

HEALTH

NJ school bus safety push left out critical reforms, mom says



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In his final days in office, Gov. Phil Murphy signed several bills into law aimed at improving [disability rights](#) and transportation safety for New Jersey residents, advocates said.

Other measures signed by Murphy, who left office Jan. 20, include legislation expanding access to health and mental health services for those with disabilities.

One bill that did not gain approval in the closing days of the legislative session was inspired by the recent [deaths of a Morris County teen and two other disabled students](#) traveling on New Jersey school buses. Legislation requiring cameras and GPS tracking on buses, and requiring staff to take action in an emergency, did not get a vote this month.

“It actually breeds indifference,” said Anabela Rossi, an East Hanover mother whose 19-year-old son, Matthew, died during a school bus ride three years ago. “Because the contractors understand that there’s no accountability. The operators, the owners, the drivers, they understand there’s no accountability because there are never consequences.”

Nonetheless, Paul Aronsohn, who just finished his second term as New Jersey’s disability ombudsman, said other bill signings represent long-awaited progress.

“Over the last couple of days, a couple of key pieces of legislation were signed,” Aronsohn said. “One to impose [monetary fines on poor-performing provider](#) (home and therapy) agencies and one that set up a task force to address very serious issues concerning the transportation of students with disabilities.”

School bus safety task force

Among the most significant measures was S3447/A4607, which creates a [Special Education Transportation Task Force](#) to examine safety, training, staffing and oversight of the state’s estimated 1,800 companies that bus special education students to school.

The task force was spurred by the deaths of several children with disabilities, including Matthew Rossi, who had muscular dystrophy and was found unresponsive after a bus ride home in February 2023.

A nurse who accompanied him on the trip pleaded guilty last year to endangering another person and neglect of a disabled person. The nurse was sentenced to 90 days in prison and agreed to surrender his license.

“I think it provides us with an important opportunity to get it right,” Aronsohn said of the task force. “To really address the multitude of issues that are currently putting so many students with disabilities at risk. I hope the right people are appointed to it, and I hope whatever they recommend is followed through.”

Aronsohn credited the Rossi family, particularly Anabela Rossi, for pushing the issue into the Legislature.

“The Rossi family is extraordinary,” he said, adding that Matthew's mother “never gave up on this.”

“I’ve worked so closely with her over the last couple of years,” he said. “Meeting with legislators, meeting with administration officials, testifying alongside her. She made this

happen. She was the driving force.”

'Critical, immediate gaps'

Rossi welcomed the task force but worries that until it recommends reforms, children will remain at risk. The task force is required to report its findings to the governor and Legislature within a year.

“I think the task force bill, it will provide an opportunity to look at long-term, comprehensive, system-wide solutions because it really is system-wide,” she said. “There’s a lot of issues and gaps in the entire system.

“But,” she added, “there are critical and glaring issues that can be addressed in the immediate, and that was really what the 911 bill was intended for. The 911 bill wasn’t going to fix the system, it was intended to address the critical, immediate gaps.”

More: [NJ bill would require cameras on school buses to protect students with disabilities](#)

That bill, [A5142](#), introduced by Assembly members Al Barlas of Essex County and Michael Venezia and Shama Haider of Bergen County, would have required mandatory 911 calls during medical emergencies, GPS tracking and video cameras on buses transporting students with disabilities. It called for expanding training and penalties for noncompliance. The bill passed the state Senate unanimously but stalled in the Assembly after being referred to its Education Committee.

The measures called for in that bill are “basic commonsense things that unfortunately are not done. When we look at the three deaths, including Matthew’s, there’s evidence of that,” Rossi said.

Families are being asked to wait years for reforms while their children continue to ride buses without those safeguards, she said.

“It’s going to be three years in a few weeks that I lost my son tragically,” Rossi said, repeating, “It’s going to be three years.”

She said the failure of the bill highlights what she sees as a lack of urgency and accountability in the special education transportation system. Families, she said, continue to reach out to her with complaints.

“There’s tons of Facebook websites where parents are constantly posting complaints about the simple things,” Rossi said. “Like, ‘Every day my driver is different. How am I supposed to feel safe?’ or students getting left on buses.”

Barlas, the Essex County assemblyman, agreed and said that what happened to the Rossi family was a "horrific tragedy."

Lawmakers "ran out of time to move the bill" in the session, which ended Jan. 13, he said. But Barlas has filed to reintroduce it in the Assembly in the new legislative session, and he said Republican Morris County Sen. Anthony Bucco will be doing the same in the Senate.

Other disability laws signed

- A5052/S4018, requiring insurers and Medicaid to cover behavioral-health screening and treatment for children. The law is intended to make it easier for families to get early diagnoses, therapy and ongoing mental health care.
- A4642/S3864, allowing families to bank unused disability services for use during school closures or before school. This gives families flexibility to use community disability programs when schools are closed or delayed, instead of losing them.
- S1016/A3636, requiring state websites to be accessible to people with disabilities and usable on mobile devices. The law ensures that people who rely on screen readers or smartphones can access benefits, forms and services online.
- A5118/S4223, expanding health care benefits for public school teachers with disabilities. Sponsors said this protects educators who become disabled from losing their medical coverage while they remain in the pension system.

- S5026/A6302, providing \$3.25 million to help districts pay for high-cost special education services. The funding helps school districts afford services like aides and medical services without cutting other programs.