

10 Characteristics of Safe, Professional School Bus Drivers

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1. They know they aren't driving a 3,000-pound car:

We have all seen school bus driver candidates during their first few days of training. They walk around the parking lot marveling at the size of the buses. Many new drivers who have just received their learner's permit from the DMV cannot imagine at that point that driving one of these behemoths could possibly be easy. Veteran drivers use this opportunity to assert their experience, professionalism and possibly their seniority with comments of simplicity and confidence.



References are made that compare their bus to a large minivan or an SUV. While these comments often help the new drivers respect the experience of veteran drivers and help them believe that they could one day do this, these statements could not be further from the truth.

The fact of the matter is that true professionals know the distinct differences between their personal vehicle and their school bus. Size, acceleration, handling, braking and the most important difference, stopping distance, are factors that must be understood and respected. Drivers have to know that they must smoothly switch between small personal vehicles and their buses with no compromise in safety.

2. They know it's easy to accelerate to 55 mph but tougher to stop

The sheer power of the diesel-fueled school bus is an amazing thing. Literally, with the effortless push of just one toe on the accelerator, hundreds of horsepower and thousands of pounds of vehicle can achieve highway speeds in seconds.

Unfortunately, while acceleration can be easily controlled without much thought, stopping distance takes considerable thought and planning. There's much written about braking and stopping school buses, so I will not hammer this point home. However, professional drivers understand that they control the bus. The bus should never control the driver.

3. They drive the bus like their children are inside

Basically this one line says it all. Sometimes we get so caught up in the rules and regulations or the daily difficulties of working with hundreds of children that we become inflexible. After all,

we perform the same tasks day after day, and it's easy to get into a routine or groove. Still, we do transport somebody's child. Professional drivers always drive in the same fashion they would expect a person to drive a vehicle transporting their own children or grandchildren.

4. They don't allow emotions or adrenaline to drive the bus

Do you know Debbie Dilemma or Charlie Chaos? If you don't, you should. Every bus garage has a driver or two who is constantly living in a state of chaos, sometimes of their own making. Supervisors need to pay close attention to drivers who are constantly rushing into work in a whirlwind. The vary nature of our business, such as part-time status or bidding for hours, helps create hectic lives. It is not uncommon for drivers to juggle two or three part-time jobs. Add to that kids, domestic matters, bus garage personality conflicts or local political issues and the pressures can be tough to handle.

Drivers need to clearly separate their personal matters from the time spent on the school bus. Emotions such as anger, sadness, nervousness or chemical surges from adrenaline can cause even the best drivers to make poor decisions. Supervisors or trainers can clearly recognize people like this in their operation but need to respect their personal matters. We need to work with them to keep a safe route. We can also help them bid hours that fit their busy schedules and alleviate some time pressures. Professional drivers separate life's troubles and pressures from their driving environment.

5. They always observe the three-month rule

The three-month rule for professional drivers is that if you have not driven a particular vehicle in the past three months, you should not be using it on a route. School bus fleets are *identically different*. If that statement sounds humorous, it was meant to be. If you think about, it is actually true. One of the things professional drivers pride themselves on is their ability to drive any bus in the fleet. One of the purchasing practices that aids this concept is fleet managers who try to standardize their bus specifications. One key fact to keep in mind is that even buses built to the same specifications each year will have a number of differences and, if the manufacturers are on top of things, improvements as well. Items like switches, heater controls, drivetrains and braking systems can function differently from bus to bus. Professional drivers do their best to stay familiar with all the buses they may be expected to transport children in.

6. They treat returning to the garage equally to the route itself

With the students safely dropped at their respective destinations, the driver's thoughts often turn to some well-deserved personal time. Whether you are heading back to the garage, home (if you keep your bus there between runs) or to get a bite to eat during a trip, you must still drive defensively and professionally. This is not the time to open the windows, turn up the stereo and cruise. Citizens are always watching your bus, and accidents can happen anytime. Another fact for drivers to consider is that an accident on downtime, while out of the district on a trip or athletic event, can strand your students and result in significant delays locating mechanics, relief drivers and buses on evenings or weekends.

7. They don't mess with drugs or alcohol

Zero tolerance for drugs and limited social use of alcohol are the accepted rules of the day.

However, there seems to be a small minority of drivers who still feel that as long as they are alcohol free during the work week, it is OK to let their hair down on Friday night.

The problem with this way of thinking is that unless you are in the privacy of your own home, the eyes of the community are still upon you. Even if you stay clean and sober Monday through Friday while behind the wheel of a school bus, driving under the influence in your own car on Saturday night is just not acceptable behavior for a professional driver.

8. They watch their speed and use proper rail crossing procedures

If you review a great deal of accident reports, you'll find a common thread — speed. Professional drivers recognize the importance of speed control and adjusting speed to conditions. On the same note, following posted signs and warnings and following rail-crossing guidelines can prevent disaster no matter what you are driving or transporting.

9. They always wear the driver's seat belt

Not that I am looking to get into a debate about seat belts, but I do feel that seat belt use for drivers is critical. Professional drivers must be able to remain in position and in control of the vehicle they are driving no matter what situation arises. Also, supervisors and driver trainers need to be aware of drivers in their organization whose physical features such as height or weight present difficulties using seat belts. They need to remedy this situation before it is too late. Professional drivers always use their seat belts.

10. Some final thoughts

There you have it. Nine of the most important characteristics shared by professional drivers and an article you can use to build a training class or talking points. If you are thinking to yourself that I promised 10 and only delivered nine, you are right. The 10th point is something your drivers can only be assisted with.

The 10th characteristic shared by professional drivers is a constant thirst for training and knowledge. From the school board to the superintendent and on down, an environment that supports and provides training opportunities must be offered. Costs of training can be high, so you must budget accordingly. Professional drivers love training opportunities.