HOW TO BUY A BUS

FREE eBook

The Ultimate Guide

Everything your organization needs to know to make an informed decision that's right for your specific needs and budget.
WELCOME

This guide is designed to help you make a more informed buying decision. It’s not a sales tool or a product catalog. Knowing the lingo shows a bus salesperson you know what you’re talking about and helps build trust. Being educated before you shop also helps you know what questions to ask.

When you buy from Alliance Bus Group, we’re Along for the Whole Ride.® We’ll help you keep up with everything from evolving regulations to maintenance issues. After all, our business is built on service and reputation, and we depend on the relationships we build. But even if you buy somewhere else, we hope the information in this guide will help you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**

- How to Buy a Bus: **4**

**ASSESSING YOUR NEEDS**

- How Many Passengers?
  **5**
- Do You Require Storage?
  **7**
- Do Your Passengers Have Special Needs?
  **8**
- How Many Miles?
  **8**
- How Long Does the Bus Need to Last?
  **9**
- What Kind of Warranty Do You Need?
  **9**
- Where Will the Vehicle Be Parked?
  **9**
- In What Kind of Climate Will the Bus Operate?
  **10**
- How Important Is Safety?
  **10**
- What Interior Options Are Needed?
  **12**
- Graphics or Logos?
  **13**

**WHAT TYPE OF FINANCING IS BEST?**

- Traditional Loan Finance: **13**
- Loan Finance with Balloon: **14**
- Fleet Line of Credit: **14**
- Lease Purchase: **15**
- Trac Lease: **15**
- FMV Lease: **15**
- Municipality Lease: **16**

**WHAT ARE THE MAINTENANCE AND OPERATING COSTS?**

- Fuel Costs: **17**
- Engine Types: **18**
- Routine Maintenance: **19**
- What Are Insurance Options?: **19**

**SAFETY AND OTHER MODIFICATIONS**

- Wheelchair Lifts: **20**
- Booster Seats: **21**
- Safety Belts: **22**

**SAFETY, LICENSE, AND COMPLIANCE ISSUES**

- Safety Considerations: **25**
- State Regulations: **26**
- License and Driver Requirements: **26**
- Vehicle Requirements: **28**

**SPECIFIC REGULATIONS FOR CHURCH BUSES**

- Exemptions: **29**
- Examples: **30**

**SPECIFIC REGULATIONS FOR SENIOR CARE BUSES**

- Records: **30**
- Training: **32**
- Safety: **33**
- Miscellaneous: **33**

**SPECIFIC REGULATIONS FOR CHILD CARE BUSES:**

- Records: **32**
- Training: **32**
- Safety: **33**
- Miscellaneous: **33**

**SHOULD I CONSIDER A USED BUS?**

- What to Look for in a Used Bus: **34**
- Other Tips on Buying a Used Bus: **35**
- Maintenance and Other Costs: **35**
- More Things to Consider When Buying a Used Bus: **36**

**AFTERWORD**

**38**
INTRODUCTION

This is not an Alliance Bus Group product catalog or sales tool. At Alliance Bus Group, we understand how important it is to make an informed decision that serves your organization’s unique needs, fits your budget for both the short and long term, complies with regulations, and doesn’t come with red tape and administrative headaches.

The information in this document is provided as a service to help you make an informed decision and avoid headaches.

It shouldn’t be a surprise that most first-time buyers find the bus-buying process confusing. The truth is that even experienced operators of large fleets can find the process frustrating. There are quite a few questions to answer when purchasing a bus.

**These questions might include:**

- What kind of licenses will we need?
- What kind of regulatory issues will we face?
- What happens when regulations change?
- Can I customize my bus with graphics or logos?
- Is it more cost effective to buy one bus for 30 passengers, or two for 15?
- What should I do about passengers with special needs?
- After I buy my bus, what will it cost to operate every year?
- Am I better off buying a new or used bus?

**We hope this ebook helps make the process at least a little easier.**

This ebook is designed to give you, the reader, an easy-to-follow guide for purchasing a bus for your organization. Whenever possible, details about regulations are included, including links to other online resources.
Throughout the book you’ll also find numerous questions designed to get you thinking about what you really need from a bus. Thinking carefully and realistically about your organization’s needs and resources is the best way to choose a bus that will provide the best solution.

Remember that purchasing a bus can represent a significant investment for anyone. Typical prices vary widely based on needs and options, but usually range from $45,000 for a basic new 15-passenger bus up to $500,000 or more for a deluxe touring coach with all the bells and whistles.

The purchase price of a bus is only part of its true cost. Keep in mind that there are other expenses such as fuel, maintenance, repairs, driver training, storage, insurance and licensing fees that can put the true cost of bus ownership at a level you may not be budgeting for. Familiarizing yourself with these other cost factors helps you make an informed purchasing decision.

**ASSESSING YOUR NEEDS**

Before you start seriously considering a bus purchase, there are a number of factors you can use to start framing your thinking, including budget, number of passengers and the culture of your organization.

Most importantly, you must consider the actual use of your bus and the specific needs of your passengers. For example, did you know different regulations apply if a bus is used to take children to and from school than if that same bus took those same children anywhere else?

**Let’s start with a few basic questions:**

**HOW MANY PASSENGERS?**

This question involves more than counting the number of passengers you plan to move on a regular basis. For example, let’s say you need a Multifunction School and Activity Bus (M.F.S.A.B) for a childcare service or pre-school. Hypothetically, let’s also say you carry an average of 30 passengers a day. In this case, a bus that carries at least 30
passengers might seem like the right solution. On the other hand, two buses designed to carry 15 passengers might be a better solution. How do you know which option to go with?

You don’t want to leave anyone behind (obviously!), but buses are designed for optimal rides when they are at least three-quarters full. You may want to allow for growth, but you don’t want to have too many empty seats—that can be as bad as having too few.

Accounting for growth is especially important for start-up schools and childcare organizations, and for senior centers, especially when the centers aren’t full. Take senior centers as an example. As the population ages and more seniors seek senior care facilities, there is a greater need for safe group transportation. This trend will continue as the baby boomer generation grows older. US census data predicts the population of people aged 65 and up to reach 55 million by 2020 and 72 million by 2030 (up 80 percent from 40 million in 2010). Of these adults, the population aged 85 and over is expected to reach 6.6 million by 2020 and 8.7 million by 2030 (up 53 percent from 5.7 million in 2010).

Consider the following:

• If you are picking up passengers and bringing them to a single location (i.e. a school), how large a geographic area do you serve? Remember to consider fuel costs.
• If your buses will be used for activities, field trips, or other outings, will all the passengers be going to the same place? If not, a single bus might limit your options.
• If you are making multiple trips, will a single bus limit your schedule options?
• If your group tends to stay together, will a larger bus allow more passengers to participate in activities?
• If you do plan to use two buses, do you have the staff on hand to drive the vehicles?

In short, you will want to ensure the bus has enough seats for all of the passengers since you don’t want to leave anyone behind. The bus must also comply with all regulations, accommodate any passengers’ special needs and make the most efficient use of your financial resources.

Also, keep in mind that not all passengers are the same size. Some take up more space than others. If your bus
accommodates passengers with disabilities or special needs, extra storage space and accessibility features may result in significant loss of seat space.

Finally, account for growth. 30 passengers today might be 40 in two years. How long do you plan to use your bus?

**DO YOU REQUIRE STORAGE?**

If you are purchasing a new bus, it can be configured with overhead luggage storage inside the cab as well as rear storage with or without a rear wall. Undercarriage storage is available on larger models designed to carry at least 27 passengers. This is an important factor to consider if your bus will be used for overnight trips.

It is also important for those operating Senior Care facilities to think about what special features may be required for elderly passengers. Some buses are better than others when it comes to accommodating wheelchairs, walkers, oxygen tanks and more. If that bus takes seniors on shopping trips, consider room for purchases as well. Be sure to ask about these features early whenever talking with a bus dealer.

For buses serving schools, consider what types of storage options work best for band or sports equipment, books, electronic devices, booster seats, and other learning and accessibility tools.

Providing storage space means that some potential seat space might have to be sacrificed, which might necessitate a larger vehicle or multiple smaller vehicles.
Once you’ve accessed your needs, there are three basic options to consider:

1. **Front or Rear luggage compartments (available with or without a rear wall)**
   Appropriate for collapsible walkers and wheelchairs, smaller luggage items, book bags and backpacks, emergency and medical equipment, and more.

2. **Under floor storage compartments**
   Appropriate for full-size luggage, equipment, and more.

3. **Overhead storage compartments:**
   Appropriate for bags, books, coats, backpacks, purses, and other small items.

Remember that some passengers may require assistance using any storage options.

**DO YOUR PASSENGERS HAVE SPECIAL NEEDS?**

If you are transporting seniors or children with disabilities or other special needs, you might need to consider accessibility issues beyond those required by local regulations. For example, you might need a wheelchair lift, a lower point of entry, or additional space for storing oxygen tanks, wheelchairs, or walkers. Wheelchair lifts are discussed later in this document.

**HOW MANY MILES?**

Is your bus going to take lots of short trips or more infrequent long trips? In addition to the number of buses needed, understanding how much punishment your bus will endure helps determine what engine is best and whether you are
better off with a new or used bus.

If the bus you plan to buy needs to operate at low speeds and make frequent starts and stops, hours of operation may be a more important factor than miles. A reputable dealer can advise you.

**HOW LONG DOES THE BUS NEED TO LAST?**

How long do you expect to keep your new bus in operation? Owning a bus for a longer period of time can reduce acquisition costs, but can seriously increase maintenance costs — and all buses require significantly more maintenance than a typical automobile. If you don’t have easy access to affordable service facilities, consider warranty options in your purchasing strategy. A bus with an impressive manufacturer’s warranty or reputation for quality may be worth a few extra dollars each month in the long run. Speaking of:

**WHAT KIND OF WARRANTY DO YOU NEED?**

One of the many ways the bus industry differs from the automotive industry lies in how warranties are handled. Most new bus purchases do not come with a single, all-encompassing warranty plan. The chassis, body, rear air conditioner, video system, and even the tires can all have separate warranties and an excruciatingly long list of contacts to deal with in order to resolve any problems. It’s best to choose a dealer that is willing and able to help you navigate the warranty maze and handle or at least direct you to reputable local service providers. Additionally, each warranty varies in length and mileage, so get a detailed explanation of each component’s warranty plan for the bus you are considering.

Alliance Bus Group is one of the only bus providers with a comprehensive customer support team that includes warranty support as part of a full-featured service and training program.

**WHERE WILL THE VEHICLE BE PARKED?**

...
An oversize garage, barn or even a shed can improve appearance and trade-in value years down the road in addition to extending the serviceable life of your bus. If you expect a bus to be exposed to the elements day-in and day-out, plan for a shorter vehicle life. This isn’t always a bad thing since some buses are designed to last longer than others.

**IN WHAT KIND OF CLIMATE WILL THE BUS OPERATE?**

Depending on climate, requirements for both heating and air conditioning should be a real concern for bus buyers. Most small buses can be equipped with optional front and rear air conditioning for maximum occupant comfort. Remember, there is more to consider in an air conditioning system than just its output.

Keep in mind that the climate control system will be either a dual compressor or tie-in. A dual compressor system is one with an additional compressor. This gives greater cooling than a tie-in and is usually more efficient. This is a big advantage for buses operating in warmer parts of the country. A tie-in system that uses the OEM compressor with an added evaporator and condenser is less expensive and will usually work for smaller buses operating in cool climates.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS SAFETY?**

One can never have enough safety when buying a bus. However, it is important to strike a balance between top-notch safety features and budget-friendly options. There are a whole host of new options to consider, including better seat belts, wheelchair restraints, electronic sensors, and cameras.

**Backup Cameras**

- Typically cost less than $1,000
- Often automatically engage when the bus is put into reverse, showing what is behind the vehicle
- Larger vehicles can be equipped with side cameras to show traffic in the adjacent lane
- Cameras are usually activated with the turn signal
Interior Surveillance Cameras:

- Similar to ones found in classrooms, banks, etc.
- Can be added to virtually any bus
- Record activity inside the bus, providing evidence in case of an incident

Seat Belts:

- Federal legislation does not require them on buses with a gross vehicle weight (GVWR) of more than 10,000 pounds
- Some buses feature two-point seat belts, which only fasten across the hips
- Three-point belts are in high use and are recognized as the most effective type of restraint

Wheelchair restraints have also improved significantly. They are now much easier to operate with several automatic tensioning or locking mechanisms and have easier restraint-to-floor anchoring systems such as L-Track and Solo or Slide-n-Click floor anchors. These options make the process of safely securing a wheelchair occupant much easier and quicker.

Wheelchair Restraints:

- More popular and prevalent on buses transporting those with special needs
- Automatic tensioning or locking mechanisms like L-Track, Solo and Slide-n-Click floor anchors have simplified operation
- Improved restraint-to-floor anchoring systems also make securing a wheelchair occupant much easier

Mirrors:
WHAT INTERIOR OPTIONS ARE NEEDED?

Bus manufacturers offer a wide range of products. Fit, finish, and amenities speak volumes about the vehicle’s quality. Think carefully about what your passengers expect to experience once they step inside the bus. Whether you need the barest of vinyl seating or top-end leather, most dealers can offer a wide range of options, especially if your bus is custom built.

New seating system options make the interior arrangements and floor plans more comfortable.

• Side sliders are an option that allows the aisle seat to move closer to the center, allowing for additional hip and shoulder room
• Footrests and overhead storage are also frequently requested
• Lap trays, book or magazine storage and beverage holders are increasing in popularity such that they are becoming standard on many bus options
• As discussed earlier, rear luggage compartments and under floor storage compartments are popular options since they do not take away from occupant space
• Wheelchairs can be secured in place, allowing passengers to ride safely and comfortably without transferring to another seat. As a rule of thumb, accommodating a wheelchair requires the removal of two conventional seats

Vehicle electronics have also made huge advancements over the past five years. Many schools now outfit their buses with DVD players and video screens. The cost of a DVD system has decreased considerably in the last five years, with a one-screen system costing as little as $1,500. Mobile Wireless Internet access using a wireless router and Satellite TV are popular options for tour and charter bus companies, but typically require an additional monthly fee. The right bus provider can include these options in virtually any size bus.
As you can see, there are virtually endless combinations of interior options. Make a checklist of the features you and your passengers require prior to visiting bus dealers. Also be sure your dealer has the options that best meet your needs and budget, and can work within your budget early in the process. Don’t let a dealer representing one or a limited number of bus brands talk you into a bus that doesn’t fit your organization’s needs 100%. There are always other options.

**GRAPHICS OR LOGOS?**

Today, a growing number of organizations like businesses, churches and civic groups are sensitive to presenting the best possible image or representation of their organization to their community. The bus you choose says a lot about your organization.

*In addition, state regulations require specific identification graphics, as discussed later in this document.*

Basic body paint can cost from $1500 to $5000 (ballpark!), depending on the size of your vehicle. A number of other options are also available. The most common are “car safe” vinyl film decals, printed from your digital files (logos, text, etc.), which can be dye cut and applied seamlessly. These generally start at around $40 each, but can rise with larger images. Be sure the price you are quoted includes application and, if necessary, removal.

You can even wrap your entire bus, including perforated window graphics, for prices starting at just around $8,000 and up to around $12,000, including application and removal.

**WHAT TYPE OF FINANCING IS BEST?**

When purchasing a bus, you have a lot of financing options to consider, whether leasing or purchasing. In general, there are six types of financing options available, each with its own specific advantages. Choosing the right option involves knowing how you plan to use the bus, how long you plan to use it, what will happen when you replace the bus and your target budget for monthly payments.
Alliance Bus Group has created an online tool to help you learn more about financing and explore different payment options. You can access it at: (URL TO COME). In the mean time, here is a summary of some of the most popular financing types.

Alliance Bus Group is one of the only bus providers to provide a full-time finance department. Because we are an active part of the financing process we can tailor finance options to fit your organization’s specific needs. This goes well beyond what a typical financial institution can do for the average bus buyer. To find out more about how Alliance Bus Group’s financing options can help you, call (number)

**TRADITIONAL LOAN FINANCE**

Most businesses rely on traditional loans because, because they own their bus straight up at the end of the loan period, and because accounting and long-range planning are simpler. Advantages include:

- Sales tax is billed at purchase
- You own the bus and keep the depreciation benefits
- Bus purchase will reflect on your financial statements

This loan type is often appropriate for schools, childcare organizations, senior centers, charter bus operators and most others.

**LOAN FINANCE WITH BALLOON**

A Balloon loan is like a tradition loan, but may offer lower payments because the purchase doesn’t fully amortize over the course of the loan. This leaves a final “balloon” payment, usually 20 or 40 percent, due at the end. The final payment can often be refinanced at market rates.

This loan type is often appropriate for schools, childcare organizations and others.
FLEET LINE OF CREDIT

Businesses with a large or ongoing need for buses tend to rely on Fleet Lines of Credit. They offer flexibility to make new purchases quickly and easily.

- Helps streamline the funding process, giving you more time to keep buses running on schedule
- Quick and easy buying process
- Loan or lease options available for each purchase
- When you need growth, you’re already approved

This loan type may be appropriate for organizations that operate large fleets of buses.

LEASE PURCHASE

Using a lease purchase combines lower, fixed monthly payments with the guaranteed right to purchase at the conclusion of the term for a predetermined price. Lease purchases are popular with businesses that prefer lower monthly payments, but want to retain full ownership at the end of the term.

- Keep the depreciation benefits, which can result in savings when itemizing taxes.
- Preserve your credit line
- Zero down payment available
- Sales tax is billed monthly (in most states)

This lease type is often appropriate for senior centers, charter bus operators and others.

TRAC LEASE
A Trac (Terminal Rental Adjustment Clause) Lease offers many of the same benefits of a true lease, but it is designed specifically for over-the-road vehicles like buses. Special provisions of the tax code allow for predetermined end-of-lease valuations. Trac Leases are typically popular with larger, for-profit businesses as well as some others.

- Equipment does not reflect on your balance sheet
- Lower rates available due to depreciation kept by the Lessor
- Zero down payment available (depending on credit and payment)
- Purchase your bus at an agreed upon residual at expiration
- Sales tax is billed monthly (in most states)

This lease type is often appropriate for senior centers, charter bus operators and others.

**FMV LEASE**

A Fair Market Value (FMV) Lease can provide greater flexibility and lower monthly payments, especially for those in the (include business types). Sometimes you can also “walk away” at the end of the lease to buy another bus, or purchase the leased vehicle at fair market value.

- Equipment does not reflect on your balance sheet
- Zero down payment available (depending on credit and payment)
- Sales tax is billed monthly (in most states)
- Walk away from your equipment at the lease expiration with no obligations
- Equipment may be purchased at the lease expiration

This loan type is often appropriate for Senior Centers, Charter Bus Operators and others.

**MUNICIPALITY LEASE**
A Municipality Lease is a tax-exempt financing option designed to meet the special needs of state and local municipalities. These entities include school districts and any organization where the interest paid is exempt from federal income taxes.

If you qualify as a municipality, you can often find extremely low rates because of the tax exemption treatment that is provided.

This lease type is only available to government organizations.

WHAT ARE THE MAINTENANCE AND OPERATING COSTS?

FUEL COSTS

The cost of fuel can vary dramatically from bus to bus. As a rule, newer buses get significantly better mileage than used buses, which is an important factor to consider when determining the overall cost of owning and operating your vehicle or fleet.

When comparing buses, calculate the average mileage you drive, remembering to factor in both highway and surface miles. Then, look at the fuel efficiency of each vehicle you are considering. Compare that cost to the difference in monthly payments. That will help you know what you can expect to spend on fuel annually, which should assist you in making a more financially and socially responsible decision for your budget and organizational values.

Mileage can vary greatly based on:

- Bus type — is it a large bus or a small bus? Is it a gas engine or a diesel engine?
- Geography — are you in a hilly or flat region?
- Route — are you driving locally around town or doing longer trips over highways?
- Capacity — is the bus being driven with a few passengers or many passengers?
A good estimate for mid-size buses is approximately 10mpg (gas) and 12mpg (diesel).

**ENGINE TYPES**

Several chassis and engine configurations are available for buses. Some people assume a diesel engine is the best option for any bus, but there are several gasoline engines available that get satisfactory fuel mileage and will last as long as most diesels. One challenge with diesel engines is that there is often a considerable upcharge, sometimes more than $12,000 in a small bus cutaway chassis.

**Gas Engines**

When buying a new bus, a conventional gas engine is almost always the most affordable option, at least at the time of initial purchase. In fact, on an average new vehicle, a gas model costs about $4,000 to $8,000 less than a diesel model. Plus, it’s easier to find mechanics to work on a gas engine since they are the dominant engine type across North America.

**Diesel Engines**

Diesel engines usually last longer than gas engines and get better mileage per gallon. The question for you is, does the planned use of a bus warrant the extra up-front expense of $7,000 or more? Diesel engines get roughly two miles per gallon higher fuel economy and normally logs around 100,000 miles before needing major mechanical repairs. This is why we recommend taking a realistic look at how you plan to use the bus before deciding up on features. The cost-to-benefit ratio for a diesel engine just may not be there unless you’re looking at purchasing a larger bus.
ROUTINE MAINTENANCE

Preventive Maintenance (PM), Lube Oil & Filter (LOF) the “A” denotes basic. Sometimes services are simple referred to as “A”, “B”, “C”

Vehicle starts new and the services begin as the mileage start. Example

3000 miles / 6 months “A” Service (LOF)
6000 miles / 12 months “B” Service (LOF + Fuel Filter “diesel only”)
9000 miles / 18 months “A” Service (LOF)
12000 Miles / 24 months “C” Service (LOF + Brake Check + Air Filter + Fuel Filter “diesel only”)
15000 Miles / 30 months “A” Service (LOF)

30000 Miles / 60 months “A” Service (LOF + Trans Service)

Annual Aux A/C Check and Service
Annual Bus Body Maintenance, Lube egress and entry doors pivots, linkage, Seam Inspection and Maintenance
Annual / 800 Cycles W/C Lift Lube, Adjust & Inspection

Vehicles operated at low speeds or idle most of the day service should be based on Hours not Miles

WHAT ARE INSURANCE OPTIONS?

Insuring a bus or fleet is one of the most significant and important financial decisions you will make. It’s important to feel safe and secure in the knowledge that you have the proper insurance coverage in the event that you file a claim. You’ll want to be sure your bus can be repaired or replaced and that any liabilities are covered.

For example, if you are buying a coach for charter use, you are required to have at least $5 million in coverage. For
private use, costs can vary with the age, purchase price and replacement value.

(Note for design: Include the two copy paragraphs below in some sort of sidebar or call-out)

Alliance Bus Group refers many churches to Church Mutual Insurance for insurance questions. Church Mutual provides a number of extremely helpful documents and information to insure your church’s insurance needs and plans are fully met. Please visit Church Mutual’s web site at http://www.churchmutual.com/.

Alliance Bus Group also recommends WS Pharr, a local Atlanta full service insurance agency to provide the best insurance coverage options to meet your needs. WS Pharr is a full service agency offering property and casualty insurance expertise in the Transportation industry for more than 25 years. Transportation insurance is actually their specialty.

WS Pharr & Company’s client service team has the depth of experience necessary to provide insurance and risk management solutions for either a single vehicle or a larger fleet. Building on long-standing, solid relationships with their underwriters, WS Pharr obtains the best policy terms at the most competitive rates from reputable insurance carriers from around the world. You can visit WS Pharr online at http://www.wspharr.com/.

SAFETY AND OTHER MODIFICATIONS

School Buses and MFSABs must meet more stringent state and federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards because they transport children. These regulations are designed to provide enhanced protection for their occupants in the event of a crash. Features such as high-back padded seats, stronger seat mounts, and enhanced rollover protection significantly reduce injuries and fatalities. When you make your purchase, you will want to ensure that your bus meets all state regulations, can be upgraded or modified if regulations change, and provides the level of safety that meets your organization’s own high standards.

In general, federal laws cover the construction and safety features of your bus, so any new or late model used buses should be compliant. Unless you are buying a older used bus, your bus should already be compliant with federal laws. If you have any doubts, ask a reputable dealer.
Other regulations can vary from state to state — and often do. When making your purchase decision, make sure you are 100 percent compliant with your state’s specific regulations to avoid costly fines and to ensure your bus is legally able to keep rolling. That will take some research, but the following sections offer an overview of some of the most important regulatory issues you’ll have to keep in mind.

**IsMyBusCompliant.com**

Compliance research can be a time-consuming headache. Alliance Bus Group developed this tool to help you quickly and easily get your specific state’s regulations as well as Federal guidelines.

**WHEELCHAIR LIFTS**

Unless there are other specific regulations in your state or unless your organization is accommodating a significant number of people with physical disabilities, a wheelchair lift is not usually a necessary option. Instead, businesses tend to install wheelchair lifts to satisfy the specific needs of passengers. Assess your specific needs before exploring this option.

Investing in a wheelchair lift increases the purchase price of a bus by approximately $5,000, while requiring the removal of five fixed seats from the passenger area. To assist in making your decision, consider your passengers’ specific needs, expected future growth and your state’s regulations.

Of course, if your organization transports seniors (or any population with a larger than average proportion of people with disabilities or special needs), your situation may make a wheelchair lift essential. You may also want to ensure that your bus features a “kneeling” or lower entrance threshold. You should also ensure that your bus offers ample space for storing wheelchairs, walkers, oxygen tanks and any other equipment common to your passengers.
KNEELING BUSES

A kneeling bus has no steps between the door and the bus floor, along with an air-adjustable suspension. This feature allows the driver to actually lower the bus to the curb to make entering and exiting the bus much easier for seniors and other people with special accessibility needs. Even wheelchair access is made easier.

By depressing a button inside of the bus, the operator is able to release air from the front air bag suspension. This allows the kneeling bus to slowly drop down from its normal ride height. Once the passengers have made their way on or off the bus, the switch is released, and the suspension once again fills with air. This brings the kneeling bus back to normal operational height.

Along with the airlift system, the kneeling bus has no stairs or steps on the interior of the bus to impede traffic. Passengers who use wheelchairs, or any passenger who may have difficulty climbing steps, can navigate the entrance of a kneeling bus much more easily. Typically, the doors and aisles of a kneeling bus are also wider than the same areas in a standard bus, making access much easier for seniors.

Cons: While the buses make it more convenient to load and unload, there is additional wear and tear on the bus’s suspension, extra fuel used in the buildup of air to the system and a longer load time. The latter isn’t an issue for most senior centers, but the others should be considered when exploring options.

BOOSTER SEATS

If your bus will be used to transport young children, you’ll want to check your state’s regulations carefully before you make a purchasing decision to ensure that your purchase can comply. A reputable dealer should be able to advice you. You should consider the following:

In most states, all children over 20 pounds and one year of age are required to sit in a forward-facing booster and wear a full harness until the child reaches at least 40 pounds. In a 15-Passenger bus, children under age six must...
be in an appropriate child restraint system (a car or booster seat). That means that your bus must either be equipped with booster/safety seats, or must have appropriate lap and/or shoulder belts for securing seats in place. Make sure your bus can accommodate these requirements, or (especially in the case of a used bus) can be modified to do so. If modifications are necessary, consider the costs against the cost of a new bus.

Child passenger restraint requirements vary state to state and are based on age, weight and height. Often, this is broken down into three stages:

**Toddlers use forward-facing child safety seats. In most states, all children over 20 pounds and one year of age are required to sit in a forward-facing booster and wear a full harness until the child reaches at least 40 pounds.**

**Older children use booster seats. In a 15 -Passenger bus, children under age six must be in an appropriate child restraint system (a car booster seat).**

**Infants use rear-facing infant seats**

In addition to potentially endangering children, not making the right purchasing decision can have significant impact on your bottom line. For example: First offense fines for not complying with a state’s child passenger safety laws vary from $10 to $500. Some states also use driver’s license points as an additional penalty for noncompliance. In worst-case scenarios, a regulator may prohibit the operation of your vehicle until upgrades are complete — making it difficult to continue running your business or organization as it should.

In addition to potentially endangering children, not making the right purchasing decision can have significant impact on your bottom line. For example? First offense fines for not complying with a state’s child passenger safety laws
A few more important facts regarding the regulation of buses carrying children (as of 2013) that you’ll want to keep in mind when buying your bus:

- All 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the Virgin Islands require child safety seats for infants and children fitting specific criteria
- 48 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico require booster seats or other appropriate devices for children who have outgrown their child safety seats but are still too small to use an adult seat belt safely
- The only states lacking booster seat laws are Florida and South Dakota
- 5 states (California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey and New York) have seat belt requirements for school buses. Texas requires them on buses purchased after September 2010

**SAFETY BELTS**

For larger buses, the federal law changed in November, 2013: new tour buses and buses that provide service between cities must be equipped with seat belts starting in late 2016.

5 states (California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey and New York) have seat belt requirements for school buses. Texas requires them on buses purchased after September 2010.

More laws are likely to follow. To be prepared and stay current, there are two times you can make a change—before the law requires it, or after. The former is a more fiscally sound choice.

Seat belts can add about $3,000 to the price of a new, 54-passenger bus. You have to weigh that cost against the cost of making modifications later (the price isn’t likely to go down, after all) and the cost of potential liability. Which way do you go? It’s important to be a responsible financial steward, and to maximize return on investment. So the question...
is important: even if your state doesn’t require safety belts, should you make the investment?

First, some laws may already apply to you. For example, did you know all new school buses weighing 10,000 pounds or less must have lap-shoulder belts? However, most state rules allow you to continue transporting children in older school buses and MFSABs without seat belts. However, each state has its own regulations and regulations often change. A bus that’s grandfathered now may not be in coming months.

Of course, even if you have the belts available, you may still not be compliant—children must be using them to remain in compliance with licensing rules and regulations. Moreover, they must be used correctly. Make sure your dealer offers training, and can keep you up-to-date as the laws continue to tighten.

Seatbelts do more than keep kids safe in accidents. They also protect your bus from its passengers. Unfortunately, children get rowdy on the bus. They stand up in their seats, turn around and talk to the children behind them — sometimes while walking the aisle. Seatbelts have been shown to reduce instances of vandalism by keeping kids in one place, which can also save money over the long run. This is often called compartmentalization.

Compartmentalization only works when students are sitting in their seats, facing forward and with their feet on the floor. Schools and child care centers integrating lap-shoulder belts along with an enforced usage policy often see a significant improvement in student discipline. As an added benefit, drivers are not only less distracted but also more satisfied with their jobs.

So to recap, there are compliance, liability, and discipline issues to weigh against the cost of seatbelts. There is one more thing to keep in mind. Safety is, of course, the most important factor of all. Even though some states don’t require safety belts for all buses, we absolutely recommend them.

**SAFETY, LICENSE, AND COMPLIANCE ISSUES**

**Safety Considerations**
New tour buses and buses that provide service between cities must be equipped with seat belts starting in late 2016 under a new federal rule passed in November, 2013. In addition, most organizations decide voluntarily to purchase retractable seat belts for their new buses. Used buses are sometimes retrofitted to include seat belts. Your organization will have to consider this, as well as the issues discussed below, when making your purchase decision.

**State Regulations**

State regulations change regularly and usually with good reason. Be sure to purchase your bus from a provider who is knowledgeable and active in working with state agencies on defining the rules. These providers will ensure you stay informed when regulations that impact your vehicle or fleet change. A good bus partner will also let you know the best way to modify your vehicle to stay in compliance.

(Alliance Bus Group has worked with state legislatures often to make sure compliance regulations are realistic and reasonably applied to organizations who operate buses. As a result, we consider ourselves to be the foremost experts on keeping our customers compliant and reducing the risk of fines.)

**License and Driver Requirements**

As with regulations, each state has its own requirements for licensing. In general, you need a Commercial Driver’s License with a Passenger Endorsement if you drive a vehicle with more than 15 passengers. This license is not difficult to obtain, but it does require written and in-person driver’s tests, a Department of Transportation (DOT) physical and possibly other testing. Maintaining a group of CDL drivers can quickly become a burden.

Because the cost-per-passenger can be much less than for a non-CDL bus, licensing should be a prime consideration prior to purchase. If you purchase a bus to serve 15 passengers or less, your drivers usually won’t need a Commercial Drivers License. Check with your state DMV for proper licensing requirements.

When making your purchase decision, you have to keep the following in mind, and remember that the regulations vary state-to-state. Choose a dealer that can advise you and, ideally, provide training. If you don’t buy your used bus from a
1. In general, a driver seeking a CDL must:
   • Be in good health — many states actually require drivers to obtain a health certificate
   • Be at least 21 years of age
   • Speak and read English well enough to do his or her job and respond to official questions
   • Be able to drive the vehicle safely
   • Be able to determine whether the vehicle is safely loaded
   • Have only one valid driver’s license
   • Not have been convicted of motor violations in the past 12 months
   • Have a valid medical certificate
   • Not be disqualified to drive a commercial motor vehicle

2. The driver must comply with the following safety requirements:
   • Be sure the vehicle is safe and properly working before each trip and ensure that emergency equipment is in place
   • Buses must stop at all railroad crossings
   • The parking brake must be set when a driver leaves a vehicle unattended.
   • Emergency warning devices must be activated in an emergency
   • Headlights must be used from one-half hour after sunset to one-half hour before sunrise (or anytime there is not enough light to see clearly 500 feet away)
   • Drivers who are involved in an accident must stop immediately and assist injured persons and take steps to prevent additional accidents at the scene
   • Drivers must not smoke when the vehicle is being fueled
   • Written permission from the owner of the vehicle is necessary for passengers to ride
   • Alcohol may not be consumed during the transport or four hours before transport.
   • The driver must not drive for more than 10 hours following eight consecutive hours off duty, drive after being on duty for 15 hours or drive after being on duty more than 60 hours in any seven consecutive days

A driver log is a helpful way to comply with regulations covering operating hours. Note: The purpose of this
requirement is to prevent driver fatigue; be careful about the requirement when your driver is also a professional driver for another organization, because the time is cumulative. Again, a reputable dealer should be able to advice you, even after the sale.

**VEHICLE REQUIREMENTS**

We’ve also assembled a few requirements you should be aware of prior to purchasing a bus. This list can be helpful when looking at both new and used buses. The vehicle must be marked on both sides with:

- The motor carrier’s name or trade name
- City and state of the church or organization
- Motor carrier identification number preceded by “USDOT”

You will be responsible for modifying your bus to be compliant. You dealer should be able to help.

**Ask any bus salesperson about the following:**

- Adequate exterior lighting
- Reflectors
- Electrical equipment
- Brakes
- Specified glazing and window construction
- Coupling devices and towing methods
- Emergency equipment
- Protection against shifting or falling cargo
- Appropriate frames
- Cab and body components
- Wheels
- Steering and suspension systems
- The vehicle’s fuel system must be maintained to the original manufacturer’s standards
• Push-out windows, emergency doors and emergency door marking lights in buses must be inspected at least every 90 days
• Records of vehicle maintenance must be maintained

After purchase, the bus must be inspected regularly, repaired and maintained. All vehicle parts and accessories must be in safe and proper working order at all times. Unless you have an existing resource for bus maintenance, ask your bus provider about how they help customers with maintenance. If they don’t have maintenance facilities nearby, ask how they plan to help you find a reliable maintenance provider. Don’t be afraid to expect this. Any good bus provider should be willing to be a partner for the entire lifecycle of ownership.

For more information about regulations, please visit this site:
http://www.IsMyBusCompliant.com

SPECIFIC REGULATIONS FOR CHURCH BUSES

Be sure your church bus serves the needs of your congregation while satisfying government regulations. Did you know churches that use buses or large vans to transport passengers across state lines may be subject to federal safety regulations for motor coaches and buses? The regulations apply to any interstate transportation of business private motor carriers of passengers and nonbusiness private motor carriers of passengers as these terms are defined by each state’s Department of Transportation (DOT).

There are exceptions to the rules in many states, and you will want to be sure you have a fair understanding before you start researching your options. The following sections outline issues that may impact your purchasing decision.

EXEMPTIONS

In many states, churches either will be exempt from the federal regulations altogether or will fall within the definition
A church that owns or leases a bus or van will be a “nonbusiness private motor carrier of passengers” if:

- The bus or van has a gross vehicle weight of 10,001 or more pounds or is designed to transport more than 15 passengers (including the driver) and
- The bus or van is “involved in interstate transportation of passengers,” which basically means taking the bus or van outside of the state where the church is located.

Local churches are exempt from the regulations if:

- They do not take the bus or van outside of the state where the church is located, or
- They do not own or lease a bus or van with a gross vehicle weight of 10,001 or more pounds and do not own or lease a bus or van that is designed to transport more than 15 passengers (including the driver).

**EXAMPLES**

A local church that is located in a town at a state line and has a van or bus that carries 16 passengers (including the driver) and crosses the state line to transport people to church every Sunday is subject to the federal regulations (regardless of the gross weight of the vehicle or number of passengers it holds). If this description fits your intended use, be sure to research federal regulations, as well as those of both states, and be sure to buy a bus that is 100 percent compliant.

On the other hand, a 20,000-pound bus designed to hold 50 passengers that is never used to cross state lines is exempt from the federal regulations. A 14,000-pound van that is designed to hold 18 passengers and occasionally crosses state lines is subject to the regulations. The same van that is never used to cross state lines is exempt from the regulations. In this case, your decision is a little easier. You will still want to ensure compliance.

**SPECIFIC REGULATIONS FOR SENIOR CARE BUSES**

At the time of this writing, no states have specific regulations that apply only to buses that carry senior passengers.
That means a wider range of purchasing options may be available to you. However, any ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) regulations apply to seniors and should be considered when making your decision.

Some examples to keep in mind when buying your bus include:

- As of 2012, buses that travel a fixed route (i.e. municipal buses or activity buses with a regular schedule and route) must be handicap accessible.
- Small demand responsive companies must provide accessible service to passengers with disabilities on a 48-hour advance notice. However, such companies are not required to fundamentally alter reservation practices or displace other passengers in order to meet these requirements.
- Small mixed service DRB (Demand Responsive Service) companies can meet the alternatives to the general rule for both small fixed route bus companies and small demand responsive companies by providing accessible service within 48 hours. Doing so allows such companies to comply with one set of requirements for all provided services.
- An accessible bus includes a lift for getting passengers who cannot climb steps onto a bus, specific locations for securing the wheelchair to prevent it from sliding, and other features to ease travel for passengers with disabilities.
- Some states have specific regulations about how wheelchairs and medical equipment such as oxygen tanks must be stored.

Based on your state, some of these regulations might apply to a private senior center bus, or they might apply in the near future. A reputable dealer should be able to advise you and, ideally, provide training. Make sure that’s the case when choosing your vendor. If you buy a used bus from a non-dealer source, you will be responsible for all compliance research.


Again, to ensure that your bus is compliant in your state, visit http://www.IsMyBusCompliant.com. A report containing the appropriate regulations for your state and industry can be emailed directly to you. Since the regulations can change, you should visit that site annually.
**SPECIFIC REGULATIONS FOR SCHOOL BUSES:**

School bus regulations vary from state. The following guidelines are typical and consistent with most state regulations. You’ll want to keep them all in mind when choosing your bus.

Check your state’s specific regulations before making a purchase. Alliance Bus Group can help you stay up-to-date on regulatory changes. If you buy a bus elsewhere, you need to monitor changes regularly and make any necessary modifications immediately. Your dealer should be able to advise you, and keep you advised after the sale when regulations change, and provide training.

Again, to ensure that your bus is compliant in your state, visit http://www.IsMyBusCompliant.com. A report containing the appropriate regulations for your state and industry can be emailed directly to you. Since the regulations can change, you should visit the site annually.

**RECORDS**

Most states also require private schools to maintain a record of the school bus safety instruction provided by the school for the previous year. The record must indicate the name and location of the school, the date of the instruction, supervising adults, number of participating students, student grade levels, subjects covered, time taken for the instruction, bus driver’s name, and the bus number. Your dealer should provide training on these issues.

Many states require private schools to implement a policy for reporting complaints related to school transportation safety and maintain a written record of complaints received. Within 30 days after the end of the school year, nonpublic schools must provide a copy of the written record of complaints to the commissioner of motor vehicles. Private schools must also make written reports to the commissioner of any accident involving a motor vehicle and a student pedestrian near a designated school bus stop within 10 days of the incident. Consider the administrative costs when making your purchase decision. It make affect your final budget decision.

**TRAINING**
In many states, private schools are required to provide instruction in school bus emergency procedures, and passenger safety for any students transported in a school bus or school pupil activity bus. The instruction must be given at least once a year to all transported pupils, prekindergarten through grade 8. In addition, safety instruction must be given prior to departures on a school activity trip, including instruction on the location of emergency exits and location and use of emergency equipment. The school must maintain a record for one year documenting the details of the instruction.

The cost of training must be factored in to the cost of purchasing your bus.

**SAFETY**

In general, states require private school buses to be inspected once or twice yearly to determine if they are safe, fit for operation, and properly equipped in accordance with state-specific regulations. The costs of upkeep and repairs should be factored in to your purchase decision, especially if you are considering a used bus.

In most states, private school bus drivers must be over 21 years of age, have at least one year of driving experience, and hold a valid school bus driver permit. A few states require one or two days of annual safety workshops or training in addition to an initial training program of approximately 40 hours. Some states will reimburse private schools for the cost of the training. Your dealer should be able to advise you.

In most states, private schools must immediately suspend a driver, pending a hearing, for the use of nonprescription controlled substances or alcoholic beverages during work hours.

Many states have regulations which state that private school buses must be equipped with seatback crash pads that meet the standards established by each state’s Motor Vehicle Administration. Again, consider these administrative costs, and factor them into the costs of operating your vehicle.

**MISCELLANEOUS**
Most states require an additional license fee, usually under $25 dollars, for school buses, including any used by private or charter schools. Another budget factor, albeit a minor one.

Some states allow collected fuel taxes to be returned to private and charter schools, which may impact your budgetary decisions.

Florida and some other states allow private and charter schools with racially nondiscriminatory student admission policies to purchase school buses through state pool purchase programs. Check with your state to see if such a program is available before you make your decision. Be aware that your choices might be more limited and your specific requirements might not be met.

**SHOULD I CONSIDER A USED BUS?**

It depends. A used bus can be an excellent buy and may be able to save your organization significantly on purchase costs. The truth is, there are some excellent used bus buys on the market. However, there are some tradeoffs, specifically with maintenance costs.

Price alone doesn’t tell the whole story. Used buses might not be as dependable (consider the cost of losing your bus for a day or longer for repairs) and will cost more to maintain. Also, you will want to check that parts are still available for your used bus and that service for your specific bus model is available in the area. You’ll also need to set aside a contingency plan to keep your business or organization running during any unforeseen breakdowns. Depending on the problem (and the bus) these can become expensive.

Before purchasing a used bus you should locate a repair shop that can maintain your bus on a regular basis, find any parts needed and perform any repairs. Be sure to ask any potential bus provider about parts availability. It’s not unusual to sell a bus because parts become hard or impossible to find. Take great care to avoid this situation.

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A USED BUS**
**Be sure:**
- The bus meets or can easily be modified to meet all regulations
- Fuel and maintenance costs don’t outweigh any savings
- The used bus does not come with a higher interest rate if financed, which can negatively impact your monthly payments
- The overall lifespan of the bus is not reduced to the point that you’ll be bus shopping sooner than expected

**OTHER TIPS ON BUYING A USED BUS**

- First and foremost, ask to see maintenance records. It will help you know the vehicle has been well cared for, and the records will give you a sense for what operating the vehicle actually costs, as well as what service might need to be performed in the near future. Also, ask to see fuel records, if available.
- Ask about a warranty since used bus warranties can be hard to find.

(Designer Note: Include paragraph below in a call-out or subset)
**Alliance Bus Group is unique in that it provides a short-term warranty for select used MFSAB buses. To find out more, call (insert number).**

- Get the biggest engine you can afford. The more people you’re transporting and the heavier your bus, the more engine you’ll need. There’s really no substitute for a powerful engine.
- If buying a smaller bus that doesn’t require the driver to have a Commercial Driver’s License, get an automatic transmission unless you have a personal preference for manual. They’re usually easier to handle and on long trips and can make the drive more pleasant. Also, if you’re planning to resell the bus after a few years, remember: most buyers want buses with automatic transmissions.

**MAINTENANCE AND OTHER COSTS**

If you’re buying a bus that needs immediate repairs, get an accurate estimate of the costs. If you’re planning to modify
your bus or you don’t mind taking on some of the repair work (either yourself or with the help of a repair shop), you might be able to save a little money. In any case, your research to get an accurate idea of what the repairs will cost and the time it will take to complete them. This should include the time to track down parts (again, make sure they are readily available). Create a plan for completion of repairs and a timeline.

Have a professional inspector look at the bus. The inspector should focus on all major parts, including the engine, transmission, frame, electrical system and air conditioning. Ensure that your inspector is as thorough as possible and gives you the full story on the bus. Listen carefully to advice on potential problems and don’t let your immediate need for a bus or a bargain cloud your decision.

Look at the body carefully, especially for signs of rust and damage. Buses are usually made from fiberglass and a lot of caulk, so check to ensure the seams are intact so the bus won’t leak in heavy rains. You should also examine the interior carefully for signs of water damage.

Don’t settle for a used bus that has any leaks whatsoever. There are plenty of leak-free bus options out there.

**MORE THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN BUYING A USED BUS**

- Never buy a bus according to the age. Instead, buy according to the condition (unless you are looking for certain options that may not be offered until a certain year). Newer is not always better.
- Buses are highly customizable, and most new buses are built to order. No two buses are alike, even if they are of the same make, year and model.
- Just because it is a “Southern” or “West Coast” bus doesn’t mean it is rust free. Remember that all buses will have some superficial rusting in certain places. Inspect each bus carefully.
- When looking at a bus, look carefully from the bottom up. You have to look at all buses for rust. Ask if any rust problems were ever repaired and treated. If there is a history of rust, ask where on the coach and when the repairs were done. Your main concern should be for the mainframe section of the bus since that is where repairs can be most costly. Remember that rust spreads, so be careful.
- Again, always ask to see if records are available on the bus. These would include any minor or major repair. If
records are not available, ask if you can talk to the mechanic, shop foreman, or the primary driver of the coach.

- Ask about mileage on the engine and the transmission. Depending on the age, most buses are high in mileage, but are able to handle additional miles easily if properly maintained.
- Do not rely on the odometer to give you the actual mileage. Odometers on buses are prone to break, so check to see when and if a hubometer was installed and what mileage is recorded there.
- After checking out the frame and drivetrain, focus on the cosmetics, such as body damage, paint condition and interior condition. It is always easier to paint, change seat covers, or redo the carpets than rebuild an engine or do extensive frame work. Keep in mind that a bad paint job never left anyone on the side of the road.
- Engine warranties are tricky. Again, find out the particulars of the warranty since most require a transfer fee when you buy the bus. You should also find out if the proper maintenance files are up-to-date. Warranties require that certain types of oil are used and that you have kept the bus on the required maintenance schedule. Not all warranties are what you might think they are.
- After you have found the bus you think you like, ask if you can get a non-biased opinion from another mechanic.
- If you plan to finance your purchase, remember that most banks do not know how to put a value on buses. Several banking institutions offer this kind of financing, but be ready for relatively short terms for the loan. Better yet, find a dealer with multiple in-house financing options, or that can assist you.
- If you are buying a bus for charter use, you may be required to have at least $5 million in liability coverage.
- Just because a bus is titled a 1995 or any other year it does not mean that the MSO (manufactures statement of origin) is the same year. In some states, you can take an older bus and “reman” it. After specific items and changes are done, a “new” title is issued in the year that the “reman” is completed. The bus now has a new title and model year.
- Always ask the reason the bus is being sold. You do not want to buy someone else’s problem. Many times the person or company is upgrading or going out of business, so it may indeed be a good buy. But be sure.
- Last but not least, always deal with someone that can give you references. If you are not comfortable with the company you are dealing with, go somewhere else.

When considering a used bus, remember that the rest of the information in this document still applies. Make sure the bus fits your needs specifically, otherwise it’s not a good buy no matter the cost.
In today’s rapidly changing economic and regulatory environment, making the right decision is more important than ever. We hope the information in this guide helps you in doing just that.

Another tool you might want to try is our online product fit finder: http://www.URLTOCOME.

We are continuing to add helpful information, tips, and news to our Web site. Please visit us at http://www.alliancebusgroup.com/.

Alliance Bus Group is a low-pressure organization with a business built on service, reputation, referrals, and repeat business. Our experts can answer any questions or help you in a number of ways, so please don’t hesitate to give us a call at 866-287-4768 or at one of the local numbers listed here: http://www.alliancebusgroup.com/contact/.