed of their basic needs. During an IEP meeting when specialized transportation is deemed to be needed, the next basic question that needs to be considered is, would having an additional adult riding the special needs school bus route help ensure riders safety? After viewing the Longest Ride video the answer is, yes!