

How small-capacity vehicles complement the bus



As school districts across the country grapple with the challenge of providing safe, reliable transportation to all of their students, many are exploring alternative strategies to optimize their resources. While the iconic yellow school bus remains the primary mode of transportation for most students, small-capacity vehicles can offer a more flexible and cost-effective solution.

How does it work?

Alternative student transportation (any transportation aside from the school bus) supplements a school district's existing program by taking on smaller routes and those with students who have unique transportation needs. Utilizing smaller vehicles for these routes can save the school district money and their students and students' families time, while not compromising on safety and still allowing the district to transport general education students in the most efficient way possible.

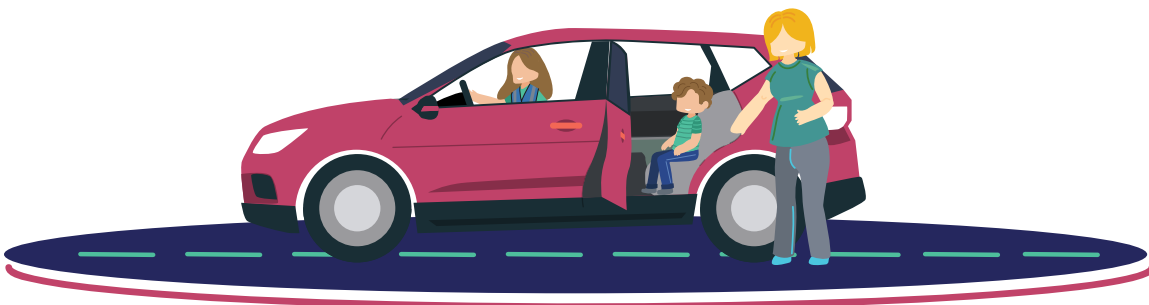
Are small-capacity vehicles safe for students?

Yes, alternative student transportation in efficient vehicles is safe when proper precautions are met. It is comparable to a parent or guardian transporting their child to and from school. Traditional student transportation (on the bus) is regulated by both federal and state laws. Alternative student transportation, however, is regulated at the state level and some states don't yet have codified regulations. This can leave many districts and parents concerned about the safety of the children being transported by alternative means.

A school district can ensure student safety, whether it's regulated at the state level or not by building upon state regulations or creating their own requirements. For example, some states require drivers to get a pre-employment drug test, but a school district may consider adding post-accident, reasonable suspicion, and random drug testing. If the state doesn't have any rules or regulations surrounding alternative student transportation, it's the district's responsibility to ensure and verify that any vendor they utilize meets the district's expectations and industry standards.

The best way to keep students as safe as possible is to mirror (when applicable) the same requirements expected of a school bus and school bus driver. While a requirement for behind-the-wheel (of a bus) training is not relevant, standards regarding working lights, windshield wipers, and dashboard lights are. Pre-trip inspections can reflect many of the same options as the bus, and driver background checks and drug testing can too.

An imperative component of safety is transparency. This is an area where alternative transportation may surpass the school bus. Supplemental transportation companies may provide GPS tracking to districts and parents, route optimization, and trip updates at the student level (not just the vehicle or bus level). The student's driver will also have access to encrypted information pertaining to the student's unique needs during the trip. This can make the experience more personalized, while also providing a sense of familiarity and trust.



Which students benefit from small-capacity vehicle transportation?

1 Students with special needs

Alternative transportation options are customizable to meet the specific needs of students with special needs. For instance, vehicles can be equipped with sensory features to create a calming environment for students with autism. Many individualized education plans (IEPs) dictate that students with specific processing disorders ride alone to and from school. A sedan or SUV may be a better option for these kids.

Many children need access to wheelchair accessible vehicles or those that can accommodate car seats, boosters, or safety vests. Alternative solutions provide students with special needs with a more accessible and personal transportation experience, allowing them to arrive at school ready to learn.

2 Students experiencing homelessness

Students covered by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act are frequently in transition, which can be difficult for district staff to keep up with. Also, adding and removing stops to existing bus routes can make the trip longer and delay pick-up times for students already traveling on that route. The inconsistency can cause confusion for families and students.

Alternatives provide flexible options that can be adjusted as the student moves from one location to another. Regular routes with consistent drivers can create a predictable routine for students, helping them feel more grounded and secure. Transportation that accommodates changes in a student's living situation or schedule ensures their attendance at school even if they move frequently or have irregular schedules. Keeping these students in school, on a more constant basis, increases their chances of graduating with their peers.

3 Early childhood education students

In many areas across the country, education is becoming available for students who are not yet ready for kindergarten or preschool. Depending on the state, seat belts or car seats may not be required on school buses, even for children younger than five, the typical age of a kindergartener. Districts may require that students ride in car seats, but they may not have a bus equipped to utilize them. Small-capacity vehicles are a good option for small children who should travel in a car seat.



4 Medically fragile students

Medically fragile students who may find it challenging to ride on a school bus may benefit from vehicles equipped with features to accommodate mobility impairments or other needs such as oxygen securement. Transporting students in specialized vehicles can give district staff and families peace of mind and better accommodate their unique needs.

5 Out-of-district and rural students

Some school districts have students that are transported to specialty schools, like a school for the deaf or blind, or another school 30 minutes or so down the road. These types of trips can be expensive. Utilizing an efficient, small capacity vehicle for one or two students traveling out-of-district allows the district to only pay for the trip and not for the other miles traveled in each direction.

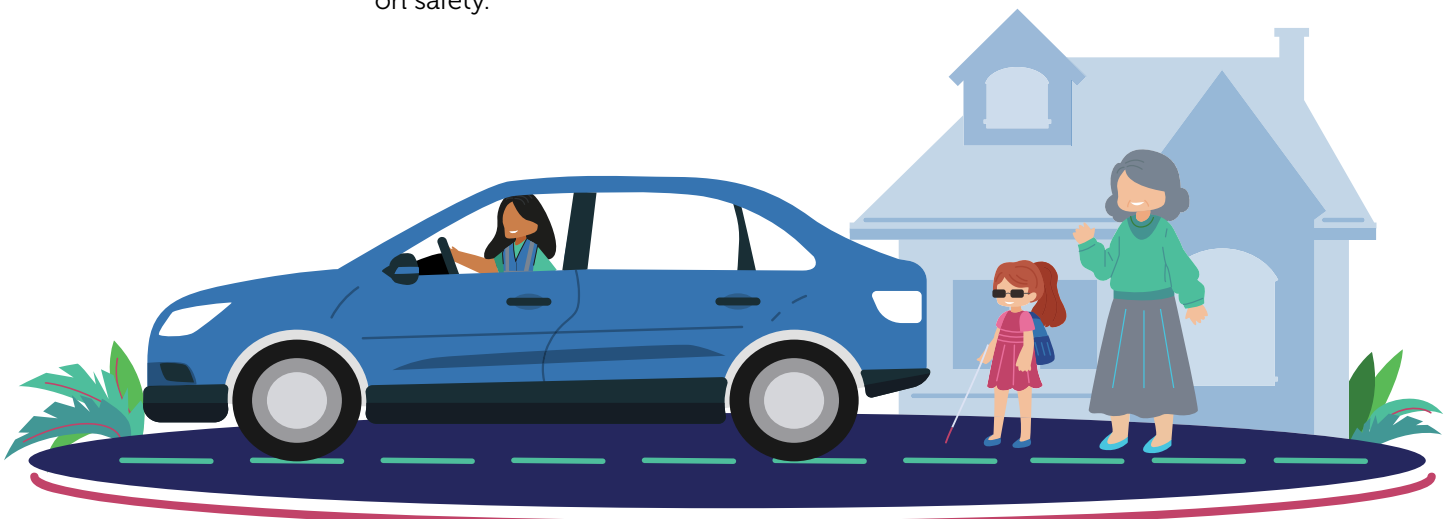
Students in remote areas can be a challenge to transport utilizing a bus. Children who live in mountainous areas, on long curvy roads, or on farms at the end of a dirt road can be difficult to reach with a bus. Small-capacity vehicles can more easily chain their tires, avoid large holes washed out by rain, and navigate tight spaces where there is little room for turning around. This makes alternative transportation ideal for districts who have students living in these types of areas.

6 Students attending specialty programs

Many districts offer special after-school programs for students. Adult transition or after-school care programs are a couple of examples of only a few students being transported to locations specific to them and their needs. These types of trips are more efficiently served utilizing smaller vehicles.

7 Extended school year (ESY or "summer school")

It's common for not all students to attend classes during the extended school year. Smaller enrollment numbers usually mean smaller routes. Often these smaller routes are more efficiently served in smaller vehicles. Utilizing alternative transportation, and paying just for the trips, can save districts a lot of money while not compromising on safety.





How can I incorporate small-capacity vehicles into my transportation program?

Some school districts choose to keep alternative student transportation in-house, but many districts choose to outsource it instead.

In-house options are ideal for districts who can:

- Purchase vehicles
- Hire drivers
- Pay for additional overhead to satisfy driver benefits and vehicle maintenance
- Develop their own processes and procedures
- Invest in routing, monitoring, and tracking technology
- Maintain schedules, driver benefits, routing, dispatch, etc.
- Coordinate communication with parents and providers

Outsourcing alternative supplemental transportation is a solution for districts who:

- Need scalable or seasonal transportation as students' needs ebb and flow
- Have budgetary concerns with fulfilling alternative transportation in-house
- Want to provide parents with trip transparency
- Suffer from bus driver shortages
- Lack enough staff for routing, optimization, or dispatch

How do I partner with an alternative transportation provider?

The process to partner with an alternative transportation provider can be similar to outsourcing traditional bus transportation. It often starts with an RFP. In many cases, districts that are new to alternative transportation will attempt to use a traditional transportation RFP that doesn't allow for alternative options. School districts may need to create a new RFP specific to alternative options. While it's possible to have both types of transportation live within the same RFP, many districts find it easier to evaluate the bidders when the RFPs are split. It's really a district preference.

Pro tip: There are many school districts that already utilize alternative student transportation. It's possible that a neighboring district or another in your state has an RFP you can utilize.

There are purchasing co-ops that have contracts with alternative student transportation providers. Check with your purchasing department to see if your district has a cooperative agreement with one of these types of purchasing agencies. Be sure to review the RFP and awarded contract to verify that they meet your district's requirements. If so, you may be able to skip the RFP process and begin working with a supplemental provider right away.

What should my district consider when selecting an alternative transportation partner?

Not all transportation providers are created equal. Many excel at customer service or safety while others offer less expensive solutions. It's important to get a sense of the following to find the best partner for your district:

- Safety requirements for drivers
- Safety standards for vehicles
- Scalability
- Pricing model
- Contractor requirements (like insurance and technology)





What should the driver requirements be?

As mentioned above, states vary when it comes to regulating alternative student transportation. At a minimum, drivers should be subject to:

- Federal, state, and local background checks
- Enrollment in a drug and alcohol consortium for pre-employment, post-accident, reasonable suspicion, and random drug testing
- County, state, and national criminal record checks
- Driver education courses, including education on working with students with disabilities
- National sex offender registration check
- Proof of insurance

If outsourcing supplemental transportation, these standards can act as a guide for both creating the RFP and evaluating bid submissions. Districts can also add their own requirements to find the best partner to fit their students' needs.

What should the vehicle requirements be?

Vehicle requirements should mirror those of the state's bus requirements, as applicable to smaller vehicles. Inspections, first aid kits, and safety belt cutters, should be included; but instead of stop-arms, a district could require that child locks be engaged during all trips. Instead of post-trip walk-throughs, a district may require digital confirmation that a child has been dropped off. In lieu of rear-evacuation drills, training on applicable emergency procedures should be included.

How does pricing work?

Pricing models vary across alternative transportation providers, but most bill per trip rather than per student. In those cases, it's important to also require route optimization so the district isn't paying for trips that could be combined.

Some of the line items districts may see in an alternative bid include:

- **Trip fee:** this is the base cost of each trip and usually includes a certain number of miles
- **Additional miles:** price per mile over the miles included in the trip fee
- **Cancellation fee:** most providers will require a minimum number of hours to cancel a trip to not incur any costs. Depending on the area, that may range from 2-24 hours.

If a student needs additional equipment, services, or accommodations, the cost may be accounted for per student rather than per trip. These solutions often call for advanced planning, scheduling, and routing on the part of the provider and might include:

- **Wheelchairs:** Trips that require wheelchairs should include routing. If a provider is not offering scheduling or routing, they may not be able to accommodate students in wheelchairs. Drivers should be trained on proper wheelchair securement.
- **Car seat and safety vests:** Car seats also require scheduling and routing. Drivers should also be trained on how to properly install the car seat or safety vest within their vehicle.
- **Monitors:** Pricing for monitors may vary based on whether the monitor is provided by the district or the transportation provider.
 - **Monitors provided by the district:** Ideally, the partner you're vetting will charge per trip and only the regular trip fees will apply. If they're charging per student, there may be a charge for a district-provided monitor.
 - **Monitors provided by the transportation provider:** If the monitor is provided by the provider, it's not uncommon to see an hourly fee in addition to extra mileage fees to transport the monitor after the student is dropped off.
- **Wait time:** The district and provider will work together to determine an appropriate amount of time for a driver to wait for a student. For ride-alone students, the timeframe could be up to five minutes without the student arriving late to school. For students who share routes, two minutes per student can add up quickly. Wait time fees may also be considered when determining how long a driver should wait.

If flexibility is important to you, ask potential alternative student transportation providers if they include a contract minimum. Most do not and this allows for them to remain adaptable, responsive, and efficient for districts who would rather not pay for unused trips.

Can alternative transportation scale to meet my school district's needs?

One of the best things about utilizing alternative student transportation is that it can be on an as-needed basis, or it can be a valuable piece of your regular program. Districts utilize supplemental vehicles for a variety of purposes, and as those needs change, the routes and utilization change too.

Conclusion

Small-capacity vehicles are an efficient and cost-effective solution that complements traditional school bus transportation. Utilizing alternative student transportation enables school districts to provide equal access to education to all of their students and presents a personalized transportation experience to their most vulnerable student populations. Good state regulations can help ensure that alternative transportation options are safe. If state regulations are lacking, it's up to school districts to hold their providers accountable to the district's safety requirements. The ability to adhere to state and district requirements, while providing a flexible and sustainable option, allows districts to supplement their existing transportation program with a solution that works for everyone.

