

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.

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ARE SCHOOL BUSES SAFE?

School buses are a relatively safe means of transporting children, due to several advantages they have over automobiles, such as size, weight, visibility, and infrequency of use during peak collision periods.

But many of the deaths and injuries which do occur in crashes involving school buses could be prevented by improving equipment standards, by replacing obsolete buses with buses which meet the current manufacturing standards, and by using recommended procedures for training, maintenance, and choices of routes and bus stops.

IMPROVE OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES

Most of the *fatalities* occur *outside* the bus -- the children are run over by either their own buses or other vehicles. Many of these deaths could be prevented by regularly evaluating and improving the operation of the bus:

- Select and supervise drivers carefully. All bus drivers in California must pass state certification, which includes 20 hours in the classroom, 20 hours behind the wheel, and a California Highway Patrol driving test. Send drivers and instructors to the excellent Department of Education School in Sacramento (no cost except transportation).
- Choose routes and bus stops with safety in mind. Avoid steep grades, narrow roads, and unguarded railroad crossings. Whenever possible, children should be picked up and dropped off on their own side of the road.
- Buses should be properly maintained and equipment checked by the driver daily. Buses must be withdrawn from service when safety-related defects are discovered.
- If buses have safety belts, require their use. Prohibit three-across seating and standing in the aisle.
- Students must be instructed to remain seated while the bus is moving and to be extremely cautious in crossing the street to and from the bus. California schools are required to provide annual instruction in safe riding practices and evacuation drills to bus riders. Parents should check that this training is being provided.
- Trained monitors can be used to keep order in the bus, to assist children in crossing, to help the driver in emergencies, and to check safety belts (if available).

Recommendations for parents whose children ride in buses without belts:

- Teach your child not to ride in the front row of seats.
- Teach your child to remain seated whenever the bus is in motion.
- Reassure your child that riding the bus to school is safe.
- Teach your child how to enter and exit the bus properly.
- Make sure there is an adult volunteer at your child's bus stop to monitor the children.

IMPROVE THE BUS

Most of the *injuries* in crashes involving school buses occur *inside* the bus. The New Jersey Institute of Technology in 1989 calculated 70% of deaths and 64% of serious injuries occur in side-impact crashes or rollovers.

Recommendations for purchasing school buses:

- If your organization is using buses made before the April, 1977, replace them.
- Order new buses with combination lap-shoulder belts and high seatbacks.

The Federal government commissioned UCLA to conduct bus crash testing in 1967. Based on those tests, the current federal standard for school buses, based on the concept of “compartmentalization,” went into effect in April, 1977. Required improvements included strengthening of body and roof structure; installation of seat padding to cover the exposed top rail as well as the metal sheeting on the rear of the seats; increased seat back height; improved anchorage of seats to the floor; fuel tank integrity. However, many of the changes needed to make compartmentalization effective were not mandated by the new standard. Seat backs were 8” shorter than recommended. There was no requirement for side padding, aisle panels, or lap belts to keep passengers within the compartment, as recommended by the study,.

The following organizations recommend safety belts on school buses: American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, American College of Preventative Medicine, Center for Auto Safety, National Transportation Safety Board, and SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.

Federal vehicle safety standards do not require belts in full-sized school buses, and most state safety belt laws have an exemption. As of July 2005, California requires that all newly purchased buses have restraint systems for upper and lower body. Florida has required safety belts on new buses since 1999 and has required passengers to use them since 2001. New York has required safety belts on school buses since 1987 without a policy of required use. New Jersey passed legislation requiring the phase-in of buses with belts in 1992 and the policy requiring use in 1994. Reasons for requiring belt use include: 1) consistent teaching that restraint use is important on every ride; 2) tendency of children not to sit forward-facing with their backs against the seat back but instead to turn to talk with friends, lean into aisles, lie down, or leave their seats, so they are out of position for “compartmentalization” to work as designed; 3) the number of preschoolers traveling to school for early attention to developmental delay issues or with school aged parents; these youngsters require use of safety seats for proper protection as they travel to on-campus child care. Children who have been raised with child restraints are shocked to find no belts on their school buses. Several states have bills for belts on buses under consideration.

Manufacturers, such as SafeGuard/Indiana Mills & Manufacturing (317/896-2142) and C.E. White (419/492-2157) have designed bus seats with built-in adjustable shoulder-lap belts and special child seats for buses. E-Z-On Products of Florida and SafeGuard/IMMI have harnesses that can be attached to bus seats. More work is needed to further improve school bus transportation.

For more information on this issue, contact the National Coalition for School Bus Safety, www.ncsbs.org, Box 1616, Torrington, CT 06790, phone 860/489-1234, fax 860/626-8863, or e-mail seatbelt@ncsbs.org. American Academy of Pediatrics has adopted recommendations for children with special needs on school buses. The 1995 National Standards for School Transportation, available from Missouri Safety Center for \$20 (816/543-4830), gives excellent recommendations regarding use of safety seats, crash-tested harnesses, and belts. Frequently, however, school bus belts do not accommodate safety seats well.