# North Carolina Exceptional Children Transportation Study

## Initial Report

Submitted by:

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# Abstract

The purpose of this initial report is to provide preliminary information regarding length of instructional day and length of ride for exceptional children (EC). Discussed in the initial report is how both length of instructional day for EC and length of ride are impacted by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction budget rating formula.

## Methodology

On November 15, 1999, members of the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute (PTSI) consulting team met with DPI Transportation Services, DPI Exceptional Children Division, local transportation personnel, Transportation Information Management System (TIMS), and Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) representatives to get an overview of North Carolina's transportation services. Subsequently, during that week PTSI consultants met individually with DPI Transportation Services staff, DPI Exceptional Children Division staff, and ITRE staff. The purpose was to familiarize the PTSI consultants with North Carolina's transportation system, beginning at the state level, to initiate the process of answering the nine questions central to the RFP. (See p.4 of this document for those nine questions.)

In addition, PTSI consultants made one site visit to an LEA, interviewing the transportation director, exceptional children director, TIMS coordinator, a bus driver, monitor and a parent of an exceptional child. One school in the LEA was visited to observe the afternoon loading procedures for exceptional and non-exceptional children.

The *DPI Exceptional Children Transportation Study Survey* was sent out December 5, 1999 to all LEAs. Preliminary information from this survey that pertains to length of instructional day and length of ride is included in this report.

Two teams of PTSI consultants from December 14 –17, 1999, conducted site visits to 10 LEAs, making the total of the site visits 11 LEAs. The format of the site visits was to interview the transportation director, exceptional children director, TIMS coordinator, any other personnel the school felt necessary, a bus driver, a bus monitor, and a parent. Then the PTSI consultants observed the afternoon loading procedures at a school selected by the LEA. Preliminary information from the 11 LEAs that pertains to length of instructional day and length of ride is included in this report.

## Preliminary Findings

These three questions and responses summarize the preliminary findings by the PTSI consultants.

1. **Are exceptional children afforded the same amount of instructional time, as their non-exceptional peers?** No, not in all cases. This is true particularly for children who are assigned to EC buses.
2. **Does transportation scheduling affect the length of instructional day for exceptional children?** Yes, in many cases. Some exceptional children routinely are dropped off at their respective schools after the school day begins and/or are picked up regularly before the afternoon dismissal.

3. **Is the length of ride for exceptional children longer than the ride for non-exceptional peers?** No, not in a deliberately discriminatory manner. Large numbers of exceptional children ride regular schools buses.

The final report will be submitted in February 2000.

# Purpose of Request for Proposal (RFP)

The purpose of this study is to identify key issues, including but not limited to, the difficulty school districts have in meeting length of day requirements for exceptional children (EC).

Those key issues as identified in the RFP by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Transportation Services are:

1. Review of current practices in EC transportation in North Carolina LEAs.
2. Ability of transportation service to meet the *length of day requirements* of exceptional children. Components to be studied and reviewed include:
   - Communication among departments (e.g. EC and Transportation) within the LEA – staff education issues
   - Placement of programs within the LEA – the impact of locations of students and schools on transportation
   - Opening and closing times of schools
   - The impact of the urban vs. rural characteristics of an LEA on the funding available for the transportation of children with special needs
   - The impact of the funding formula on the number of buses available to transport children with special needs
   - The high cost of contract transportation.
3. The involvement of transportation personnel in *the IEP process* when transportation is recommended as a related service.
4. Pros, cons and how best to pursue the issue of *inclusion* – extending to the bus the efforts of many LEAs to include children with special needs in a "regular" environment when possible.
5. Issues surrounding the *bus drivers and monitors/safety assistants* and their role in providing transportation to exceptional children, including training, access to confidential or non-confidential information for emergency reasons.
6. *Equipment issues* including school bus equipment, restraint systems, communications equipment, and types of vehicles.
7. *Discipline* issues – including suspension from school buses.
8. Length of *ride times* - to/from school.
9. *Routing issues* including the incorporation of special needs routes in the Transportation Information Management System (TIMS).

# Focus of Initial Report

The initial report was requested by DPI Transportation Services and provides preliminary information on findings concerning length of instructional day for exceptional children (#2, above) and the concurrent issue of length of ride (#8) as both relate to the budget ratings (sub –component of #2). All remaining issues required by the RFP were addressed in the course of study and will be covered in the final report submitted in February.

# The Budget Ratings

The key issues of length of instructional day and length of ride both revolve around the current budget rating formula. Therefore, a discussion of the budget rating formula must precede those discussions.

## Background Data

In school year 1998-1999, DPI Transportation Services:

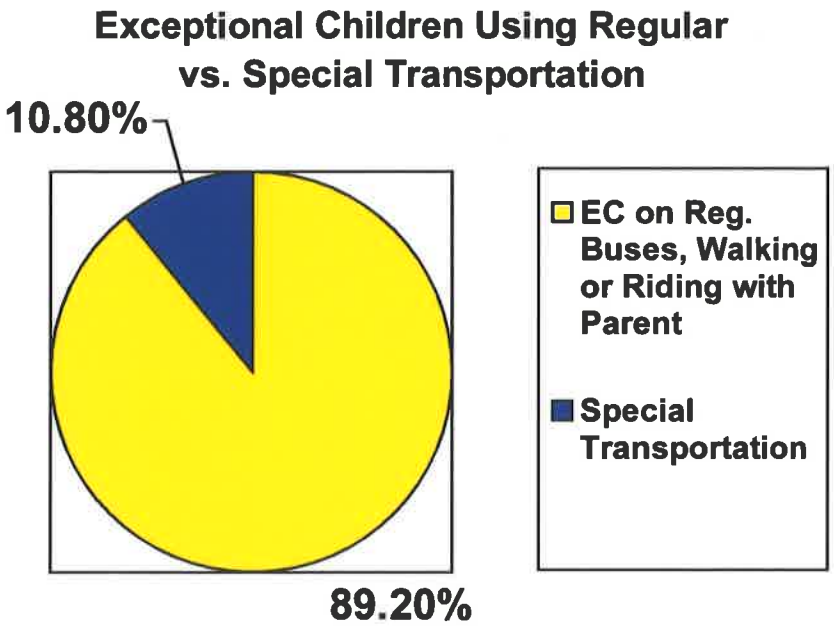
- Dispersed $190,546,983.00 in state funds to transport 698,890 pupils
- Replaced 883 regular buses and 203 EC buses.

For the same school year:

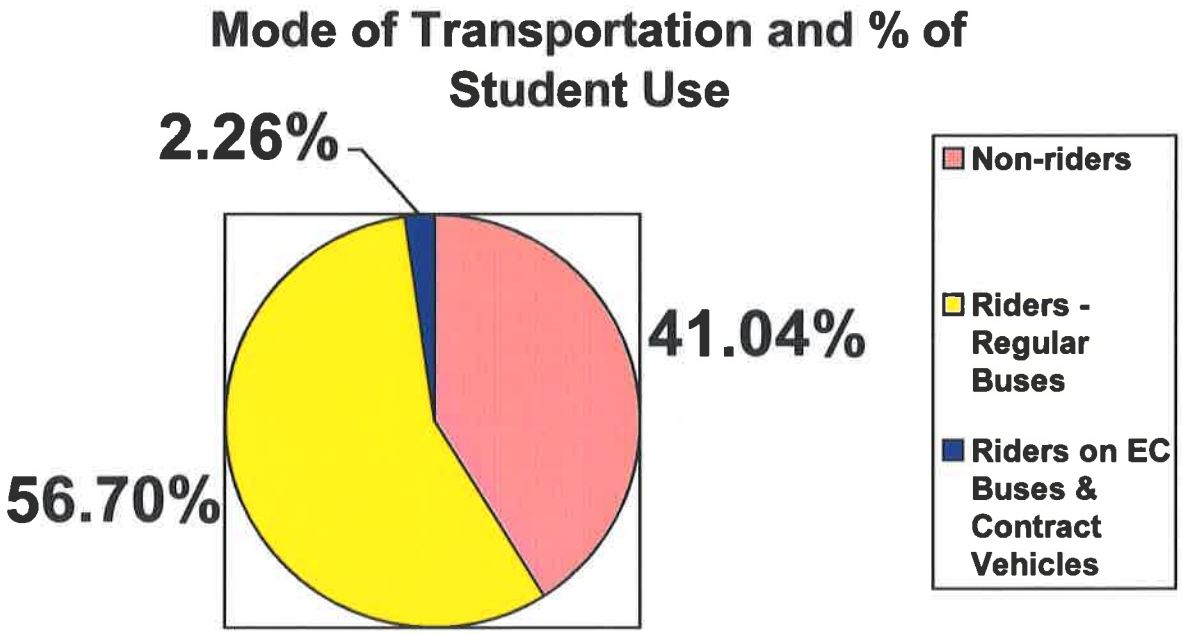
- 15,349 Pre-K – 12th grade exceptional children rode on EC buses
- 2,560 exceptional children rode in contract vehicles, operated either by parents or private contractors
- $9.35 million was expended on contract services (included in the $190+ million figure)
- 165,402 exceptional children were identified
- 17,909 exceptional children or 10.8% were transported to and from school in EC buses or contract vehicles.

**In other words, almost 90% of exceptional children rode regular buses, walked or were provided rides by parents or contractors.**

The pie charts on the next page illustrate this high level of inclusion of exceptional children from two perspectives. The first pie chart illustrates the percentage of exceptional children (based on the total exceptional children population) getting to and from school in the same ways as non-exceptional children, compared to exceptional children using special transportation. Special transportation refers to a school bus that transports exceptional children who cannot be transported by the regular bus or by a contract vehicle.




The second pie chart shows the percentage of students who ride regular buses (riders), the percentage of exceptional children who ride EC buses or contract vehicles, and the percentage of students who use neither (non-riders) based on the total student population.




**The inequities of services to exceptional children found by the PTSI consultants were within the 2.26%.**

# Budget Ratings Formula and EC Transportation

PTSI consultants find the low rate of special transportation for exceptional children is the result of North Carolina's budget ratings formula, which encourages efficient use of school buses. Through the site visit interviews, PTSI consultants were repeatedly told that the first choice for transportation of exceptional children is the regular school bus.

The site visit interviews also revealed, when other choices beyond regular transportation are needed. For example when LEAs have an influx of exceptional children requiring special transportation during the school year, one of these alternatives is usually implemented:

- Existing EC buses are used
- The parents are offered a contract (typically at $.31/mile)
- The service is contracted to a cab company or other private transportation vendor.

Seldom are EC buses added during the year because the addition of another bus places the efficiency of the district's budget rating in jeopardy. The problem with not adding another bus is that additional EC riders on existing EC buses cause an increase in the ride time. This "ripple effect" directly impacts the length of instructional day because the EC routes can become so long that the drop-off time may be after the start of school and the pick-up time may be before dismissal. PTSI consultants observed some EC buses picking up exceptional children as much as 30 minutes before dismissal time. The shortened instructional day and long riding time is a clear indication of inequity of service provided to the affected exceptional children.

## Contract Transportation

Contract transportation for exceptional children is the option of last resort according to the site visit interviews. Contract services usually are due to the location of the child's home, the program location or the child's medical condition. If the contract is for one child at $0.31 a mile, the cost is a savings as compared to the cost of adding a bus with a driver and monitor. Where contract transportation is redundant to existing school transportation, the cost is an extra expense--a significant expense if a private contractor is used.

In 1998-99, the overall per-pupil cost for North Carolina's pupil transportation was $288 plus the cost of replacement buses. The same school year, 2,560 pupils were transported through contract services at a total cost of $9,354,556, or $3654 per pupil.

In addition to being costly, contract transportation is often provided in vehicles that do not meet school bus construction standards. When parents transport exceptional children to school, it could be argued that the level of safety is the same as when parents transport children for other purposes. That argument cannot be made for taxicabs and non-conforming vans. Clearly, there is no equity in the level of safety for exceptional children on contract vehicles as compared to regular or EC buses.

# Length of Day

Five and one-half hours is the state-mandated minimum instructional time required for all children in the public schools of North Carolina. At this writing, 78 of 80 LEAs reported no different *official* length of instructional time for exceptional children as compared to their non-exceptional peers (*DPI Exceptional Children Transportation Study Survey.*) The standard length of instructional time is not applicable if a student's IEP team determines a modified day that is less than the minimum instructional day is required. Each LEA is responsible for assuring proper documentation through an IEP before adjusting exceptional children's schedules, and **transportation schedules cannot be considered a valid reason for shortening the instructional time for exceptional children** *(P.14 Questions and Answers Related to Policy Issues about Students with Disabilities*: North Carolina DPI, Exceptional Children Division).

Transportation-related issues, reported during the site visits, that cause late arrivals and early dismissals of exceptional children are:

- Safety factors at the school loading and unloading areas
- Coordinating trips with other buses, contract vehicles or with shuttles between schools
- Avoiding very early home pick-ups and very late home drop-offs.

The *DPI Exceptional Children Transportation Study Survey* information at this writing (LEAs are still submitting the survey to PTSI) shows that 33 LEAs report arrivals after the morning bell for some 260 exceptional children; 35 LEAs report departures before the afternoon dismissal for 596 exceptional children.

## Exceptional Children Division Funding

Taxing the system of EC transportation further is the formula for EC program funding. DPI Exceptional Children Division has a cap of 12.5% EC out of the LEAs total population. LEAs with an enrollment of exceptional children that exceeds the cap are forced to expend local funds for EC services. Those same LEAs may not be financially able to add EC buses or monitors at local expense. Monitors on EC buses are funded through the EC budget rather than the transportation budget. LEAs ability to put monitors on buses when needed directly related to the 12.5% cap and not to the safety needs of the exceptional children being transported.

## Exceptional Children Population Increase

The results of growth in the EC population during the school year are often a shorter instructional day, longer EC bus rides or the use of costly contracts. PTSI consultants were informed during the site visits that exceeding the cap was a result of some characteristic of the community, (*i.e.* medical center, military base or quality of the schools) which attracts families with exceptional children. DPI Transportation Services maintains a contingency fund to assist LEAs in unexpected transportation costs. The amount of money in the fund is limited and does not meet the cost of transporting EC riders in LEAs which exceeds the cap established by the DPI Exceptional Children Division

## Length of Ride

LEAs acknowledge some bus ride times are excessive and use the following techniques to correct the situation:

- Assigning exceptional children to regular buses and to a lesser degree, assigning regular students to EC buses
- Assigning exceptional children to contract vehicles
- Adding buses to the fleet
- Staggering daily school schedules
- Relocating classes for exceptional children
- Adding classes for exceptional children at different school sites to decentralize class locations
- Designating space for exceptional children classes in new schools.

Other factors that contribute to lengthy bus rides are:

1. The rate of population growth for exceptional children over non-exceptional children is without concomitant reflection in the budget rating
2. "Progressive funding" is not incorporated into the funding formula for the EC programs to pay for increases in EC population during the year
3. The budget rating, while achieving a desired level of efficiency in daily transportation operations, can push the "efficiency factor" beyond reasonable limits. An LEA that adds EC buses to shorten ride time, to provide equitable instructional time, and reasonable home pick-up and drop-off times is penalized by the budget rating formula
4. Long rides result in fewer passengers if parents find alternative means of transportation. An LEA either keeps the bus operating "inefficiently" or removes a bus, thereby extending the ride time for the remaining passengers. The situation continues.

## Preliminary Findings

These three questions and responses summarize the preliminary findings by the PTSI consultants.

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# Recommendations

PTSI recommends:

1. Increase the size of the contingency fund and give D.P.I. the discretion to distribute it to districts with an increase of exceptional children during the year or when over the 12.5% cap in the EC program formula.
2. Develop a separate formula for EC transportation that expands the definition of efficiency for EC transportation; include passenger characteristics, shorter route times, the ability to maintain equitable length of instructional day, and the capacity to absorb an increase in EC population within the LEA.
3. Establish a component within the current budget rating formula that rewards using FMVSS school buses for EC transportation either through the LEA or contractor.
4. Continue system of reimbursement for parent transport when indicated on the IEP as an appropriate related service.
5. Establish state guidelines on the use of monitors (*i.e.*, when transporting students who use wheelchairs, or students with severe behavioral or medical needs).
6. Include the cost of monitors on EC buses as an approved state **transportation** expense that is provided outside the block grant.