

## A CARING COMMITMENT TO SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

### *Milwaukee Public Schools - Milwaukee, Wis.*

The population of students served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has grown at a rate significantly higher than the general education population. Students under IDEA account for approximately 13 percent of the total education population, which is why the demand for special needs transportation service is increasing.

This can present a challenge for many school districts. Drivers and monitors must be able to clearly communicate expectations and manage behavior while transporting students with special needs — which requires comprehensive training and positive, long-term relationships.

*First Student's proven solution is focused on carefully selected, expertly trained drivers and a commitment to long-term partnerships.*

In order to develop solidly skilled driving teams, First Student requires successful completion of a well-developed special needs training program. First Student's extensive training is multi-faceted to include classroom, hands-on and on the bus instruction. Classroom training covers a comprehensive set of topics, including legal requirements, confidentiality, emergency evacuation, and specialized equipment for children with physical disabilities. Additional one-on-one training sessions allow drivers to practice real-life situations with specialized equipment.

First Student also requires cross-disability training to prepare driving teams for all potential special accommodations that current or future students may require. Training covers various characteristics and traits as well as safety strategies for transporting children with each type of special need. This comprehensive training covers all types of special needs and how to recognize the uniqueness of each child. Drivers and monitors learn how to adapt and provide for individual needs relating to verbal/nonverbal communication styles, loading/unloading, positive strategies for addressing behavior challenges and managing crisis situations.

### *Success in Milwaukee*

First Student has held a long-term partnership for more than 30 years with Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Each day, 159 of the more than 500 routes that are operated by First Student are to transport between 1,200 – 1,500 students with physical disabilities and special needs. And while each and every child transported is important, some children require more attention and time than others to ensure their ride is safe, comfortable and stress-free.



## *A Caring Commitment to Special Needs Students - Milwaukee Public Schools - Milwaukee, Wis.*

David Willis, First Student's Milwaukee location manager, has been in the industry transporting individuals with physical disabilities and special needs for 37 years. "What keeps me interested in this work is the same thing I most enjoyed when I first started... the children's excitement from the moment they see you at their doorstep until you put them onto the bus – it's the best part of your day," he says.

The driver/student/parent relationship is extremely important to David. Some MPS bus drivers maintain the same route for several years — proudly watching their special needs student riders grow up into high school graduates. His driving team is specially chosen. They show patience, courtesy and understanding to student riders and their parents. Open sessions at monthly safety meetings allow drivers to share testimonials and request support from others if a behavioral issue emerges. According to David, "We learn so much from sitting down with our drivers and listening to the unique situations on their buses. Some drivers may have discovered what works well for them and share their thoughts with another driver who needs advice. Or First Student will reach out to the District for expertise to identify solutions with the drivers."

First Student remains diligent about ensuring compliance with new state standards and developing new best practices. With an unsurpassed network of support, David and his team can focus on the children. David observes, "We focus on our passengers. Our drivers have such a compassionate attitude toward the children they transport. No matter what happens, they go the extra mile to take care of them as their own."

