School Leaders’ Guide to Minibus Safety

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A Practical Guide for School Leaders and Staff

At the School Supply Store & Network we go beyond simply offering educational supplies—we also believe in sharing knowledge that protects and empowers your school community. One area that demands close attention is the safe operation of school minibuses. Often used for field trips, sporting events, and other activities, minibuses play a key role in student life, but they also come with legal and safety responsibilities that can’t be overlooked.

Understanding Staff Responsibilities

A growing number of educators are expected to take on tasks well outside their teaching duties—including driving school minibuses. However, this is something that should only happen if it’s specifically written into a staff member’s employment contract. Teachers and school support staff cannot be legally compelled to drive unless their contract states otherwise. What’s more, if a staff member is involved in a traffic incident, the school or governing body cannot legally cover them against any resulting penalties. This makes it especially important to approach minibus use with a clear understanding of roles and legal implications.

Navigating the Legal Landscape

Schools that operate minibuses must ensure they're fully compliant with licensing laws. Most school minibuses fall under a Section 19 Permit, which authorizes the vehicle for non-commercial use. This permit must be visibly displayed at all times. Without it, the driver must hold a Passenger Carrying Vehicle (PCV) license—specifically in Category D or D1.

Things get more complex when travel goes beyond the UK. For school trips to Ireland or mainland Europe, the Section 19 permit is not valid. In these cases, the driver must have a full D or D1 license, or the school must hold an "own account" certificate. Regardless of location, all minibuses must be fitted with seatbelts, and passengers are required by law to wear them. Young children must also use appropriate booster seats or restraints where necessary.

Who Is Legally Allowed to Drive?

Driving a school minibus is not the same as driving a personal vehicle. Minibuses are typically defined as vehicles that carry between 9 and 16 passengers, placing them under the D1 category in UK licensing law. If the school is receiving any form of payment related to the journey—what the law calls "hire or reward"—then the driver must have a full D1 or D PCV license.

There are some exceptions. For instance, individuals who obtained their standard Category B (car) license before 1 January 1997 may still be allowed to drive a minibus under certain conditions within the UK. However, these exemptions can be confusing and vary depending on the type of journey and the insurance provider. Because of this, many education unions strongly advise that schools only allow minibus drivers with a full D1 license—and that schools cover the cost of training and qualification where needed. In some regions, additional training such as the MiDAS (Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme) is also required.

Ensuring Roadworthiness and Driver Readiness

The person behind the wheel holds ultimate legal responsibility for the safety of the vehicle. Before each journey, drivers should complete a pre-use checklist to ensure the minibus is roadworthy. This should include checks for brakes, tires, lights, seatbelts, and other key systems. Any identified fault should immediately ground the vehicle until it is fixed.

Drivers must also be physically and mentally fit for the task. That means being

sober, not under the influence of medication that impairs ability, and well-rested. The vehicle itself must be properly taxed, insured, and hold a valid MOT certificate. These checks are not just procedural—they are essential for preventing avoidable risks.

Managing Driver Fatigue

Long drives, especially after a full teaching day, can be hazardous. Fatigue remains one of the leading causes of road accidents. To keep everyone safe, it's vital that schools avoid scheduling trips that require staff to drive long distances immediately after working. Ideally, drivers should not be behind the wheel for more than two hours at a time without a break of at least 30 minutes. For any journey over 50 miles or those that return late at night, drivers must have had adequate rest beforehand. Having a second adult on the trip to help supervise pupils is not only recommended—it's smart practice.

Learning from Tragedy

One of the most sobering reminders of what's at stake came in 1993, when a school minibus crashed on the M40 while returning from a concert. Twelve children and their teacher died in the accident, which was likely caused by driver fatigue after a long day of work. While this led to mandatory seatbelts being introduced in school transport, it did not fully address the core issue: that teachers are often placed in unsafe positions when expected to drive.

The Push for Safer Laws

Education unions like NASUWT are now campaigning to change the law by removing the Section 19 exemption and requiring schools to operate under the same regulatory structure as other passenger transport services. Their argument is clear—if schools are transporting children, they should meet the same safety standards as commercial carriers.

Research and Surveys reveal that nearly a quarter of teachers feel pressured to drive minibuses, and over 12% report doing so after a full day of teaching. A third of those surveyed say they've felt fatigued behind the wheel. In some cases, there are also serious concerns about poor vehicle maintenance and oversight.

Parents and campaigners, including families directly affected by minibus

tragedies, are working alongside these unions to push for reform. Schools can play an active role by supporting this cause and reviewing their own policies.

We encourage all schools to take a proactive stance. Review your current policies, support staff training, and always put safety at the forefront of any transport-related decision.

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