

To manage student behavior, drivers need to be firm and fair, but not overly strict, says Will Rosa, director of transportation at Parkway School District in Chesterfield, Missouri. Shown here are students from Parkway West Middle School with Superintendent Dr. Keith Marty.



# Balancing Rules, Fun Helps Drivers, Students Enjoy the Ride

Transportation directors and bus drivers agree: adults lead by example. Maintaining authority and having fun with students begins by building relationships of compassion and mutual respect.

*By Kathleen Kohler*

Standard transportation rules in school districts include staying seated and no yelling, name-calling, racial slurs, swearing, bullying, throwing things or hitting. When students violate these rules, drivers face two choices: address the situation or ignore it. How drivers handle rule-breakers shows kids whether or not the adult in charge will provide a safe, secure environment.

“I tell drivers they need to be more toward firm and fair, without being overly strict, because that’s where they’re going to have their most success,” says Will Rosa, director of transportation at Parkway School District in Chesterfield, Missouri. “And the ones

who are least successful ignore what’s going on on the bus. They don’t have any rules or don’t enforce the rules.”

## **Firm but fair**

When a fight broke out between two middle-school boys on a bus in Rosa’s district, driver Tony Holland, described by Rosa as “a very nice, soft-spoken man,” didn’t ignore the situation. “And he could have,” Rosa points out.

Instead, Holland pulled to the side of the road and walked to the back of the bus where the charged-up teens stood. Using as firm and forceful a voice as he could, Holland said, “Sit down.” ▶

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One defiant boy shot back, "You can't tell me what to do."

Holland said, "I'm not telling you. I'm asking you to please sit down."

"Words are so powerful," Rosa explains. "[Holland] defused the entire situation. The boy didn't know what to do. He

just sat down, didn't challenge [Holland]."

Rosa says of Holland, one of his top drivers, "He could've done a lot of things in that situation. But he respected the student and he got respect in return."

"Building respect [and] trust, and building the relationship with students,

but expecting compliance too on the bus," makes a big difference, Rosa notes. "Just like parents, we're always teaching our kids. It's the same with successful bus drivers."

**Learn students' names**

Genuine care for students is another key element in building positive relationships.

"If you show enough compassion, you'll get the respect," adds Edd Hennerley, director of transportation at Queen Creek (Ariz.) Unified School District. "Respect you earn over a period of time. Compassion starts today."

As a trainer, John Horton, a retired former driver for Douglas County School District in Colorado, recommends learning the students' names.

"If you're patient and start in September, by Thanksgiving you should know all the kids," he adds.

"We're the first ones they see in the morning, representing the school district, and the last ones they see at night," Horton points out. "We're the one who will determine the weather more or less for them and their environment. So, is their day going to start off with a 'Good



School bus drivers for Queen Creek Unified School District in Arizona often dress up in holiday-themed costumes to lighten up the bus ride. Shown here is Edd Hennerley, the district's director of transportation, standing ready to drive students to and from school in holiday style.

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morning. How are you, Susie?’ When you call a kid by name, that makes an impact.”

Elsa Fox, a driver for Sultan (Wash.) School District, agrees. “Maybe the first 10 times you say good morning, they won’t acknowledge it, but after that, they’ll start responding. You try to make a difference in their lives when you ask them, ‘How was your day?’ or, ‘How was your weekend?’” (Full disclosure: Fox is also the sister-in-law of the author of this story.)

“Our football team from our high school two years ago won the state championship, and this driver drove them to all the away games,” Hennerley says. “He not only drove to the games, but he watched the games. He knew who all those players were, and it’s making that kind of connection with kids that they pick up on real fast.

“After they won the state championship, they made sure he got the T-shirt like everybody on the team because they said he was important to them and he cared,” Hennerley adds.

### **Make the ride fun**

Once drivers show they care and establish boundaries and proper behavior, they can roll out the fun.

“I dressed up as a bumblebee for Halloween one year,” Fox says. “The kids loved that.”

Fox has also worn Easter Bunny ears and a Santa hat, and she had a cowboy hat day on her bus. On holidays, she hands out candy, and she sometimes hosts an end-of-the-year pizza party.

Hennerley’s drivers also sometimes dress up to lighten up the bus ride for students.

“We have a costume party here at the terminal and all these drivers get dressed up, and they’ll wear that costume on the bus,” he explains. “The kids just eat that up.”

When reviewing safety rules before a field trip gets a bit boring, Horton of Colorado livens up the spiel by impersonating an airline pilot:

“At this time we’d like to go over our emergency procedures. ... You’ll notice we have two roof hatches on top. Now we hope we won’t have to use those, so we’ll save ‘em for Santa Claus when he can’t find a chimney. In case of emergency, we will dismiss you row by row and ask you to leave behind anything you want to claim on insurance and move 200 yards away from the bus and wait for instruction. On behalf of myself and the flight crew this morning, we want to thank you

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For new drivers and longtime veterans with a new group of kids, “Try to use the best parenting skills, the best counseling skills, if you have them,” Horton suggests. “If you don’t, find somebody who can advise you on how they would handle a situation. Talk to other drivers or your training department.” ■



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