

HCPSS Specialized Transportation Guide

For Students, Families, Staff, and Transportation Providers

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1. Purpose, Mission & Overview of Services

The purpose of this handbook is to provide parents/guardians, caregivers, school staff members, and HCPSS transportation providers with essential information about specialized transportation for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan. It outlines responsibilities, addresses common questions, and explains policies and procedures related to transportation services. Documenting this information provides a level of transparency and shared accountability for all involved in supporting students receiving specialized transportation. While this booklet covers key elements of specialized transportation, additional details may be required for specific situations. For further inquiries, please contact the Office of Student Transportation (OST).

Mission Statement

The mission of the Howard County Public School System's Office of Student Transportation (OST) is to provide safe, reliable, and efficient transportation services to eligible students, ensuring accessibility and equity for all. Transportation provides students with access to education, critical services, and plays a vital role in supporting students' success, including children with disabilities and students living in temporary housing.

Overview of Services

The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) operates an extensive transportation network comprising over 550 contracted school vehicles that transport more than 42,000 students daily. Of these, approximately 2,500 students receive specialized transportation services as a related service under their IEP or 504 plan. Services are provided to more than 100 public and non-public schools, supporting both local and regional accessibility.

2. Specialized Transportation Services & Eligibility

Services are determined by the IEP or 504 team through an IEP or 504 meeting. Services are delivered by an HCPSS transportation provider with staff trained in accordance with COMAR 13A.06.07, and supported through shared responsibility among families, schools, contractors, and OST. When not identified as a related service, transportation will be provided in the same way as it is provided for general education students. Questions about eligibility for student transportation must be directed to staff at each child's school.

Students Who Qualify for Specialized Transportation:

- **Enhanced Locations:** Receive enhanced pick-up and drop-off locations, which could include 'curb-to-curb' services. In some cases, curb-to-curb may not be feasible due to safety concerns and will be adjusted to the closest curb location.
- **Specialized Equipment:** Access to specialized equipment, such as adapted buses, safety vests, car seats, and wheelchair lifts, as stated in the IEP or 504 plan.
- **Vehicle Team Training:** Benefit from specialized training for vehicle teams, tailored to the child's unique needs as outlined in the IEP or 504 Plan.
- **Verified Drop-Off:** Are dropped off with verification to an authorized responsible individual.
- **Evacuation Plans:** Have individualized evacuation plans for emergencies based on their IEP or 504 plan.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

A safe, reliable, efficient, and on-time student transportation system depends on a strong partnership between parents, guardians, schools, and the OST team.

HCPSS CIVILITY POLICY 1000

In accordance with HCPSS Civility Policy 1000, interactions between families, students, drivers, aides, and other staff should be based on respect, kindness, and calm communication.

Parents and Guardians

- Keep all student information accurate and updated in the Student Information System.
- Inform the school about any changes in address or phone number. For changes requiring a new pick-up and/or drop-off location, allow a minimum of 10 working days for routing adjustments.
- Ensure student is ready for the school vehicle at least 5 minutes before the scheduled arrival time. Drivers are not required to wait for late students, as delays impact safety and schedules.
- Ensure that an authorized responsible person is present at the drop-off location to receive student at the end of the day. If an authorized person is not available to receive the student, the driver will return the student to the school and be released to responsible school personnel. If this occurs repeatedly, transportation services may be suspended pending a conference with the parent/guardian.
- Communicate with the vehicle team, providing them with updates when the student is absent or sick.
- Responsible for the safety of students at designated pick-up and drop-off and ensuring an authorized adult meets the vehicle at drop-off.

Students

The HCPSS Student Code of Conduct and the Board of Education's Civility Policy (1000) set expectations for safe, respectful behavior for all students, including while riding school vehicles and at designated pick-up/drop-off locations.

- Arrive at the designated pick-up location at least 5 minutes before the scheduled arrival time.
- Wait safely, away from the roadway.
- Be cautious of traffic when entering and exiting the school vehicle.
- Follow all instructions given by the School Vehicle Team.
- Board the school vehicle in an orderly manner and take a seat immediately.
 - Stay seated at ALL times, especially when the school vehicle is moving.
 - Maintain quiet and orderly behavior and be courteous to the School Vehicle Team and fellow students.
 - Keep the center aisle clear at all times.
- Be ready to board and exit the school vehicle on time at pick-up/drop-off.
- Student behavior that impacts the safe operation of a vehicle may require a temporary pause or suspension of services until an emergency meeting is held to review behavioral supports or additional safety equipment.

Transportation Providers and Vehicle Teams

- All school vehicle drivers and attendants must meet the training requirements of COMAR 13A.06.07 prior to transporting students, and complete annual in-service training.
- Build relationships with parents/guardians and communicate schedule impacts.
- Ensure timely completion of the route.
- Operate the school vehicle safely and be prepared to administer first aid in emergencies.
- Develop and maintain a passenger evacuation plan for emergencies.
- Position the attendant to meet the specific needs of the students on board.
- Assist students with boarding and exiting the school vehicle as required.

- Treat students, parents/guardians, and colleagues with respect, kindness, and calmness.
- Uphold confidentiality of all students assigned to the route.
- Report unsafe behaviors and submit a School Vehicle Conduct or Incident Report to school administration.

School Responsibilities

- Ensure all required transportation documentation is completed and finalized in Tienet Special Programs System and the HCPSS Student Information System.
- Collaborate with the Office of Student Transportation regarding IEP meetings, discussing special equipment or any other special arrangements.
- Provide any relevant details and information about students to the school vehicle staff.
- Ensure students are prepared for dismissal and support the boarding process as necessary.
- Notify parents/guardians of schedule changes impacting transportation in a timely fashion.
- Inform the vehicle team or contractor about extended student absences or alternative transportation plans.
- Respond to School Vehicle Conduct Reports and provide feedback to the vehicle team.
- Review to ensure specialized transportation requirements are met to require a specialized vehicle. If no equipment or attendant is needed, work with your transportation area manager to determine if accommodation can be provided on a general education bus.

Division of Special Education Responsibilities

- Schedule an IEP meeting to determine if specialized transportation is required.
- Communicate transportation timelines and route timing challenges, if applicable.
- Update transportation information annually with input from IEP teams. Include required transportation supports such as equipment, medical, and behavioral, on the Transportation Request Form (TRF).
- Consult with Health Services on health concerns related to transportation.
- Train the school vehicle team on best practices for fostering relationships with students.

Division of Special Education (Non-Public Services Responsibilities)

- Check vehicle capacity and timeline for routing and communicating to families.
- Ensure families are aware of potential extended route times.

Office of Student Transportation (OST) Responsibilities

- Implement a transportation plan within 10 school days of receiving the Transportation Request Form (TRF). Provide an update during those 10 days if there may be challenges with setting up service.
- Identify pick-up and drop-off times and locations based on accessibility and student needs.
- Supply safety equipment, such as vests, car seats, and booster seats in accordance with the IEP or 504 plan.
- Respond to concerns raised by parents/guardians, contractors, or school staff.
- Provide training and screening for the school vehicle team.
- Oversee and enforce all OST policies, regulations, and transportation procedures.
- Inspect vehicles regularly to ensure compliance with state requirements and Howard County specifications for safety equipment.
- Ensure that students arrive at school prior to school starting.

4. Procedural Items

Pick-Up and Drop-Off Times

- Assigned pick-up and drop-off times at the start of the school year are based on best estimates. Times may change during the school year due to changes in routes and real time experience based on traffic and other factors.
- Routes will not be modified to accommodate childcare arrangements or family convenience.
- HCPSS vehicles arrive within 15-20 mins of the school start time. Some specialized vehicles may arrive closer to the school's start time due to the length of the route, number of students, and additional time needed to support students boarding the bus.

Designated Drop-Off Location - Authorized Individual

Students may only be discharged at their designated drop-off location or school. If NO authorized individual is present at the designated drop-off location:

- The driver will return the student to the school and leave them with responsible school personnel. If school personnel are not available, OST will work with law enforcement to ensure student safety.
- Repeated instances may lead to temporary pause in transportation services pending a parent or guardian conference.

Private Driveways, Private Roads, and Parking Lots

- School vehicles do not enter private driveways and private roads for transportation purposes. OST will assign a safe pick-up/drop-off location near the student's residence on a county or state owned location.
- In cases where condominium/apartment management denies access to parking lots, OST will assign a safe pick-up/drop-off location near the student's residence.

Loading/Unloading at Pick-Up/Drop-Off Locations

- Vehicle teams are responsible for ensuring the safe loading and unloading of students.
- The responsibility of the vehicle team begins when the student enters the vehicle. Parents/Guardians may only enter the vehicle if authorized by OST.
- Students should not bring food or drinks for consumption on the school vehicle.
- A student accessing specialized transportation must have an authorized person at the stop for pick-up and drop-off.
- Vehicle teams cannot make a decision to allow a student to deboard without an authorized person present.
- It is the parent/guardian's responsibility to ensure student safety at the designated bus stop.

Procedural Safeguards for Loading/Unloading (Manual & Power) Wheelchairs

Phase / Step	Procedural Safeguards & Standards
Arrival & Pick-Up	Have your child ready and at the bus stop 5 minutes before pick-up. Only authorized adults may receive your child at drop-off.
Boarding the Bus	Students must use the wheelchair lift—never carry up/down steps. Motorized chairs may self-mobilize only if cleared by the IEP team. Wheelchairs must be powered off and brakes engaged while on the lift.
During the Ride	Students face away from the bus on the lift. Roll stops and seat belts secure students safely. Lift attendants and drivers are trained and communicate throughout the process.
Drop-Off	Students are safely unloaded following the same secure process. Staff release students only to authorized adults unless the IEP specifies otherwise. Provide instructions for specialized equipment if needed.
At the School	Contractor personnel must manage loading, unloading, and securing students using wheelchairs. School personnel assist ambulatory students with restraints. The driver holds final responsibility for inspecting restraints. Wheelchairs must meet transport safety requirements (brakes, locks, belts).

Carrying Students On and Off the School Vehicle

Students shall not be carried up or down school vehicle steps. When a student is unable to safely navigate the steps, the school team shall consult with the Office of Student Transportation (OST) and related service providers (including PT, OT, and Health Services) to determine appropriate alternative solutions.

Transporting Wheelchairs Without Students

- Vehicle teams are prohibited from transporting wheelchairs without their assigned student, except in emergencies (e.g., the student is transported to a hospital during the school day, leaving the wheelchair at school).
- There are exceptions if the wheelchair or stroller is owned by HCPSS.

5. Student Behavior & Safety Procedures

GOVERNING HCPSS POLICIES

Policy 5200 – Student Transportation

Policy 9200 – Student Discipline

- Parents/guardians, students, and vehicle teams are encouraged to build positive relationships through simple gestures like learning each other's names and exchanging greetings on each trip.
- Schools will incorporate their Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) programs into transportation. Students may earn behavioral incentives while being transported to and from school, consistent with school programs.
- Vehicle teams are responsible for ensuring students behave safely and responsibly and must report any behavior that interferes with safe transportation.
- Vehicle teams will use the School Vehicle Conduct Report to document inappropriate behavior and refer incidents to school administrators. Administrators will follow the HCPSS Student Code of Conduct for any discipline procedures.

Dangerous Behaviors and Medical Emergencies

- Unsafe behavior will be documented on the School Vehicle Incident Report and submitted to the school administration. Copies of the report and the school's response will be provided to parents/guardians, the vehicle team, and OST.
- Bullying incidents will be reported immediately to school administration, as outlined in Policy 9460.
- For behaviors posing imminent danger to self or others, the vehicle team will notify the school and OST. In extreme cases, the School Vehicle Team will call 911.
- In an emergency situation, the driver must safely pull the vehicle over at the nearest appropriate location, secure the vehicle, assess the situation, and immediately call 911 while ensuring the safety of all students on board.

Behavior Issues at Dismissal Time

- School staff will assist in de-escalating the student for up to 5 minutes before boarding the school vehicle.
- If a student is not prepared and ready to safely board the school vehicle up to 15 minutes after dismissal, transportation home will be the parent's responsibility.
- School vehicles cannot stay an extended period of time beyond their scheduled departure time.
- If the student cannot be de-escalated, transportation may not be provided, and the student will remain at school with school personnel. Parents/Guardians will be notified immediately and asked to pick up their child.
- A student's transportation may be paused or suspended if the student's behavior poses a threat to other students, the vehicle team, or to the safe operation of the vehicle. An IEP or 504 meeting may be held to determine the need for safety devices, which will be documented and shared with OST.
- If the school vehicle leaves the campus and the student is exhibiting unsafe behavior, the student may be returned to the school. Parents/Guardians will be notified immediately and asked to pick up their child.

6. Discontinuation of Services & Parent Mileage Reimbursement

Discontinuation of Transportation Services

Transportation services may be withdrawn if a student repeatedly exhibits disruptive behavior, poses a safety threat, or refuses to follow the directions of the School Vehicle Team. In such cases, the Division of Special Education will be informed; a parent meeting or an IEP or 504 meeting, if necessary, will be convened to address transportation services. The meeting should include all relevant parties: transportation, special education, parent/guardian, and any relevant school staff. The Office of Student Transportation (OST) regularly monitors bus ridership to support safe and efficient transportation services. If a student does not consistently ride the bus and the school or OST is not notified, the student may be withdrawn from the transportation services. Families may request reinstatement of transportation services as needed.

Parent Reimbursement

Reimbursement to parents for transporting a student may occur when the arrangement is approved by the school system and provided in accordance with applicable provisions of the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) governing pupil transportation. The school system remains responsible for providing transportation services, and parents are not required to transport their child as a condition of receiving educational services. Parent reimbursement may be authorized as an approved alternative transportation arrangement.

7. Safety Devices & Equipment

Only safety devices that meet all applicable safety standards and COMAR regulations shall be permitted for use. Specialized equipment should be used in accordance with manufacturer's written instructions and be in working condition to provide a safe ride. HCPSS will provide the initial safety vest for the student whose IEP includes the requirement. If the vest is lost or misplaced, it becomes the responsibility of the parent or guardian to replace it. If required safety equipment is documented in the student's IEP, transportation services cannot be provided without that equipment in place.

Types of Safety Seats & Restraints

Safety Restraint Type	Target Criteria & Description
Rear-Facing Infant Seats	For infants under 20 lbs.
Forward-Facing Seats	For toddlers 20–40 lbs. and 26–40 inches tall.
Booster Seats	For children 40–60 lbs.
Integrated Car Seats	Built directly into the school vehicle seat; dependent on weight/height.
Star Seats	Utilized if the school vehicle is not equipped with an integrated car seat.
Seat Belts	Lap or over-the-shoulder belts for older children.

Safety Vests Guidelines

- If a safety vest is required, it must be documented in the student's IEP on the LRE page.
- A TRF needs to be completed or updated to include this piece of equipment.
- The safety vests include a back zipper and straps that secure the student to the school vehicle seat.
- Students will board the vehicle with the safety vest on.

8. Medical, Evacuation & Travel Training

Bowel and Bladder Accidents

- Vehicle teams are not permitted to transport students who arrive for boarding in soiled clothing due to an accident. In such situations, the team may wait a reasonable amount of time for the student to be changed. Once the student is appropriately cleaned and ready, transportation services can then be provided.
- If an accident occurs during transit, the team will proceed to the scheduled stop at school or home.
- The student will be escorted to staff (school) or parents/guardians (home) for attention.
- The vehicle team is responsible for cleaning and disinfecting the school vehicle using the body fluid cleanup kit.

Bus Evacuation Plan

Students with disabilities who can board and exit the school vehicle independently are required to participate in evacuation drills conducted each fall and spring. For students with physical disabilities, vehicle team must maintain a written up-to-date evacuation plan, including:

- Roles of the vehicle team during evacuation.
- Identification of students with medical conditions (e.g., brittle bones, respirators).
- Instructions on whether students should be removed from wheelchairs.
- Seating locations for all passengers.
- Locations of emergency exits and equipment (e.g., extinguisher, first aid kit).

Travel Training

Travel training provides instruction and support for students with cognitive or physical disabilities to help them understand their environment and develop the skills needed for safe and independent travel. Travel training should be considered during IEP meetings, particularly for students transitioning to postsecondary settings. Planning should include collaboration between special education staff and transportation teams to ensure a coordinated approach that supports student independence.

9. Training & Certification Requirements

All school vehicle teams (drivers and attendants) go through a vetting and certification process prior to being certified to work with students. After their initial screening and training, they continue to receive annual training and are continually monitored.

Drivers and Attendants Core Requirements:

- Must complete at least 9 hours of classroom instruction.
- Participate in a minimum of 4 hours of annual professional learning to retain certification.
- Child abuse and neglect training are included.
- Undergo comprehensive federal and state criminal background checks.
- Are enrolled in a controlled substance and alcohol testing program.

- Attend annual in-service training.
- **Drivers Only:** Participate in an additional 2 hours of training specific to their position.
- **Drivers Only:** Pass a rigorous driving test to obtain a Commercial Driver's License (CDL).
- **Drivers Only:** Have their driving records regularly reviewed and monitored for compliance.
- **Drivers Only:** Observed every two years operating a school vehicle.

Specialized Training (2 Additional Hours):

In addition to core training, Vehicle teams receive an additional 2 hours of specialized training focused on:

- De-escalation strategies for managing challenging situations on the school vehicle.
- Positive reinforcement techniques to encourage appropriate behavior.
- Relationship-building skills to establish rapport with students and avoid power struggles.

10. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q: Who determines eligibility for transportation services?

A: An Individualized Education Program (IEP) team or 504 team determines whether a student receiving services requires specialized transportation to support that student's specific education goals. IEP and 504 teams may consist of teachers, healthcare specialists, administrators, advocates, and parents/guardians and will incorporate feedback from transportation or include staff in meetings if necessary. Questions about eligibility for student specialized transportation must be directed to staff at your child's school.

Q: How are school vehicle routes developed?

A: The OST develops school vehicle routes using a combination of routing software, GPS data, and driver feedback. There are many factors that are considered when designing school vehicle routes which may include: the school's location, the number of students on the school vehicle, and traffic patterns for areas within Howard and surrounding counties.

Q: How long will my child be on the school vehicle?

A: Every effort is made to keep ride times under one hour for local and regional programs. For county-wide and out-of-county placements, rides times may exceed one hour due to distances travelled and traffic conditions. Throughout the school year, OST monitors ride times and adjusts routes as needed.

Q: Why was my child assigned to another school vehicle route?

A: Route changes occur at the beginning and during the school year for a variety of reasons, including: ongoing student enrollments, a change in a student's school placement, a change in the student's pick-up or drop-off location, or OST may change a route to ensure better ride times, more accurate pick-up times, or to improve on-time arrivals at school. All these situations can lead to a route change. During the first couple of weeks of the school year, parents/guardians may notice some variation in their child's route, such as early or late pick-ups or drop-offs. School staff will notify parents/guardians by phone about any route changes.

Q: Can I track the location of my child's school vehicle?

A: On select routes, parents/guardians have the ability to track the location of their child's school vehicle through a tracking app provided by the specific contractor. If your child is transported on one of these routes, you will receive an invitation to register your email address from the vendor. Looking forward, HCPSS seeks to outfit all school vehicles with GPS tracking capabilities.

Q: When should my child be ready for the school vehicle and where should they be waiting? Does the attendant have to knock on the door? How long does the school vehicle have to wait for my child?

A: Students should be at their designated pick-up location and ready to board the school vehicle at least 5 minutes before the scheduled arrival time. Since the School Vehicle Team is required to monitor the students on the school vehicle, the School Vehicle Attendant does not leave the school vehicle to knock on your door. Since other students and parents/guardians rely on a consistent pick-up time, School Vehicle Drivers adhere to a strict schedule. Additionally, School Vehicle Drivers will not keep the red student warning lights on for an extended period. Please note that student safety at the bus stop is parent/guardian responsibility.

Q: Who do I notify if my child is sick?

A: Call your child's vehicle team or contractor and notify the school.

Q: How do I update my contact information? What if we move or change schools during the year?

A: Call your school to update all information changes. OST cannot change information such as phone numbers and addresses unless notified by your school.

Q: Is curb service available?

A: Those students whose physical disability does not permit them to go to a designated stop may be picked up at the safest curb closest to their residence. The decision as to whether curbside pick-up and drop-off is required will be made by the IEP or 504 team in consultation with the Transportation Area Manager and indicated on the student's IEP or 504 Plan. Please be aware that in some cases, this service is not possible due to the location of the home or due to a private roadway. Situations where there would be excessive traffic congestion which blocks a curb, dead-end streets, courts, or other instances that would create a safety hazard for the student and others, will impact the pick-up/drop-off location. It's the parent/guardian's responsibility to ensure the student arrives safely at the designated bus stop.

Q: May my child be dropped off at a location different from the morning pick-up location?

A: Yes. This can be done on a consistent basis upon request, and the alternate location must be within the jurisdiction of the home school. Morning and afternoon locations can be different. Location differences that change from one day to the next or from week to week cannot be accommodated. Only one morning location and one afternoon location are acceptable and must be within the area served by the program. Please note that requests are reviewed on a case-by-case basis and not all requests can be accommodated.

Q: Can my child be discharged at home without an adult being present?

A: All specialized vehicle teams are trained and directed to ensure that students are dropped off with an authorized parent or guardian. If the student does not require adult supervision at the bus stop, please contact your child's school to discuss if your student's accommodations can be met on a general education bus.

Q: If my child is late getting to the assigned pick-up location, can the school vehicle return to pick him/her up?

A: No. Obligations to other riders and schedules prohibit school vehicles from doubling back for any student. Parents/Guardians should transport the student to school as soon as possible to take part in all scheduled classes.

Q: Who will communicate bus route changes and other transportation related information to the parents/guardians?

A: OST works in collaboration with the Division of Special Education, and school administration, to make adjustments to routes throughout the year for changing enrollment and for various other reasons. These changes may be communicated by any of the forementioned entities.

Q: Can a student ride a general education bus that has an IEP?

A: Yes. A student with an IEP can ride a general education bus if the student's transportation needs can be safely met on that bus. If the IEP team determines that the student does not require specialized support, the student may ride the general education bus with peers. If support is required, they must be documented in the IEP and provided during transportation. Some students with disabilities may receive accommodations to be able to ride the general education bus. When a student rides the same bus as peers and receives support to help with access, safety, or participation, this ensures appropriate placement in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).