

Considerations for Selecting Commercial Charter Bus Services

On January 31, 2024, Governor Mike DeWine announced the release of the [Ohio School Bus Safety Working Group Report](#). This report was a comprehensive examination of the safety of Ohio school buses and contains 17 recommendations intended to improve school bus safety in Ohio. One of those recommendations dealt specifically with the contracting of commercial bus services for non-routine bus trips to school events such as athletic competitions or field trips. The recommendation provides:

The Ohio School Bus Safety Working Group recommends school districts establish screening policies around contracted commercial bus services.

The Department of Education and Workforce developed this document to provide recommendations to district leaders and transportation professionals regarding the selection of commercial carriers. These recommendations are intended to assist schools and districts in developing and supporting the most effective screening policies to ensure the safety of the students in their care. The importance of schools and districts implementing robust screening policies for contracting with commercial bus carriers cannot be overstated, as stringent vetting processes are essential to ensuring the safety and security of students.

Business Reputation

When hiring for commercial charter services, scrutinizing their business reputation is a foundational aspect of ensuring the well-being and security of the students and other school community members who will be traveling on these vehicles. The final selection will directly impact the reliability, safety, and overall quality of the transportation experience. The Department of Education and Workforce recommends schools and districts consider the following to ensure they are hiring only the most reputable companies:

1. **Make sure the company has a good reputation in the industry.** Check the company's safety record with [the U.S. Department of Transportation](#), including background checks and accident.
2. **Ensure the company has adequate insurance liability coverage to operate legally.** This information may be found on the company's website or by contacting them directly.
3. **Investigate the experience and professionalism of the company.** Check to see how long the company has been in business. Contact neighboring schools and districts to inquire about their experience with the business. Observe their customer service to ensure that they are attentive and professional.

4. **Ask if the company offers drivers safety incentives.** If so, how many drivers receive this? Incentives serve to ensure drivers are more safety conscious.
5. **Inquire about whether the company has a driver fatigue plan.** Be sure to ask if the company coordinates a location where drivers can meet and switch places when fatigued to ensure the safety of the trip.
6. **Does the company subcontract for drivers?** If so, ask the company for the name of the second bus company it contracts with so its background and record can be checked as well.

Driver Qualification and Training

The qualifications and training of drivers are crucial for ensuring the safety and efficacy of student transportation. Drivers must fundamentally meet the necessary requirements for operating a commercial vehicle and understand traffic laws to qualify for this important role. Further, drivers who have been properly trained are equipped with the skills necessary to handle various driving conditions, ensure a safe and positive passenger experience, and respond to emergencies effectively. The Department of Education and Workforce recommends schools and districts consider the following to ensure their students are only transported by appropriately qualified and trained drivers:

1. **Ensure that all drivers driving in interstate commerce meet Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration qualifications.** Some of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) Qualifications include, but are not limited to:
 - a. **The driver is 21 years of age or older.**¹
 - b. **The driver must hold a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) for their specific vehicle.**¹ (Class A, B, or C) with a passenger endorsement.
 - c. **Drivers must pass a DOT physical to ensure the driver is physically capable of operating the vehicle safely.**¹ This is required every two years.
 - d. **Commercial drivers are subject to pre-employment drug and alcohol testing and must be included in random testing.**² Inquire about the company's post-accident drug testing policy.
 - e. **The driver must have a current FMCSA Clearinghouse query.**³ This query contains records of violations for all commercial drivers, including positive drug and alcohol tests, refusals to take the required test, and other violations outlined by the FMCSA.
 - f. **The employer must conduct a Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) check.**⁴ This check is used to review the driver's history and check for any

¹ 49 CFR 391.11 General qualifications of drivers

² 49 CFR 382.301 Pre-employment testing and 49 CFR 382.305 Random testing

³ 49 CFR 382.701 Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse

⁴ 49 CFR 391.25 annual inquiry and review of driving record

suspensions or violations. Drivers must be in good standing to maintain their CDL.

2. **Verify that the driver will not extend the driving hours of service.** Drivers may drive up to 10 hours in a 24-hour period after having eight (8) consecutive hours off duty. Driving time hours are any time a driver begins work or is required to be in readiness for work until the time the driver is relieved from work and all responsibilities for performing work. Performing other compensated work for a person who is not a motor carrier is also on-duty time ([49 CFR 395.2](#)). Inquire if this trip will need to be divided with another driver to ensure proper driving hours are maintained.
3. **Inquire about the company's training plan and what training the driver has completed in the last year.** Ask if the driver has attended safety training, CPR, first aid, seizure training, or training in handling bloodborne pathogens.

Fleet Condition

Verifying the condition of a commercial charter service's fleet is essential when contracting their services, as it directly impacts student safety, vehicle reliability, and overall service quality. A well-maintained fleet will result in buses that are less likely to experience breakdowns, reducing both delays and potential accidents. The condition in which a company keeps its fleet directly reflects the company's commitment to high standards and expectations. The Department of Education and Workforce recommends schools and districts consider the following to ensure a safe and dependable transportation experience for their students:

1. **What is the average age of the fleet?** The average age of a commercial charter bus is typically 10-12 years. This can be extended due to how well the fleet is managed and kept on a routine maintenance schedule.
2. **Verify that any transporting vehicle has a current Ohio State Highway Patrol annual inspection sticker.** Inspection stickers are visible on the outside of the bus and will have the date marked when the inspection expires.
3. **Ask for vehicle preventative maintenance records to ensure it is regularly inspected.** Regular maintenance and updates can help extend the life of the vehicles used for transportation.
4. **Inquire about the safety features the bus is equipped with, such as seat belts and fire extinguishers.** Verify the safety equipment has been inspected and is up to date.
5. **Determine whether the bus is equipped for passengers with disabilities.**
6. **Ask if the bus has a GPS tracking device.** GPS helps monitor driver behavior, speed, and route adherence
7. **Review the emergency procedures during a breakdown or accident with the company.** This will ensure the company has thoughtfully considered and outlined the necessary steps to keep the students during such an incident

Essential Clarifications for Safe and Smooth Transportation

The Department of Education and Workforce recommends schools and districts clarify the following items to ensure that both the school and district personnel and the commercial charter service agree on the expectations for all trips:

1. **Who manages students when stopping for breaks during travel?** Typically, school personnel are responsible for the supervision of students while off the bus. Still, it is important that school personnel and the commercial charter bus company agree on responsibilities during travel.
2. **Who is responsible for ensuring all passengers are accounted for?** Typically, school personnel are responsible for ensuring the number of students are accounted for while traveling on the bus. However, it is important that school personnel and the commercial charter bus company agree on responsibilities during travel.
3. **What happens in the event of a mechanical breakdown or accident during the trip?** What will the charter service provide to ensure trip transportation is provided?
4. **Ensure that the trip itinerary is shared.** Best practice is to share the trip itinerary in advance with the company, which will allow the driver(s) to become familiar with the routes and the time schedule at each location.

Conclusion

Regardless of the type of authorized vehicle transporting students, it is everyone's shared responsibility to ensure students are safe in and around transportation vehicles. Schools, districts, businesses, and our communities must work together to uphold laws and effective policies that prioritize the safe transportation of the students in their care.

While not a comprehensive list, this document is intended to support schools and districts in developing robust screening policies for contracting with commercial bus carriers. Schools and districts are encouraged to use this document as a guide as they look to create local policies. Ensuring stringent vetting processes is essential to ensuring the safety and security of students riding on commercial buses for non-routine trips.