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Legislative Disability Caucus Briefing | School Bus Safety for Students with Disabilities

Special Education Transportation Task Force Update

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Opening

Thank you, Senator Bucco, Mercedes, members of the Legislative Disability Caucus, and everyone joining us today.

I am Christine Bakter, Deputy Director of New Jersey's Office of the Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families. I was appointed by Governor Sherill to serve on the Special Education Transportation Task Force as the representative of our Office.

Dr. Murray has provided an important overview of the Department of Education's current transportation-safety work. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Task Force's statutory charge and to provide a status update for the Caucus.

Purpose of the Task Force

The Special Education Transportation Task Force was established by S3447, signed into law on January 20, 2026 as [P.L. 2025, c. 301](#). Its purpose is to study and make recommendations regarding best practices for transporting students who receive special education and related services, including the prevention, identification, and response to medical and behavioral emergencies on school buses.

The work also includes examining certification and training requirements for drivers, aides, and nurses; the role of transportation in the Individualized Education Plan process; current New Jersey policies and practices; best-practice approaches used in other states; and concerns involving safety, equipment, staffing, and family communication.

The Task Force may ultimately recommend policy, regulatory, or statutory changes. The final report is due to the Governor and Legislature within 12 months of the Task Force's organization date.

Broad and Varied Membership

The Task Force has 23 governor-appointed members. It includes state officials or their designees, representatives from education and disability organizations (Including NJCDD), individuals with specialized professional expertise, school bus aides, and two parents of students who receive (or have received) special education transportation.

The Special Education Ombudsman and the Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families are both represented. Those are distinct roles, and the statute's structure recognizes that each brings a different perspective to this work.

How the Task Force Operates

The Department of Education provides both administrative and professional support for this work and has established an evidence-based and deliberative process. The work is organized around three principal areas which will be the basis of deep subcommittee work:

- emergency policies and training;
- certification and staffing;
- and IEP integration and family engagement.

One of the clearest messages from our inaugural session was that recommendations should emerge from evidence and inquiry. The process is designed to examine research, policy, state comparisons, professional expertise, and relevant case examples. It also allows areas of uncertainty or disagreement to be documented and discussed.

Many professionals on the task force also voluntarily shared their personal connection to this work.

Status of the Work

The Task Force held its inaugural virtual session on April 7. That meeting focused on the statutory charge, member roles, group norms, accessibility, officer responsibilities, the recommendation process, and the proposed schedule.

On July 15, the Task Force met in person in Trenton for its first substantive public working session. Members heard presentations from the Office of Special Education, the Office of School Bus Safety, and the Office of Student Transportation. We also reviewed parent bus-survey results presented by the Bloustein Center for Survey Research at Rutgers University and participated in initial small-group work.

Our next meeting is August 12, where we will continue discussion of current transportation supports and the identification of systems gaps.

Schedule

The proposed work schedule runs from July 2026 through January 2027, alternating between in-person and virtual meetings. The July and August sessions focus on organization and the New Jersey transportation landscape, followed by deeper subcommittee exploration in September, October, and November.

In December, the Task Force is scheduled to review draft recommendations concerning emergency training, certification and staffing, and IEP integration. This gives all members an opportunity to review work and recommendations outside of their subcommittee assignment. A final review and approval meeting is proposed for January 5, 2027.

Office Perspective

The Special Education Ombudsman brings direct expertise in special education processes. Our Office brings a broader, cross-system and lifespan perspective from working with individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families across children's services, health care, behavioral supports, and adult developmental-disability systems.

Through that work, we often see what happens at the seams between different systems: important information does not always reach the people who need it; accountability may be divided among several entities; and families can become the only consistent communication coordinators.

This observation is relevant to student transportation. A student's medical, behavioral, communication, mobility, and supervision needs may be known to the family and documented through the IEP process. Safe transportation depends on whether that information reaches the driver, aides, bus company contractor, nurse, or substitute in a form they can understand and use.

Our Office also looks beyond individual complaints to identify possible systemic concerns. One incident may be isolated. Repeated concerns involving safety, communication, training, emergency response, staffing, or family notification may reveal a broader weakness that deserves examination. We have heard these concerns from so many families related to school busing. The Task Force gives us a structured way to work with our Department of Education colleagues to raise those concerns against evidence and translate what we learn into meaningful recommendations.

The Work is Personal

That cross-system perspective is part of what I bring professionally. But this work is also deeply personal to me. I know firsthand what it is like to put a child with behavioral support needs on a school bus and wonder whether the people responsible for him understood those needs.

Once that bus pulls away, a parent is placing enormous trust in people they may never have met with names they may not even know.

Over the years, my own family experienced transportation problems, misunderstandings, and failures. There were times when information was incomplete, expectations were unclear, or the people supporting my son did not fully understand what his behavior was communicating.

But I also count myself among the fortunate. At the end of every day, my son came home to me. Not every family has been able to say that. That reality should remain at the center of this work.

A strong student transportation system should not depend on a parent's persistence, technical knowledge, or ability to escalate a concern. It should establish clear responsibilities, ensure that relevant information reaches transportation personnel, and provide the training, equipment, authority, and support needed to respond appropriately.

Transportation should be treated as an integral part of individualized educational access, not as an administrative afterthought at the beginning and end of the school day.

Closing

I am grateful to the Caucus for focusing attention on this issue, to Senator Bucco for his leadership, and to the Department of Education for establishing a thoughtful and evidence-based process.

The Task Force's work is still unfolding. Special Education students each have different medical, behavioral, communication, mobility, and educational needs. But they share one basic expectation: when they leave home for school, they should be transported safely, treated with dignity, and returned safely to the people who love them.

Thank you.