

Choosing the Right Transportation for Your Needs

by Bob West

The need for student transportation varies from one child care facility to the next. For some, daily drop-offs and pick-ups and frequent field trips may be the norm. For others, the occasional need to transport a single student may be the extent of your travels. Choosing the right type of transportation for your child care facility may seem simple but, with ever-present budget constraints and precious lives on board, this is not a decision that can be taken lightly.

Your budget and facility size, along with the number and age of your passengers, will help determine the most appropriate type of transportation. A smaller facility may need only a small multi-purpose vehicle (MPV) used for transporting fewer than 10 passengers, while a larger facility with more than 100 students may require a 90-passenger school bus. Others fall somewhere in between.

But there is more to choosing transportation than just budget and size:

- Will your vehicle need to be equipped with car seats or specialized restraints?
- Will you be transporting children with special needs?
- Will you require cargo room for longer trips?
- What do federal and state regulations require of your facilities?

To help navigate these uncertain waters, a few transportation options are reviewed here, along with some safety suggestions and a discussion of some federal regulations. Each child care facility will need to evaluate its specific needs on a case-by-case basis, but hopefully this information will steer you in the right direction.

Multi-Purpose Vehicles (MPV)

For smaller child care facilities, a multi-purpose vehicle (MPV) built specifically for child care facilities may be your best option. MPVs are built to carry fewer than 10 passengers safely and do not have the rollover risk of passenger vans. They are small enough to allow easier maneuverability, but are built to meet the same rigorous safety and performance standards as full-sized school buses.

MPVs are a popular choice in many states, including California and Pennsylvania, where state regulations do not mandate that MPV drivers have a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). Of

course, all drivers should have a valid driver's license and a good driving record, even when specialized licensing is not required. On the other hand, all riders in an MPV must be restrained by lap and shoulder seatbelts, and in a car seat or booster seat, based on the passenger's age, weight, and developmental level. Be aware that regulations on restraints and licensing vary by state, so check your state's licensing and restraint regulations. To review state child restraint requirements, visit <http://www.ihs.org/laws/SafetyBeltUse.aspx>.

Buses

For transporting more than 10 passengers at a time, a school bus or multi-function school activity bus (MFSAB) is the best option. MFSABs come in all sizes, from small buses that carry 10-20 passengers, to large buses that can carry up to 90 passengers. MFSABs meet the same Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) as school buses, but they are not allowed to have stop arms or traffic control lights and, in most states, do not have to be that familiar school bus yellow color.

School buses are just that: the bright yellow buses typically associated with transporting school-aged children. School buses are required to have a number of safety measures built in, such as flashing warning lights and a stop arm. Because of

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these safety requirements, a school bus's lights and safety equipment must be in full-operating condition at all times and must be taken out of service until any problems are fixed. If you plan to operate a traditional school bus, make sure you fully understand the requirements for operating the bus and what conditions require that it be taken out of service.

Both school buses and MFSABs are built with the same interior and exterior construction and with all of the same safety standards. According to three nationally recognized authorities — the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the National Safety Council — school buses and multi-function school activity buses are the safest form of surface transportation because they are held to higher safety standards than other similarly-sized forms of transportation.

All buses, both big and small, are built with sturdy steel cages to withstand a rollover better than other vehicles. Seating is designed to compartmentalize passengers in the event of an accident, and seat backs are engineered to absorb impact. All buses are required to have multiple emergency exits and rugged body construction for side impact protection. Seat belts, three-point safety belts, and five-point harnesses are available as options with regular bench-style seating.

In most states, proper child restraints and car seats are required in school buses or MFSABs. Seats with ISO/latch systems (similar to those in motor vehicles), that secure rear-facing and front-facing car seats and booster seats, are available as an option. Again, the use of such car seats or restraints is regulated at the state level and may vary from state-to-state.

In terms of storage and special allowances, there typically are more options for transporting children with special

needs and for specialized storage needs in an MFSAB or a school bus. When purchasing a bus, be sure to discuss these needs with your dealer. Rows of seats can be taken out, and specialized storage compartments or harnesses can be installed to ensure safe and secure storage during travel. Many buses also come equipped with convenient features, like alarms that alert drivers if a child is left on the bus.

State law may require school bus equipment not specified by National Highway Traffic Safety Administration regulations. Each state regulates how school buses and child care buses are to be used and which agencies are responsible for developing and enforcing school bus regulations. In some states, requirements for transporting public school children differ from requirements for transporting children attending private schools and non-school organizations (e.g., Head Start programs and child care agencies). Drivers of both school buses and MFSABs also must have a CDL. Check with your local agencies to ensure you understand all guidelines for your area. For further information about state school bus regulations, contact the applicable state director of Pupil Transportation. A list of State Directors is available at www.nascdpts.org or by calling (800) 585-0340.

Other Considerations

Whatever type of transportation you choose for your child care facility, there are several factors to keep in mind. First, all vehicles should be safe, sanitary, and in good working order. Second, make sure you always have the correct insurance and the appropriate amount of coverage for your transportation needs.

Terms You Should Know When Researching Group Transportation Options

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

(NHTSA): This division of the Federal Department of Transportation regulates and sets standards that must be met by manufacturers of various types of passenger vehicles. Go to www.nhtsa.gov for more information.

Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS):

This refers to specific standards that a certain class of vehicle must meet to comply with NHTSA regulations.

Third, make sure that you can easily control the temperature of any vehicle you choose. Children tend to overheat five times faster than adults, so proper ventilation and air conditioning are important.

Ultimately, safe, reliable, and comfortable transportation is your primary goal. So define your transportation needs, align them with state and federal recommendations and regulations, and make the right transportation decision for your company and for the children you transport.

