

# Special-Needs Ridership Rises



Photo by Lois Hoffman, Chandler (Ariz.) Unified School District #80

**More than half of survey respondents say that they are transporting more special-needs students this school year. The proportion of regular-education versus special-needs passengers shifts toward the latter.**

**BY THOMAS MCMAHON,  
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**A**mong the key findings of *SCHOOL BUS FLEET*'s annual Special-Needs Survey this year was an increase in special-needs students on most operations' school buses (see Chart 2).

Not only did the number of these passengers rise, but survey respondents reported a higher proportion of them (see Chart 1). Still, special-needs students only accounted for an average of 12 percent of respondents' passengers — the other 88 percent being regular-education students.

Another interesting discovery was that most operations pay their special-needs drivers at the same rate as their regular-route drivers (see Chart 3). In some cases, though, special-needs drivers are paid more. One respondent reported a differential of \$2 per hour. On the other end of the spectrum, aides are paid an average of \$3.77 less per hour than regular-route drivers.

One question in the survey that's not represented in a chart was: Is there a par-

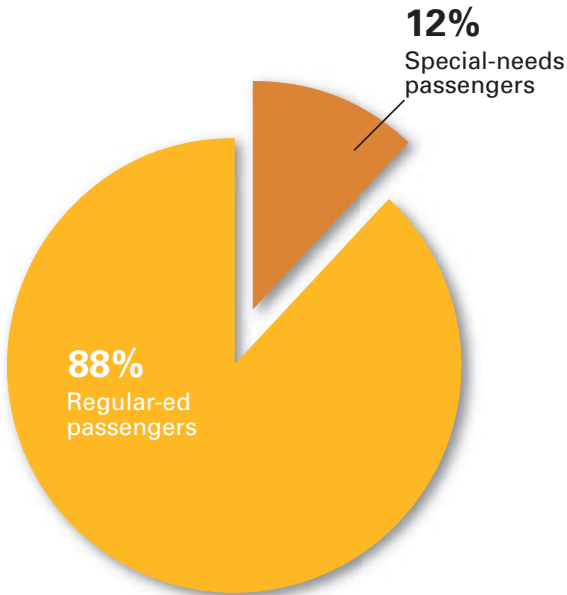
ticular type of disability that your operation finds most difficult to transport? The most common response by far was autism. The second-greatest response was emotional disturbance.

Also, several respondents said that they have the most difficulty in transporting students who use wheelchairs. On average, 10 percent of respondents' special-needs passengers use wheelchairs (see Chart 4).

Another challenge for pupil transporters is keeping ride times down. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said that the longest one-way ride that any of their special-needs passengers has to endure is 60 minutes or more (see Chart 7). The longest ride reported was three hours.

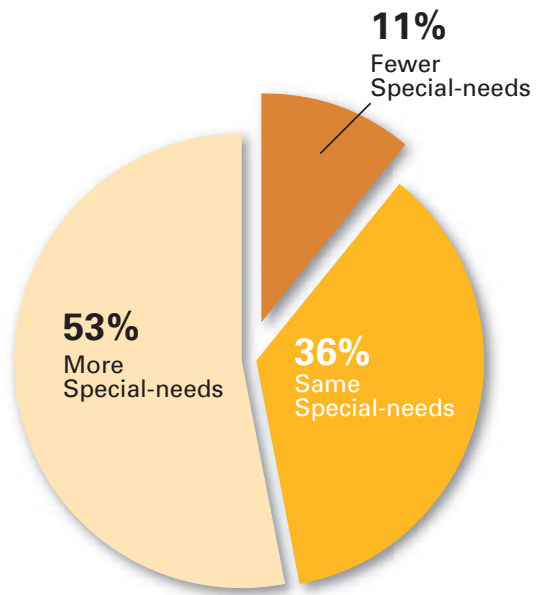
For this survey, a questionnaire was emailed to pupil transportation managers and supervisors at school districts and contractor companies. A total of 227 useable responses was received. Our thanks to all who participated.

**Chart 1**  
**Special-needs numbers grow**



On average, 12 percent of respondents' passengers have special needs. In last year's survey, the average was 10 percent.

**Chart 2**  
**Most respondents see increase**



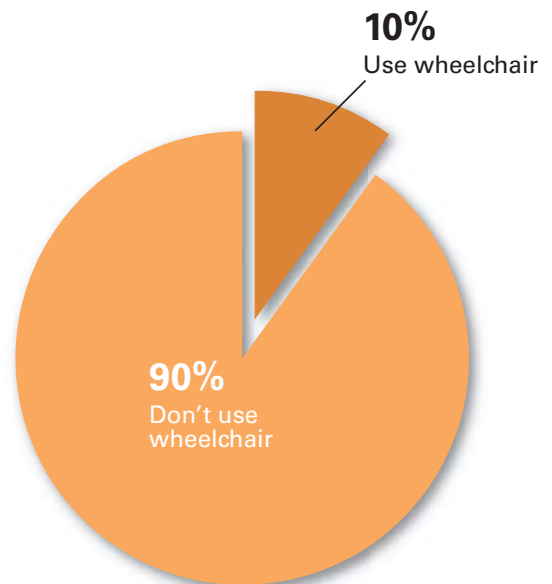
More than half (53 percent) of respondents said that they are transporting more special-needs students this school year than the previous year.

**Chart 3**  
**Two driver types paid alike**



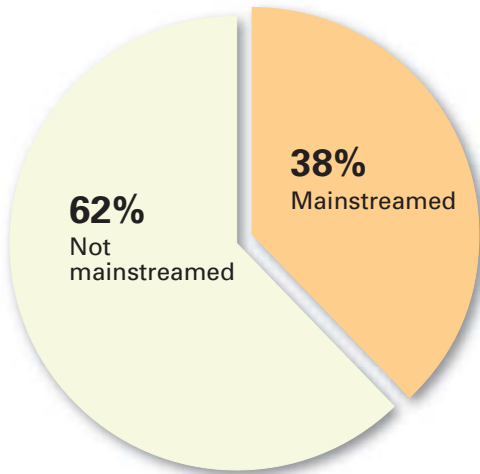
The majority of respondents said that their special-needs drivers are paid at the same rate as regular-route drivers, as reflected in the averages above. In some cases, though, special-needs drivers are paid more.

**Chart 4**  
**Wheelchair transportation is sizable task**



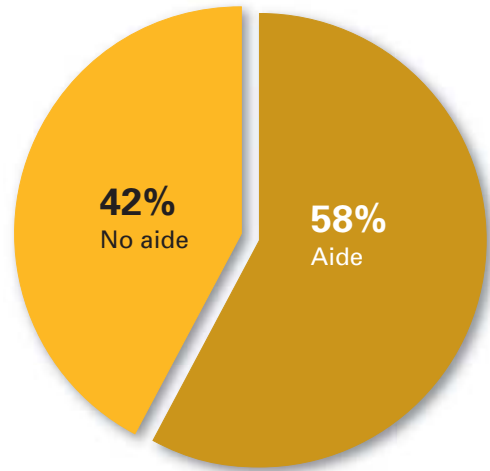
One-tenth (10 percent) of respondents' special-needs passengers use wheelchairs. Last year's figure was 11 percent.

**Chart 5**  
Mainstreaming at a standstill



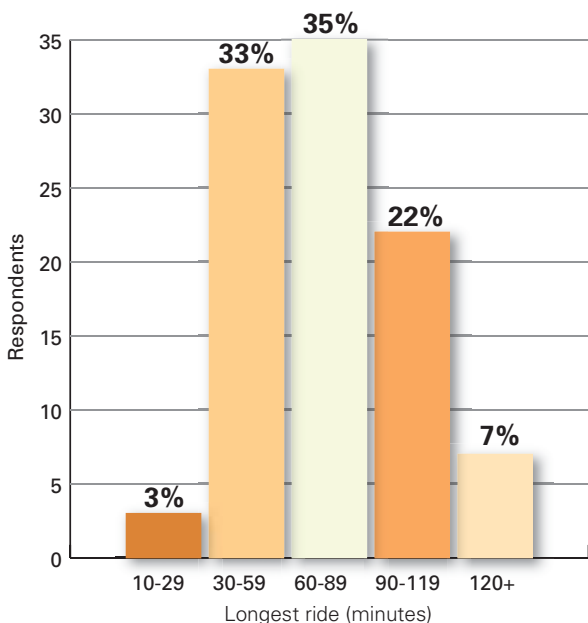
More than a third (38 percent) of special-needs students ride on regular-route buses, a practice known as mainstreaming. The ratio was exactly the same last year.

**Chart 6**  
Aides accompany most routes



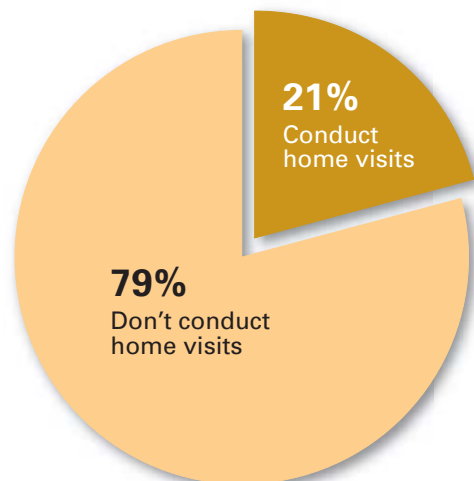
More than half (58 percent) of special-needs routes include an aide (also known as a monitor or an attendant). Slightly less use of aides was reported last year (55 percent).

**Chart 7**  
Long rides common



Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of respondents said that the longest one-way ride that any of their special-needs passengers has to endure is 60 minutes or more. The longest ride reported was 180 minutes.

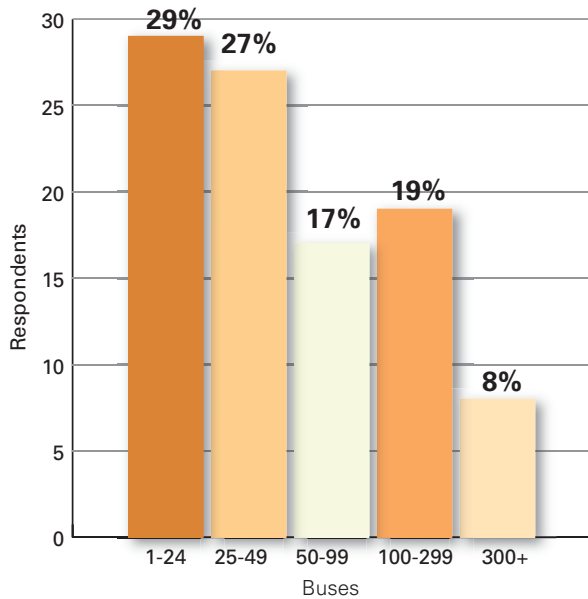
**Chart 8**  
Home visits uncommon



Nearly four-fifths (79 percent) of respondents said that their special-needs drivers don't conduct home visits at the beginning of the school year. For more on this topic, see Ted Finlayson-Schueler's feature in the Small Buses supplement on pg. A4.

**Chart 9**

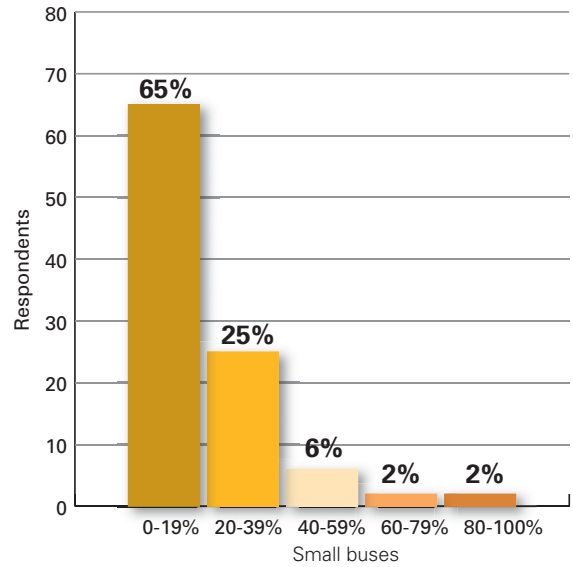
**Large response from smaller fleets**



More than half (56 percent) of respondents represent fleets of fewer than 50 school buses.

**Chart 10**

**Small buses are significant fraction of fleets**



The majority of respondents (90 percent) said that small buses (30 passengers or fewer) make up less than 40 percent of their fleets. The average response was 18 percent.

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