

DRIVING CHANGE ADDENDUM

Ensuring Accessibility in the Transition to Electric School Buses

The content below, including policy recommendations, was developed from the working paper “Next Stop, Access! An Exploratory Paper on Disability Rights and Justice Throughout the Transition to Electric School Buses” by Justice Shorter (SeededGround), Valerie Novak and Alyssa Curran (World Resources Institute). This serves as an addendum to the publication, “Driving Change: A State Playbook for Equitable Electric School Bus Policy.”

Summary

Approximately one in five [students who rely on school transportation](#), or about 4.5 million children, have a disability, [according to a 2025 survey](#). Students with disabilities [rely more frequently](#) on school transportation than their peers without disabilities.

There are three major federal disability rights laws related to student transportation;

- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination based on any physical or mental disability within federally funded programs or of federal employees.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990) prohibits discrimination based on disability in employment, transportation and public accommodations, and requires businesses to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities.
- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) established that children with qualifying disabilities have access to free and public education. Importantly, IDEA also outlines special education benefits granted to students.

Within the existing school transportation system, students with disabilities often experience [segregated bus routing and endure longer commutes](#) than students without disabilities. This can negatively impact their health due to increased exposure to diesel exhaust pollution associated with the most common school bus fuel type. Additionally, due to overlapping identities such as race, income and geographic location, students with disabilities can experience compounded inequities – including greater exposure to air pollution at home, in their community and at school, as well as on their way to school.

Currently, school bus designs [often lack universal accessibility features](#), such as adaptable seating, reliable wheelchair lifts and sensory accommodations. World Resources Institute research reported that students experienced frequent malfunctions of wheelchair lifts and limited driver training on accessibility equipment. Furthermore, disabled students and their families are often excluded from transportation planning and decision-making processes, contributing to long-standing accessibility gaps in school transportation.

The transition to electric school buses offers an opportunity to address systemic inequities by prioritizing accessibility for students with disabilities. However, without a focus on equitable transportation planning and sustained engagement, the transition risks perpetuating existing injustices and barriers. Below are suggestions for how policymakers and advocacy groups can work to advance a disability-justice-forward approach to school bus electrification.



Best Practices

For State Agency Staff:

ENSURE UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY IN STATE EV PLANNING

- Develop policies that prioritize accessibility upgrades, especially in historically underserved and underfunded school districts. Policies should address the intersectional needs of students with disabilities, ensuring equitable access to transportation across all demographics.
- Integrate universal design standards into EV charging infrastructure planning:
 - Require [charging designs](#) to accommodate buses equipped with lifts and ramps and be [accessible](#) for bus operators and mechanics to foster opportunity for a disability-diverse workforce.
 - Mandate infrastructure designs that minimize sensory disruptions, such as noise and vibration, to meet the needs of students with sensory sensitivities.
- Prioritize deploying ESBs in underserved areas and integrate infrastructure upgrades, such as paved sidewalks and accessible bus stops, into funding initiatives.

COLLABORATE WITH DISABILITY ADVOCACY GROUPS

- Engage disability advocacy organizations to inform state planning processes.
- Use participatory research to identify barriers and solutions directly from students with disabilities and their families.

FUNDING PROGRAM DESIGN

- Design funding programs that encourage school districts to adopt electric school buses with accessibility features.

For Legislators:

REQUIRE ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL BUSES

- Pass policy requiring that all school buses incorporate universal design features, including:
 - Adaptable seating and security options for students with mobility devices.
 - Reduced-stimulation environments to accommodate sensory sensitivities.
- Ensure compliance through regular inspections and audits through state agencies related to school transportation.

FUND AND PRIORITIZE APPLICATIONS FOR ACCESSIBLE ELECTRIC SCHOOL BUS INFRASTRUCTURE

- Develop funding programs that prioritize and provide additional funding opportunities to school districts that provide accessible electric school buses, as [Michigan](#) did.
- Authorize dedicated funding for accessible electric school bus features, such as audiovisual communication tools, wheelchair lifts and sensory accommodations.

SUPPORT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR ACCESSIBILITY

- Create programs to train bus drivers and maintenance staff in operating and repairing accessibility equipment, such as wheelchair lifts and adaptable seating.
- Include training on disability awareness and inclusive communication to foster a respectful environment for all students.

Resources

- Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) - *Transportation Advocacy*
- Sins Invalid - *10 Principles of Disability Justice*
- WRI's Electric School Bus Initiative - *How Electric School Buses Can Improve Disability Access*
- WRI's Electric School Bus Initiative - *Next Stop, Access! An Exploratory Paper on Disability Rights and Justice Throughout the Transition to Electric School Buses*
- WRI's Electric School Bus Initiative - *Prioritizing Students with Disabilities in the Transition to Electric School Buses*



