



**By Pete Meslin**

# Special Education Bus Service: Towards a Less-Restrictive Environment

For students with special needs all too often transportation options are extremely limited. If transportation is required as a related service to access the educational program the student almost always receives curb-to-curb (or curbside) bus service. Very few IEP teams request “regular” bus service and receive service on the “regular ed” bus at a neighborhood bus stop. This “all or nothing” pattern with regard to student transportation independence is both harmful to student development and contrary to the intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA stipulates all educational services for students with disabilities be provided in the least restrictive environment. Transportation, as a related service, falls under this mandate. However, for most districts there are no transportation options other than the most restrictive service. If a student has special needs and requires bus service (s)he will have to ride the “small bus,” which is often the brunt of jokes. They make jokes about the “small bus,” but if your only option is to have a bus stop in front of your home, it probably isn’t a laughing matter.

Compounding this vehicle issue are other factors that separate special ed bus service. For example, the special ed buses may load and unload in separate zones. In fact, contrary to IDEA’s intent, students with special needs may actually attend school at different times than their non-disabled peers. We may not be able to control all of the aspects of a student’s educational service, but certainly we as transporters can take steps to teach students the independence skills necessary to receive other than curbside bus service.

Special educators regularly adapt service levels based upon student skills and abilities. We can provide similar flexibility by creating bus stops which aren’t in front of the home but provide transitional opportunities for the student to safely learn transportation-related skills. Instead of waiting for students to learn these life skills in adult transition programs, they can learn and practice these skills as soon as they’re ready. The skills and abilities vary widely, and we can match these with levels of service that are on a continuum. The transitional bus stop provides access to the related service at a level the student is ready for. This type of bus stop, which can range anywhere from curbside to the neighborhood stop, can be adapted to the student’s abilities and evolve as the student is ready to progress.

We say all students are required to be ready for the bus when it arrives; however, most districts do not require students to wait at the stop if they have special needs. By moving the bus away from the front door, even one house away, the student can learn and practice the essential skill of waiting for the bus. Several other skills are also necessary to attain this level of independence. For example, this student might have to learn to get to the stop independently. Perhaps the parent can still observe from a window. Initially, parental support is still available but not as immediate as when the stop is directly in front of the house.

This transitional stop is a change for the parent as well. The parent becomes more and more of a coach with regard to transportation-related skills rather than a provider. While the student is learning and practicing the new skills, the parent is learning how to support and reinforce those skills. This adjustment from doing to supporting is frequently more difficult for the parent than the student. However, as parents of every flavor and species have done for eons, parents of some students with disabilities must learn to free their child to grow. We, as educators, need to recognize the emotions that will surface for some parents. We need to be even more supportive during this separation process. Safety needs to be assured at every step. The documentation for the skills which have been learned needs to be even more transparent and available. That is, we need to prove to the parent that the student is ready for the next level of independence.

## CAUTION

Removing the must-be-met requirement while leaving the bus stop at the curb in front of the house will often be proposed as the next step towards independence. Transporters should avoid this temptation. Although allowing the student to navigate from the bus door to the house door without assistance is indeed a skill, it is not necessarily the next appropriate step. A more logical and safer sequence is:

- Curbside stop while being met
- Transitional stop while being met
- Transitional stop independently

Removing the requirement to meet, while continuing to provide curbside service, frequently stalls the transition process. This type of service is definitely more convenient for most parents. They don't have to leave the house to assure bus service, but the student can still stay in the house until the bus arrives. The bus often ends up waiting for the student instead of the student waiting for the bus.

In these circumstances many parents refuse to pursue true independence or skills building for their children. On the other hand, if they have to meet their child at a transitional stop and can progress to where they don't have to meet them, they frequently are supportive of the next step in independence.

## GAINING MOMENTUM

Many parents, once they have experienced success at a transitional stop, are anxious to teach more transportation independence. At that point, if the student's skills are developed, the transitional stop can be moved further away. Eventually many students can receive service as their non-disabled peers do. For a percentage of students transportation will no longer be a related service.

If transportation departments can offer a service continuum to match various levels of student skills, we can become more integrated with student education. In the process, we can do more for our students and more for our budgets. ■

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