

SB292 HopSkipDrive Amendment Explainer

The Problem: The state's current system is plagued by challenges, including a lack of available bus drivers and complex bus routes that result in long commute times. This crisis has fueled high rates of chronic absenteeism, reaching a startling 30% statewide. By opening pathways for Public Service Commission (PSC)-regulated carriers (such as sedans, SUVs, and vans), school districts can ensure that students – particularly those in rural areas or with specialized needs – get to class on time and don't miss school as frequently due to transportation issues. Currently, interpretation of the regulations limit PSC-regulated carriers that use non-taxi small passenger vehicles to 1 rider, making it difficult for schools to utilize safe, smaller-scale private contractors. This prevents transportation service providers from being able to service districts in a meaningful way such as transporting siblings.

The Solution: Safe, Flexible Alternatives and Operational Efficiency: This amendment explicitly allows schools to partner with PSC-regulated providers using "multi-rider" configurations, up to 2 riders, enabling a single SUV or van to pick up multiple students on a route. This expands the current COMAR regulation that authorizes contracted carriers to transport 1 rider, and would significantly reduce costs for county boards, would reduce the carbon footprint of multiple vehicles transporting only 1 rider, and would allow for siblings who may live in the same foster home or temporary housing to be transported to school together.

Key Provisions

- **Gold-Standard Safety:** Students remain protected by the rigorous background check standards of § 6-113.2 (the "direct contact with minors" standard) and state and FBI fingerprint based background checks. There is zero compromise on student safety.
- **Multi-Rider Efficiency:** Explicitly allows for more than one student per vehicle. This reduces the number of cars on the road, would create efficiency by allowing siblings or small clusters of neighbors to be transported together, and cuts costs for county school boards.
- **Capacity Control:** Limits vehicles to a 10-person maximum (including the driver) in alignment with current COMAR requirements, and limits the amount of riders to prevent overcrowding. Drivers transporting more than two students would be subject to COMAR alternative vehicle requirements.
- **Local Authority:** County boards have the authority to impose additional requirements on service providers through the contracting process.