

The Four Characteristics used for Student Management

Chris Darling, IPTA Executive Director



School district transportation departments in Iowa place high expectations on school bus drivers to act as role models, ambassadors, and protectors of the children assigned to their daily care. For drivers one of the most challenging skills to learn is the responsibility for managing the conduct of the students behavior while riding the school bus.

The driver must be the leader and set the tone for their bus much the same way that teachers set the tone for their classrooms. Many students bring baggage other than their backpacks when they board the bus in the morning or head home after a long day.

Both a.m. and p.m. routes are opportunities for inappropriate behavior, but the tone of your bus could make a significant difference. It is a **best practice** to greet every student with a smile while boarding the bus in the morning and in the afternoon. Get to know students names as soon as possible, and set an example on your bus of courtesy and friendliness.

When you as the driver look at your own student management style, the first question that needs to be answered is, "**Are you the leader on your school bus or are you just along for the ride?**" The correct answer is: You must be the leader, and the person that students can look up to, trust and respect. No matter what your situation, **leadership, trust and respect** is something that can only be earned by your own actions over time.

As a school bus driver it is a good idea to learn and focus on the four elements of leadership that you may already possess. The characteristics that define leadership basically can be broken in to four elements:

1. **Characteristics** - Define what is the situation...what do we both want?
2. **Communication** - Use effective strategies when communicating with children.
3. **Consistency** - Maintain a standard approach with all children.
4. **Conflict Resolution** - Positive Correction, Consequence and Follow up.

Number (1), Characteristics, define what is the situation...what do we both want? That sounds simple enough, but it takes a four part answer:

- **Who am I, the bus driver.**
- **Who are they, children (ages 5-17 years old) that want a fun, and safe ride to school.**
- **What do I want them to do, follow the bus rules.**
- **Why, to increase student safety and keep the school bus drivers eyes on the road.**

Number (2), Communication, there are only two goals:

- **To get students to HEAR, which includes understanding the Board approved bus rules.**
- **To get students to LEARN, which includes following the Board approved bus rules.**



In order for communication to exist there has to be a sender and a receiver working together. If either one is not working successfully together then communication does not exist.

One of the **best practices** is to use the student's first names and make sure that you have the student's attention. It is important to make sure that they are listening to you before reviewing the bus rules or safety instructions. When you are done, it's very important that you ask them if that sounds reasonable, and if they understand your instructions. Having students respond to your questions ensures that they have clear understanding of the behaviors you are looking for on the school bus.



When communicating with students there are some very important **don'ts** that all school bus drivers need to remember: Never yell at students, argue, or call students names. Never use profanity, verbally escalate the situation or get physical.

These types of mistakes will destroy a school bus driver's relationship with bus riders, and very quickly eliminate any chance in building a respectful relationship on the driver's assigned school bus. When working with children it is a **best practice** to build a good working relationship over time through friendly and respectful conversations. If you don't invest the time it becomes, you vs them. That is a forty plus to one disadvantage that only leads to frustration for both sides.

We have reviewed the don'ts and now let's move on to the **Do's** in Communication, they begin with simply thinking before you speak, giving polite directives, using a calming tone of voice. Clearly state the expectations and this is very important, quote only School Board approved bus rules. Clearly state consequence for inappropriate behavior and present students a choice. The driver can present options to the student such as; apologize to another rider, moving seats to resolve a situation or an assigned seat for a reasonable amount of time. The assigned seat (learning seat) is nothing more than an opportunity for the student to deescalate and relax a little. Drivers can change the perception that the student has of being relocated by using a few kind words like, "it's going to be all right, but we both have to figure out how you can be successful riding the bus." When you have a student deescalated ask them, "why are you in the (assigned or learning) seat?" Remind them what rule they apparently did not understand and try to resolve the problem. Consider it an opportunity to get to know the student better, and for them to get to know you the driver a little better.



Good **communication** is another **best practice** and the most effective tool that a school bus driver has for teaching and maintaining the bus rules. Use positive communication to ensure a proper relationship with your riders, be an "Active" communicator, and listener. Value their input, think before you speak and include positive reinforcement on a daily basis.

Number (3), Consistency - Maintain a standard and fair approach with all children. This part of leadership is an especially important component, and may be the most misunderstood by drivers. The first step to consistency is the understanding that it's the only path to building trust between the school bus driver and students. The two components that drivers have to balance are the student's **perception** of how the driver is enforcing the bus rules, and if they feel that there has been **inconsistency** by the driver or by other drivers.

To each bus driver the general rules may be very clear, Remain Seated, Speak with an Inside Voice, Keep Your Hands and feet to yourself and Be Nice. Your school district will have a list of school board approved rules, and district drivers have attended the same in-service training together, they have read the same transportation handbooks, however they may still interpret the basic rules differently. **How can that be?**

Let's call it **generational perception** for defining the rules. Take the rule, "Speak with an Inside Voice" it's clear and to the point. There should be no **inconsistency** or **perceived** favoritism by any student with this rule because it states clearly, "speak with an inside voice."

Unfortunately the board approved bus rules are not as clear as one would think if you factor in generational perception. Your district has school bus drivers from 18 to 70 plus years old and they were all raised in different generations, by different parents, and with differing childhood expectations. The more senior drivers may be from a time when children were expected to be "seen and not heard" or "speak only when spoken to by an adult." The less senior driver is from a generation where children are far more expressive and they are, "seen and heard." In regards to this one rule senior drivers in many cases (not all) have higher expectations, to maintain a quieter bus than younger drivers. That means that due to this generational perception, school bus drivers all could perceive this one rule, and other rules with different levels of expectations.

The basic rules have remained the same, however the rules are being interpreted differently due to realistic generational factors. All the students see is the inconsistency or perceived unfairness, and riders can and will direct their frustration back at the driver. Inconsistency in how a driver interacts with students produces the loss of creditability, and builds lack of trust between bus riders. This is a challenge for all transportation directors and school bus drivers, school bus rules need to be implemented the same by all school bus drivers on the driving team.



Drivers can regain trust and build good communication by enforcing the districts standard set of bus rules equally from bus to bus. Everyone on the driving team should only, say what you mean, and mean what you say, all while keeping a professional attitude and using positive redirection.

Number (4), Conflict Resolution - This may be one of the more challenging aspects for the school bus driver due to the limited amount of interaction time available during the course of a normal school bus route. Cameras on the bus have helped school bus drivers, and transportation supervisors can clearly see conflict and the bullying behavior between students riding the bus. However the bus cameras can only document the problem for viewing later, the driver must deal with the problem in real time keeping all of the passengers safe.



Drivers face a plethora of behavioral issues everyday, from the mundane to the extreme. The driver must always remember that they are *the professional*, and the *only adult with authority on the bus*. When conflict occurs or a fight breaks out, while stopping the bus in a safe location, it is best to **give verbal instructions, using clear direct commands**. After the bus is secured continue to **give verbal instructions to stop!** When addressing the situation or when students that are fighting, directives should be given in a calm, assertive tone. Let directives be clear and specific and remember to try and call riders by their name. Many times when students are involved in an argument or a fight, they are so lost in the moment that they cannot even hear the outside world. This is a technique often used to help get the students attention. In most situations saying their names along with verbal interaction will resolve the problem followed by changing seating locations. Physical contact should only be used when the driver has no other option.

Physical contact should only be used as a last resort! The school bus driver should only **physically intervene to stop students from hurting each other, themselves or the driver.**

*For the complete use of reasonable and necessary force refer to: 281 - 103.5(256B,280) Use of reasonable and necessary force.
Also refer to: Your local School District Board Policies.*

When you are able to get the students attention and they stop arguing or fighting, make sure to separate the individuals and continue to monitor their behavior. Assess whether or not there are any injuries and decide whether first aid is needed. Contact dispatch and give them an update of your situation. After dealing with a defiant unruly student, extreme bullying, or a fight on the bus, it is the drivers responsibility to report the incident in writing. These types of incidents need to be addressed immediately, advise the transportation director and depending on the severity of the incident, contact building principal and the students parents.



Implement these four characteristics that define leadership as a **best practice** in your daily interactions with bus riders. There are two ways for students to get attention, **positive and negative**. Most students generally choose positive ways of getting attention; they sit quietly and respond to directions appropriately. Keep this in mind, you cannot really change the way somebody behaves, but you can change how you react to that behavior. The way you react may influence how the student chooses to behave in the future.

Student management takes practice and experience. Understanding the four characteristics used for student management provides you useful techniques, and basic strategies for maintaining positive communication on any school bus. Keep this in mind, leaders do not force people to follow, they invite them on the journey. Send out your leadership invitations to your riders daily, every morning and afternoon.