

## **Matters related to the operation of the School Transport System**

### **Opening statement by National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education To Joint Committee on Education and Skills**

**11<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

We would like to thank the members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for affording us the opportunity to give the views of our members – schools involved in the education of pupils with special educational needs.

#### **Who is the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)?**

NABMSE is the management voice of special education in Ireland. We are a school management organisation recognised by the Minister for Education and Skills and provide countrywide representation for Boards of Management of special schools and mainstream primary and post primary schools providing education for pupils with special educational needs.

NABMSE represents over 200 schools.

NABMSE members welcome the role and co-operation of the School Transport Section of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and local Bus Eireann staff in the operation of the School Transport scheme for students with special educational needs. This co-operation and relationship has always been the cornerstone of the efficient operation of the scheme for schools on the ground.

In the NCSE policy paper no. 5 '*Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools*' launched in 2015, it was stated that 'the special transport scheme was considered to work well and to be an important asset for parents and students'.

It has been reported by schools in research undertaken by NABMSE in 2011, that the student's ability to participate in school is influenced by the events and conditions on the bus journey. This research also noted that the skill of the bus escort in ensuring a successful journey is often challenged by the duration of the journey and appropriateness of the bus in accommodating the child's specific needs.

In this opening statement, we will concentrate on the issues related to the provision of transport for students with special educational needs under the following headings:

- Day to day management of school transport in the special education setting
- The selection criteria/rules [relating to the awarding of contracts];
- Catchment areas;
- Eligibility of students who can avail of the service.

## Background and Context of transport for students with special educational needs:

Due to the geographically dispersed location of both mainstream and special schools in Ireland, significant numbers of children with special educational needs avail of the school transport system. A school transport scheme is in place to support the transport to and from school for children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability. This service is operated by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) advises the DES if a child's care and safety needs are such as to require the support of a bus escort and allocates funding to schools, for the employment of bus escorts to accompany children on the bus journey to and from school. The role of the bus escort in circulars issued by the DES is described with reference to the need for children with special educational needs to be escorted while traveling on school buses and taxis, needing help with embarking on and disembarking from the bus and needing help and supervision during the journey. Bus Escorts also act as a vital link between the school and home.

In contrast to other international jurisdictions there is no reference to the level of training that bus escorts should be expected to engage in to do their job effectively nor is there any training provided for bus escorts.

Some of the **issues** that has arisen in the provision of school transport for pupils with special educational needs:

Day to day management of school transport:

- Having staff on the buses with different employers can be difficult when procedures/ protocols are not agreed and followed.
- Some schools have expressed a preference that the DES pay bus escorts directly.
- Difficulties when buses and drivers are changed without prior notice to the school
- Many pupils with special educational needs are being transported in taxis. Some schools have found that when an issue arises, there may be no personnel in that office who are familiar with the school transport arrangements.
- There are many stages in the approval process for pupils with special educational needs. This can take some time and schools are often not informed of the progress of the application nor do they receive an approval in writing. Thus, schools and parents are often not informed of the final decision until the beginning of the school year. This is extremely stressful for parents who do not know at what time or by whom their child is being picked up for school.

Selection criteria/awarding of contracts:

- Many school bus contracts are changed and awarded without any notice to the school. Very often, the school is only aware of the change in contract when the contractor loses the route or when a different bus/driver arrives at the school at the beginning of the school year. This leaves no time to prepare the students with SEN for this change causing difficulties for all involved.

## Routes and Catchment areas:

Research demonstrates clearly that children with special educational needs experience most challenges during unstructured periods of the school day such as recess, transition-periods and travelling on school transport.

- Many routes are too long, causing difficulties for students with SEN. Some students can be on buses for over three hours per day. This issue was also raised in NCSE Policy Advice paper no 5.
- Schools have found that additional students can be added to routes without notice to them – leaving routes longer. Changes in routine for some students with special educational needs can cause difficulty for schools.
- An issue raised in the consultation groups for the NCSE policy advice paper was the inability of school transport to cater for transport to and from respite settings on the same basis as special transport is provided to and from the student's home.

## Eligibility Criteria

- School transport is awarded to students on the basis that the student is attending the nearest school or special class which can be resourced to meet their needs. This can cause problems when parents consider that the nearest special school best meets the needs of the student with SEN and there is another school nearer to the child's home. This may mean that the student is not eligible for school transport

## Some suggestions:

### The selection criteria:

We are mindful that procurement rules apply to the provision of school bus transport and that there is a requirement for some of the bus routes to be put to tender on an annual basis. However, in the tendering of these routes and awarding contracts, the following should be considered in the provision of transport for students with special educational needs:

- Experience of the operator and driver in the provision of transport and working with people with special educational needs and disabilities
- Ability to provide wheelchair accessible buses
- The alternative arrangements in place to provide suitable buses in the event of a breakdown
- Arrangements in place for the replacement of the bus driver
- Protocols in place to deal with accidents on the bus
- Willingness to engage in training for example: understanding students with SENs, roles of the driver and bus escort, policy and legislation, protocols

### Routes. Catchment areas and applications:

- The length of the bus journey should be considered when planning a route for students with special educational needs.

- Schools should be consulted and informed of any changes to a bus route, additional students on the route and changes in bus drivers well in advance so children can be prepared.
- There should also be a tracking system for school transport applications. Schools should be provided with an acknowledgement of receipt of the school transport application, a progress update on applications and a letter from Bus Éireann giving details of the bus provider on approval of the application.
- Recommendation 6.3 of NCSE Policy Paper No. 5 should be implemented without delay. This recommendation refers to transport to and from respite settings to school and for students with complex needs to be transported to alternative special schools and classes where the SHE is unable to provide therapy supports for a student in their local schools (pending full rollout of Progressing Disabilities Programme)

### **Training for Bus Personnel:**

NCSE Policy Advice Paper No. 5 – Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools, recommendation 6.2 states

*‘ Other personnel working with students with ASD, including bus escorts, drivers and caretakers should also receive training to promote a common basic understanding of ASD and how it may affect students ’*

NABMSE considers that this recommendation should apply to all students with special educational needs.

### **Developments in training:**

St. Angela’s College Sligo developed a pilot training programme for bus escorts at the request of and in partnership with NABMSE. The project emanated from the Summary Report of Inter-Departmental Collaboration on School Transport for Students with Special Needs (2010), which was issued by a working group established in Sligo in 2005, to provide for all those involved in school transportation of children with special educational needs to collaborate and work together. This working group comprised members from the then Department of Education and Skills, principals of special schools in Sligo, Bus Éireann and a parent representative. Discussions with bus escorts and occupational therapists also informed the work of the group.

This Bus Escort pilot project was rolled out in Galway in 2013 and an independent evaluation was carried out by Dr. Emer Ring of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick which states

*‘ The evaluation demonstrates that a specific training programme for bus escorts has the potential to impact constructively on the capacity of bus escorts to fulfil their role and thereby impact positively on the educational experiences of children with special educational needs and their families. Consideration should be given to providing for a national rollout of this training programme using the existing local education centre network; locating this programme on the national qualifications framework ’*

St Angela’s College have amended this programme to ensure that the specific recommendations are implemented. They are now ready and willing to roll out this programme as Continuous Professional Development.

We hope that this statement gives the Committee some insights into the issues affecting students with special educational needs and the proposed suggestions. We look forward to working with all partners on these proposals for the improvement of the school experience for all students.