

Ask about the equipment that will be used

Vans, especially those operated by non-professional drivers, have been deemed unsafe for extended student travel by both the National Transportation Safety Board and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Full-sized motorcoaches (best described as those vehicles with seating capacity of 20-or more adults and a baggage containment area beneath the passenger compartment floor), though not constructed to school bus specifications, are designed specifically for extended highway travel and are considered one of the safest forms of highway transport.

Verify that the trip can be done within federal "hours-of-service" and common sense limitations

By federal law, commercial bus and motorcoach drivers may drive for no more than 10-hours during any duty day and may not drive a commercial vehicle at all after being "on-duty" for 15 hours. At the end of their duty day, they must be afforded at least eight hours off duty for the purposes of rest. After no more than 70-hours of duty in any work week, an off driver may not drive a commercial motor vehicle before being afforded at least 24-hours off duty for rest before he may again operate a commercial vehicle.

Verify the carrier's "subcontracting" practices

Motorcoach companies often turn to other carriers for drivers and equipment when travel groups are too large or the original carrier's schedule is too busy to accommodate your travel. Ask your chosen carrier if he expects to "subcontract" any part of your travel needs and with whom. If any of your travel group is to be carried by another company, ensure that all of the companies used meet the same criteria you would impose on your chosen, primary carrier. Require proper documentation from the subcontracted motorcoach company as well.

Many churches own coaches

Churches are not required to meet federal safety compliance if they carry only the church members or if the passengers ride free. Many churches do not adequately understand this distinction and actually charter coaches to schools and other groups without complying with federal safety standards. Under these circumstances, you may risk lack of safety, lack of insurance, and lack of qualified drivers. If you are charged to use a church coach (even a donation), you should expect that the church coach meet the qualifications previously outlined for a motorcoach company. This is federal law! Coaches owned by individuals or organizations tend to be the most hazardous.

Beware of bargains

Coach companies able to offer drastically reduced rates to charter or tour your group may be forced to cut corners on coach maintenance (safety), safety compliance (inspections), insurance, license, or comfort features, such as air conditioning, video equipment, and heating.

To protect yourself and your group, always require a written contract

The contract should specify the date, number of passengers, itinerary and total charge for the trip. Every movement of the coach should be listed. The name of the coach owner and the name of the group must be on the contract. If the company does not want to give you a contract, there is something wrong! You risk paying a different, higher price later, or nonperformance of service. Require a receipt for payment. This obligates the company to provide the service. Beware of "cash only" arrangements. This may indicate lack of authority or compliance with safety regulations.



VIRGINIA MOTORCOACH ASSOCIATION

STUDENT CHARTER TRANSPORTATION SAFETY GUIDE

*Are your children
riding the safest
transportation?*

830 Dry Fork Road, Gladys, VA 24554
434-376-1150 Fax 434-376-1156
www.vanmotorcoach.com

Other Sources of Information:
American Bus Association www.buses.org
United Motorcoach Association www.uma.org

Student Charter Transportation Safety Guide

This guide, created by the Virginia Motorcoach Association, in cooperation with the American Bus Association and the United Motorcoach Association is the result of a cooperative effort with highway safety partners in the federal and state governments, the law enforcement community and the professional motorcoach industry. It is designed to serve as a guide to help those who plan, schedule and conduct student activity trips to make the right choice and to better understand each element of motorcoach travel.

The Virginia Motorcoach Association membership numbers 39 active operators, who are required to meet the requirements in this guide at the time they are approved for membership. For your convenience we have included a roster of Virginia Motorcoach Association membership.

The following steps can help you feel more confident about the safety of the motorcoach provider that you have chosen for your student travel.

- ◆ Understand and acknowledge the fact that not all motorcoach companies are equally safe.
- ◆ Don't choose a provider on price alone.
- ◆ Turn to the experts for help. Insist on the adoption of an "approved carrier list" and demand that no travel takes place on unapproved carriers.
- ◆ Do the research. Review every carrier's safety qualifications ahead of individual travel needs.

Safety First

Today's motorcoach is one of America's safest means of travel. It is also one of the most comfortable and affordable ways to move any travel group, making it the transportation mode of choice for thousands of public and private, elementary, middle and high schools and hundreds of colleges and universities who travel millions of miles each year on after-school and extracurricular trips.

Safe student motorcoach travel, however, isn't automatic. Travel planners, school administrators, students, parents and everyone associated with "student activity" transportation must exercise a strong concern for "safety first," good judgment and some basic advance research before selecting a motorcoach company to perform the trip.

Carrier Research Checklist

Ask the company for its USDOT identification number. The number is your best tool to begin your safety review of the motor carrier. All commercial bus and motorcoach companies operating across state lines must be granted "interstate authority" by the FMCSA. That authority requires a minimum insurance coverage, continued operation within federal and state safety rules, and subjects the company and its vehicles and drivers to safety review and inspection by federal and state authorities at any time.

Review the carrier's record online. The USDOT number serves as your key to online research of the carrier's safety record.

The USDOT's motor carrier safety website at <http://www.safersys.org> can provide you with a snapshot of the carrier's safety record. The site will tell you:

- ◆ If the carrier is authorized to transport passengers for hire,
- ◆ If the carrier has current insurance in force,
- ◆ The carrier's record of regulatory violations or "out-of-service" incidents; those times when a vehicle or a driver is found to be in violation of the rules, and a comparison to national averages,
- ◆ (a) The carrier's highway accident record;
- ◆ (b) The carrier's current USDOT "safety rating," if any, and the date of the carrier's last "compliance review," or on-site inspection by authorities.

Verify the company's current insurance coverage

All commercial motor carriers of passengers must maintain minimum insurance coverage to remain authorized to perform interstate service. Operators of vehicles capable of carrying 15 or fewer passengers must maintain coverage of at least \$1.5 million; those operating larger vehicles must maintain coverage of at least \$5 million. Records online may or may not be up-to-the-moment; to be certain of the carrier's coverage, you should ask the insuring company to send you verification of the carrier's coverage directly, indicating that the coverage is or will be in place on the dates of your travel. If you will be a continuing customer, you may also wish to ask the carrier to add you as an "additional insured party" on his policy. By doing so, you will receive direct communications about the carrier's insurance coverage from the insurance company.

Verify the carrier's qualification of drivers and vehicles

All drivers must possess a current commercial drivers license (CDL) issued by your state for the class of vehicle they will be driving, and a current medical certificate indicating that they have met physical qualification within the previous two years. No driver should be operating the vehicle across state lines under a suspended or state-authorized exempt status.

Drivers and other "safety-sensitive" employees, such as mechanics, are required to participate in drug and alcohol testing programs. Verify that the motor carrier has such a program in place. Because of federal restrictions, driver test results and records are not available for your review.

All commercial vehicles must be inspected at least once annually to certify their mechanical fitness and compliance. Virginia performs this inspection. Ask to see the most recent inspection report.