

*School Bus Family presents*

# DIY SKOOLIE

*Things to consider before starting your  
school bus conversion*



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# INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, our family of six lived in a skoolie – a school bus converted into an RV. We purchased an already converted skoolie in October 2012, gutted it completely and began building it back up. Once it was liveable (June 2013), we moved in. We lived there for just over a year.

It started as a crazy idea a few years ago when I (Nina) read about a family that traveled around in an RV they lived in full-time. Ian laughed off the idea for quite some time, until, in August 2012, we learned about a family that lived in a converted school bus. With 5 kids. That's one more than we've got so we figured it was doable.

And we went searching for a bus.

I looked and looked and looked for buses on Craigslist but couldn't find anything. Then I finally realized it was because I didn't know what I was looking for. We had no list of must-haves and didn't really know what was good or bad in terms of engines and transmissions. So we got wise and made our list and soon found the bus we now own.

I've received enough questions from readers interested in doing something similar that I thought it would be good to share some helpful things we learned while looking for our bus. Because there's definitely a lot to consider before you even start looking for a bus.

# DESIGN

The easiest (and funnest) thing I did was draw out the interior design. After doing a lot of googling, I was able to find a few bus layout options and used them as my inspiration. I did most drawings on blank printer paper and then did our final drafts on graph paper.

**Why is this important? Because once I had a design that looked like it would work for us, we were able to figure out what length of bus we should look for.**

We knew we'd need two sets of bunk beds, a toilet and bathing area, a kitchen with a good amount of counter space and a larger dining/seating area. I drew up many designs, some with generous amounts of space and some as conservative as I thought we could go.

Once Ian and I agreed on what would work for us, we decided we'd look for a 40 foot bus – the longest we could get.

# LIVING PLANS

When designing your bus, take into account whether you'll be living in it full-time, part-time or just every once in a while. If it's just an occasional thing, you can likely get away with a shorter bus. You'll probably need less storage space and, if you plan on only taking it to campgrounds, could even get away with limited or no plumbing.

If you plan on living in your bus longer, think about how little space you need to live in while still accommodating needs like cooking, eating, showering, sleeping and toileting.

Also take into account that your clothes need to go somewhere as does the stuff you don't end up getting rid of.

# BUDGET

Your budget will play a huge part in choosing your bus. We started with a budget of \$8500. We found a lot of nice, already converted buses in the \$15k-\$25k range, but there was no way we could afford that.

Some converted buses were in our price range, but none were just how we needed them, which meant we'd have to remodel – meaning we'd have to spend even more money.

We decided that since we'd probably have to remodel (apparently not many people with lots of kids live in buses – weird), we'd just look for a cheaper bus so we'd have money to remodel. We paid \$3500 for an already converted bus, leaving us a good amount to remodel with – if we were frugal.

Another option is to buy and fix up your bus as you have money available.

Because we had to use part of our bus money for other expenses, we had to stop working on the bus halfway through and finish projects as we had funds.

Lastly, there's the option to look for corporate sponsorship for your bus project. My friend, Andrew, did just that for his tiny house project and has just released a great book on [how to gain sponsorship for your tiny house](#).

## SKILL

How comfortable are you with building, plumbing and electrical work? Are you a creative problem solver? Do you know what a monkey wrench is?

My husband worked as a framer's apprentice for a few months several years ago and has done a few DIY projects here and there. But he definitely wasn't an expert builder before we got started.

Thankfully, he was able to gather a lot of information from places like YouTube, our friends at Tiny r(E)volution and this bus conversion website.

If you're not sure you can do this stuff yourself, you'll need to add the extra expense into your budget and/or find some great friends who can help you out. Or you can just look for a bus that's already converted instead of doing it yourself.

## RESOURCES

Do you have the tools you need to work on your bus conversion? If not, do you know where to find them? We had some basic tools and were able to borrow tools from friends and family.

You may be able to do the same or borrow them through a tool library. Some tools, we've had to buy because we couldn't borrow them (check out our resources page for tools we recommend).

Look for those used first and make sure to account for that in your budget.

## TIME AVAILABLE

Before you start looking for a bus, you'll need to take into account the amount of time you'll have available to work on your bus. If you have plenty of free time, know-how and lots of time to complete the project, it will probably make a difference in the type of bus you purchase.

For instance, if you need a bus to be liveable in three months, you'll probably be looking for one that's already been converted that will need little work on your part.

## SPACE

Armed with your design, you'll know how long of a bus you'll need. When you're searching for your bus, you'll probably find yourself obsessed with bus length. Because in a house, 1 foot of space isn't that big of a deal. In a bus, however, it makes a huge difference.

We chose a 40-foot bus after drawing out several floor plans and realizing that we needed as much space as we could get (or so we thought). We finally found a 40-foot bus that met all of our criteria and Ian drove 8.5 hours to Idaho with my brother to pick it up. Only to find that it was a 36-foot bus (even though the title says 40-feet).

**Lessons learned:** If you've found something far away, ask if the owners will measure the bus before you drive all day to pick it up and you can probably make do with less space than you think you need.



## CURRENT STATE

Do you want a pre-converted bus or do you want to start from scratch? Each one has its pros and cons. A pre-converted bus is already done, but it might not be done how you want it and you'll end up having to redo a lot and making compromises on a design that would really work for you.

After we had our bus, we had to look at the location of the pre-existing things like electrical and plumbing and make a decision – did we want to use what we had or reconfigure everything? We chose to work with the existing plumbing, which meant a big change to our bus design and changed the electrical around a bit.

Starting from scratch would mean gutting the entire bus (which we ended up doing anyway) and putting in all electrical and plumbing, which can be intimidating for many. It was intimidating for my husband, who had almost no experience with any of that, but he figured it out without too many shocks (thanks for all your help with that, YouTube). But you'd get to do everything just how you want it.

## AGE

When we were searching for our bus, we found that older buses tend to be cheaper and we almost jumped on this super sweet 40s Gillig that was already converted (I LOVE Gilligs).

However, we decided to get some input first and ended up buying a bus that made in 1995. My husband spoke to a diesel mechanic who recommended getting a newer model (1995 or newer) if we were going with an automatic transmission because it would be more reliable. We also spoke to my sister-in-law's dad, who runs the transit dept of a local school. He gave the same suggestion for the same reason.

# TRANSMISSION

Speaking of transmission, do you want a manual or automatic? Though my husband and I can both drive a manual, we decided that automatic would be better for us. I don't exactly drive manuals well and that, combined with the size of the bus, would have made me one slow, unsure driver.

That might not seem very significant to some of you, but it's definitely something to consider.

# TYPE OF BUS

Even though we have a skoolie, we strongly considered buying an old Greyhound bus because it was a bit wider than a school bus and easier to get insurance on. The one we were looking at had plumbing and electrical already done, as well as extra insulation (so important!). It just needed the interior done. Alas, it sold before we could get it – we took too long to decide if we wanted an already converted bus or one we'd do ourselves.

Decide before you look!

**These are the 3 types of buses we found when we were searching:**

**School Bus:** The most affordable option, with lots of different bus lengths available.

**Coach:** A bit wider than a school bus, with a lot more storage space underneath. Usually much more expensive.

**Transit:** Retired city transit buses come in various lengths with less storage space. Price was usually between the school bus and coach prices.



## FUEL TYPE

We chose diesel so we could have the option of converting to veggie fuel in the future. While we came across a few gas engines, the majority of the buses we looked at were diesel and I want to say they got better fuel mileage (I could be totally wrong, though).

## ENGINE

If we were to do this again, we'd choose a front engine bus. We went with the rear engine (aka diesel pusher) because, well, I'm not sure why. I probably just liked the look better.

But with a rear engine, you lose space in the back that you could use for something else. We ended up putting our bed on top of the engine block, which gave us some space below our bed for storage and our clothes.

Had we gotten a front engine, we would have still done a loft-style bed. But we would have had much more space underneath for clothing storage and a play space for our kiddos ([like in this bus](#)).

## ONE LAST THING ...

Decide how far you're willing to go to get your bus. We stayed in the Pacific Northwest, but if you're willing to make a road trip out of it, or fly to get your bus, you'll have many more options to choose from.

# CONCLUSION

I hope this eguide has helped you to feel more hopeful confident about starting your bus conversion project!

If you've found this short guide helpful, do me a favor: think of one group of people who would benefit from reading it and please share it on Facebook or by sending them to this page:

<https://shalommama.com/diy-bus-conversion>

Thanks so much,

Nina

# RESOURCES

## Step-by-Step School Bus Conversion Course

If you're just starting out on your school bus adventure, I \*highly recommend\* that you check out this awesome resource from the folks at Discovering Us Bus. It's a husband and wife team that specializes in school bus conversions. They've helped hundreds of people convert their school buses with their online course and they'll even do it for you if you just can't for whatever reason.

Then know their stuff.

And they even have a course dedicated to helping you through the entire school bus conversion process, from finding the right bus to completing your basic conversion.

[Check out Skoolie Academy.](#)

If you'd like some bus inspiration, check out my [Bus Conversion Pinterest Board](#).

You can also see our own bus conversion on our [Bus Conversion Flickr stream](#).