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U-E to review busing procedures

Special-needs student left unattended inside van

By [George Basler](#)
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Press & Sun-Bulletin

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ENDICOTT -- Union-Endicott will review its procedures for transporting students following an incident last week in which a student with disabilities was left unattended in a van for several hours, a district spokeswoman said Monday.

"We transport 4,100 students twice a day and have never experienced anything like this. This is serious business," said Marilyn Blake, public information coordinator for the district.

The student, who is a young boy, was being transported on a 30-seat Union-Endicott van to a program for special-needs students at the Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services on Glenwood Road in Dickinson.

The driver and an aide left the child in the van after dropping off other students in the morning and driving the van back to the U-E bus garage, Blake said. The boy was discovered by the driver and the aide when they returned to the van after lunch for the afternoon run, she said. There are 18 students who are a part of the run.

The district has suspended both the aide and the driver with pay while investigating the incident, Blake said. The district has not released their names.

State law requires school bus drivers to walk from the front to the back of a bus after every trip to check for students. Union-Endicott has a procedure in place to do this. So do all other Broome and Tioga county districts reached Monday. Drivers are also supposed to look under seats.

In the Newark Valley Central School District, for example, drivers must check a bus after they drop students off at their school and again when the bus returns to the garage, said Randy Zukowski, transportation supervisor. Each bus has a yellow plastic strip in its front. When the driver walks to the back of the bus and checks each seat, he or she puts the yellow strip in the back window to show it was checked, Zukowski said.

First Student, which transports students for the Binghamton City School District, has both the driver and a supervisor check a bus when it returns from a run, said Lisa Leber, contract manager. The company has also installed alarm systems on its buses that require a driver to walk to the back of the bus to deactivate the system after a bus is shut off.

Johnson City Central School District is in the process of installing these alarms on its buses as it purchases new buses, said Don Sbarra, a district spokesman.

"Over 2.3 million students ride some 50,000 school buses in New York state every day. Instances like this are a true rarity in school transportation," said Douglas Jensen, transportation supervisor for the Maine-Endwell Central School District.

However, mistakes can happen, some transportation officials said. "It still comes down to human error," Jensen said.

The check can become so routine that drivers develop a habit of looking without really seeing, said Bonnie Bates, a safety and training employee with Birnie Bus, which provides transportation for the Chenango Forks Central School District. "I tell drivers: Don't get into the habit of glancing left and right, and not observing," she said.

Union-Endicott officials don't know how the driver and the aide missed seeing the young boy, Blake said. The driver is a long-time employee with an excellent record.

Union-Endicott will be reviewing its procedures with drivers and considering possible changes, Blake said. One change already happened Monday. The transportation department instructed drivers to open the rear door of their bus and look down the aisle from that vantage point, as well as walking from the front to the back, Blake said.

Union-Endicott could begin taking attendance on buses that transport special-needs students, something that has not been done until now, she said.

Only one of the 11 districts contacted Monday currently does this. Owego-Apalachin Central School District has attendance sheets that are checked by the aide or driver on buses that transport students with special needs who attend programs outside the district, Tony Quaranta, transportation supervisor, said.

More typical is the Windsor Central School District. A checklist is not needed because the numbers are so small, usually six or less, that drivers and aides know all the students personally, Superintendent Jason Andrews said.

Other officials don't think this procedure is necessary either. "Current procedures are adequate to ensure all students are accounted for," Vestal Superintendent Mark Capobianco said.

Blake said a report on the incident will be going to the U-E Board of Education at its Dec. 17 meeting. The board has to approve any disciplinary action.

"Obviously, we can't have this happen," board President John Cornick said. "But it did happen, and we have to find out why."





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I'll probably get a lot of angry feedback on this one, but obviously the bus driver that was involved was so complacent in his job that he didn't do what he was supposed to. How can you walk from the front of a bus and back again and not notice a child in one of the seats? Unless, of course, you took it for granted that all got off & just didn't bother to do it! But, in the case of a special needs student, how could you just assume that they all got off the bus at their stop? This, to me, is a totally unacceptable infraction of not only a state law, but a school law. Our children are placed in each driver's care the minute they step on those buses until they arrive at their appointed destinations. I hope the school board also finds this unacceptable and acts accordingly in their judgement of this incident!

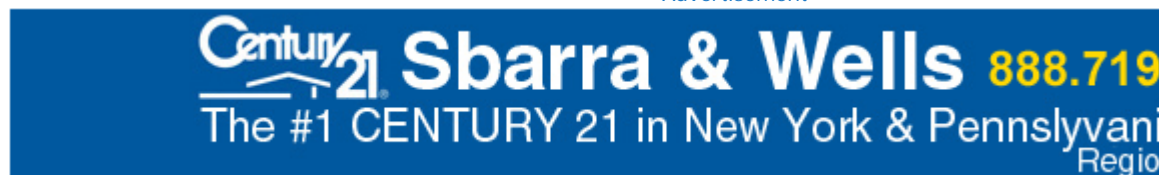
Posted by: **Endicottlady** on Tue Dec 11, 2007 7:40 am

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