

The safety of school bus transportation

Did you know that students are about 50 times more likely to arrive at school alive on a school bus than if they drive themselves or ride with friends? The safety record of school buses is also far superior to that of passenger vehicles, regardless of the age of the driver. According to the American School Bus Council, based on research from several federal studies, travel by school bus is THE safest way for students to get to and from school.



What is it that contributes to this impressive record of safety?

At first glance, today's school bus might not seem different from the buses that today's students' parents and grandparents rode ... but it is. School bus drivers must meet stringent training requirements and the bus itself continues to evolve as a result of federal regulations and industry initiatives.

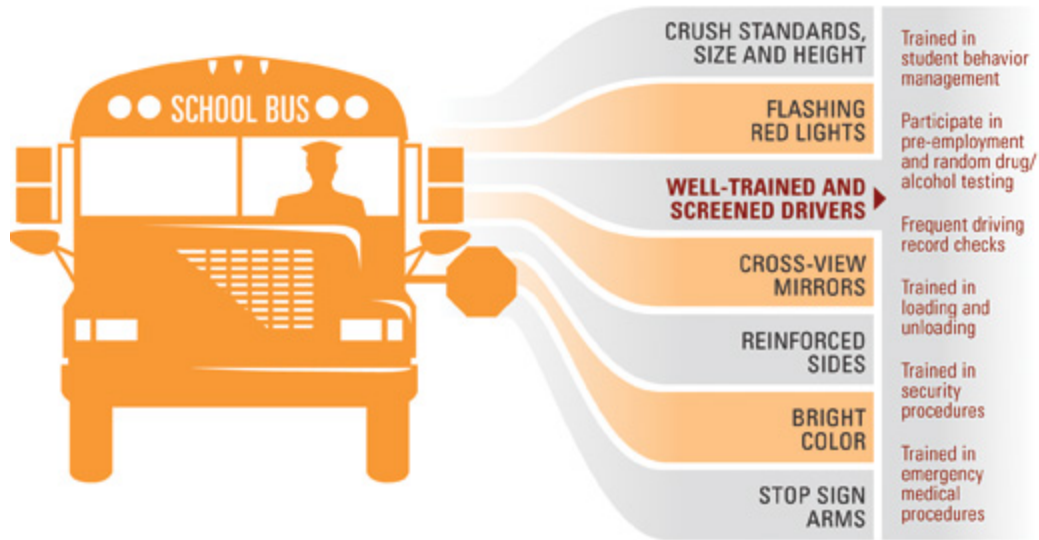
The Driver

Today's school bus driver is required to have more extensive training and certifications than drivers of any other highway vehicle. They must not only have a Commercial Driver's License, but also specific passenger (P) and school bus (S) endorsements. And individual states and school districts provide training in first aid, security, emergency evacuation and student behavior management while also conducting pre-employment and periodic background checks and drug/alcohol testing.

But the task is daunting. It is a tremendous responsibility for a single individual to be responsible for the safety of up to 70+ students. Parents play a key role in emphasizing to their children the importance of obeying school district rules which are designed for one primary purpose: protecting the safety of student passengers.

The Bus

Today's school bus is a unique vehicle. It has become an icon of our country's public education system. But most of its unique qualities lie inside the bus and beneath the yellow skin.



Construction Standards

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has the authority to promulgate federal standards for vehicle construction in order to minimize accidents and to protect passengers when accidents do occur. These standards – known as Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS's) – are incorporated into Chapter 5 of Title 49 of the Federal Code. There are FMVSS's applicable to passenger cars, motorcycles, passenger buses and school buses.

There are numerous FMVSS's that are specific to school buses, developed for a single purpose: to protect student passengers. There are FMVSS's specific to school bus joint strength (#221), rollover protection (#220), emergency exits (#217), pedestrian safety devices (#131), passenger seating (#222) and more.

www.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules/import/fmvss/index.html

The construction standards for fuel system integrity, joint strength, rollover protection, etc. result in a vehicle that is "built like a tank." In most accidents involving a school bus and another vehicle (trains and large trucks excepted) the school bus nearly always comes out ahead. Serious or fatal injury to a student while on a school bus is an extremely rare event.

Traffic Control Devices



More than danger while riding the school bus, danger to student passengers occurs most often while they are getting on and off the bus. Specifically, student safety is compromised by motorists that illegally pass a stopped school bus, despite the many features in place to prevent that exact occurrence. Perhaps most prominently, the stop sign on the left side of the bus is designed to control traffic. Equipped with alternately flashing red (sometime strobing) lights and the word STOP, the sign should leave no doubt in the minds of motorist what they are to do. The stop sign is accompanied by flashing red lights on the front and rear of the school bus, preceded by yellow warning lights that signal to motorists that the bus is preparing to stop.

In addition, all Washington State school buses come equipped with a crossing-control arm that swings out from the bumper to ensure that students do not cross the street too close to the school bus, out of sight of the bus driver.

Passenger Protection

As described above, protection is afforded to student passengers as a result of the construction of the school bus itself. According to NHTSA, "Large school buses are heavier and distribute crash forces differently than do passenger cars and light trucks. Because of these differences, the crash forces experienced by occupants of buses are much less than that experienced by occupants of passenger cars, light trucks or vans."

Inside the passenger compartment, further protection is provided. Many of us remember the school bus seats with an exposed metal bar at the top. Federal requirements have resulted in a padded seat designed to protect not only the occupant of the seat, but also the occupants of the seat behind in the event of a crash.

Why Not Seat Belts?



So ... if school buses are the safest vehicle on the road, why are most of them lacking one of the most effective safety devices in passenger cars – the seat belt. We go back again to the fact that school buses are constructed so much differently than passenger cars. For the longest time, the only belt available on school buses was a lap belt. Potential injury, especially to young children, when restrained with a single belt about the abdomen is the reason we don't use lap belts in cars much anymore.

The whole discussion changed about 10 years ago, with the evolution of lap/shoulder belts for school buses. Research and pilot studies showed that successful implementation is possible. Of critical importance, though — the school district must insist on the belts being used and the bus driver must be on-board with belt use. One of the most important benefits lies not in crash protection, but in improved student discipline — which in turn does have a positive impact on safety.

Across the country, some individual school districts and the entire state of California require lap/shoulder belts on all new school buses. And many districts use school bus seats with integrated child safety restraint systems for transporting their youngest passengers.

However, the technology really came into its own about the same time that many public schools began facing unprecedented budget crises. And the \$10,000+ price tag to equip a large bus with lap/shoulder belts has continued to be problematic.



But make no mistake — belts or no belts, the construction of the school bus, the height of the seating compartment, the steel frame construction and the padded seats offer a passenger protection system that continues to protect the student passengers entrusted to its care.

**How Can I Learn More?
What Can I Do?**

Parents and other members of the general public can improve student safety by supporting school bus transportation. School boards have tough jobs — especially when money is tight. It is tempting to reduce transportation, cut out service or take other money-saving measures that can negatively impact safety. The decision-makers must hear from their constituents that safety IS important.

Information on school bus safety is available at SCHOOLBUSFACTS.COM or from the American School Bus Council.