



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
STATE DIRECTORS OF
PUPIL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Position Paper

**Transporting the Nation's School Children
[School Buses - Transit Buses]**

Background:

Since the late 1800s, school-age children have been transported to and from school in unique school vehicles. The first "vehicles" used to transport students were nothing more than horse-drawn wagons, which were borrowed from local farmers. With the development of automobiles and trucks with gasoline-powered engines, the school "wagon" was replaced with the school "truck." During the 1920s and 1930s, the Nation's roadway system was expanding, especially in rural communities. This, along with an increased emphasis to provide education opportunities to all children, not just those living close to schools, led to a greater need for school transportation services. As a result, a new and widely important industry was formed – school transportation. This industry is composed of school transportation professionals (administrators, drivers, trainers, schedulers, mechanics, etc.) and school bus manufacturers and suppliers, all who are dedicated to the safety of the children they transport. In terms of the number of buses and passenger trips, school transportation is the largest public mass transportation system in the country.

As the number of school buses operating on the roadways increased, there came the inevitable problems. Several serious tragedies occurred involving school buses that caused school officials to think seriously about developing safety guidelines and recommendations. In 1939, representatives from forty-eight states gathered to develop specifications and recommendations for the school bus industry. Since that time, there have been twelve additional National Conferences on School Transportation. Delegations from each state have gathered to review existing specifications and establish new specifications for school buses and operating procedures for the safe transportation of students, including those with disabilities. The most recent of these National Conferences on School Transportation was held in May 2000.

In addition to the requirements developed by the school transportation community, there are 36 Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) that apply to school buses. These standards cover a wide range of vehicle components and systems. Many of these federal standards have unique requirements for school buses. For example, FMVSS No. 111 requires the outside mirrors to provide the seated driver with a complete view in front of and along both sides of the school bus. FMVSS No. 108 requires school buses to have red or amber and red warning lamps to warn motorists when the bus is stopped to load or unload passengers. FMVSS No. 217

mandates additional emergency exits on school buses, and FMVSS No. 301 specifies higher levels of fuel system integrity. In addition, the following four federal standards apply only to school buses:

- FMVSS No. 131, "School Bus Pedestrian Safety Devices," which establishes the performance and use requirements for stop signal arms to minimize the possibility of vehicles passing a stopped school bus and striking pedestrians outside the bus;
- FMVSS No. 220, "School Bus Rollover Protection," which specifies the minimum structural strength of school buses in rollover-type crashes;
- FMVSS No. 221, "School Bus Body Joint Strength," which specifies the minimum strength of the joints between the panels that comprise the school bus body; and
- FMVSS No. 222, "School Bus Passenger Seating and Crash Protection," which establishes requirements for seating and crash protection systems in all sizes of school buses, and provides minimum performance requirements for wheelchair securement/occupant restraint devices, and establishes a requirement that wheelchair locations be forward facing.

The design and construction of today's school buses are a direct result of both the FMVSSs that apply to school buses and the specifications adopted by the National Conferences on School Transportation, as well as some requirements that are exclusive to a particular state or local school district. While some may argue that today's school buses do not look much different from their predecessors of 30-40 years ago, they are dramatically different.

Every school day, millions of parents and their children rely on the "yellow" school bus to provide safe and dependable transportation to and from school and school-related activities. The outstanding safety record of this distinctive form of transportation is based on several factors:

- Clearly distinguishable vehicles, equipped with special safety features, which are afforded preferential treatment by other motorists -- specifically, motorists are required to stop while students enter or leave a stopped school bus;
- Specially-trained drivers that are concerned with only a single category of riders and are required to provide discipline to the student passengers;
- Specially-designed student education programs concerning school bus safety, including emergency evacuation drills; and
- Specially-designed routes and schedules to minimize the distance that students need to walk to the school bus stop.

Like school buses, public transit buses also have established an excellent safety record with their primarily adult passenger population. Transit buses are required to meet the same FMVSSs as school buses in a variety of areas, such as steering, brakes, tires, and flammability. However, transit buses are not required to meet the series of FMVSSs that are designed to make school buses more crashworthy and provide high levels of crash protection to passengers. There are no FMVSSs that directly deal with passenger crash protection for transit buses. For example, the passenger seats in transit buses can face in any direction, often are completely unpaddinged, and have exposed, rigid metal bars for standing passengers to hold.

For the past few decades, the safety of children getting on and off the school bus has been the largest school bus safety problem. The federal requirement that school buses have red or amber and red flashing lamps on the front and rear, and a stop signal arm on the left side, provide notice to passing motorists to stop their vehicles in accordance with State law.

Stopping traffic in areas where children get on and off school buses has proven to be beneficial in protecting students, particularly those who must cross the street to reach the bus or go home. Stopping traffic creates a safer environment for young children who are not as adept as adults with negotiating their way through traffic.

In most states, except for the transportation of students with special needs, there is no mandate to provide students with transportation to or from school. Accordingly, funding for school transportation in those states does not always receive as high a priority in budget decisions as mandated education programs, e.g., facilities, teacher salaries, computers, and books. Even in states where transportation of students to and from school is required by law, funding shortfalls can create problems in maintaining an adequate school transportation program. As a result of budget constraints, many schools are seeking alternative means of transportation services for students. A growing number of school districts are turning to public transit buses as a means of getting students to and from school each day.

The American Public Transportation Association estimates that transit buses provided over 1.2 billion student-related passenger trips in 1997. This translates into approximately 3.5 million students (7 percent of all public school students) who rode transit buses to and from school each school day. All indications are that this number is increasing and will continue to do so in the future.

Conclusions:

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services believes that the safest way to transport children to and from school and school-related activities is in a school bus. Nevertheless, the State Directors Association recognizes that there are funding constraints in some state/local school districts that make it impossible for all children to be transported in school buses. It is unlikely there will be sufficient increases in future education budgets of state

and local school districts to allow all students to be transported to and from school in school buses. Therefore, parents and transportation professionals must recognize that alternative modes of transporting students to and from school are being used and the safety of students transported by these modes must not be compromised.

The State Directors Association realizes that the transit industry is a major provider of home-to-school transportation. Some students ride transit buses to and from school out of necessity, others by choice. Over the past decade, the number of students using public transportation has increased, and likely will continue to increase in the future. Accordingly, the State Directors Association strongly urges members of the pupil transportation and public transportation communities to join forces to mutually ensure the safe transportation of students on transit vehicles.

The State Directors Association acknowledges the following actions/activities that have occurred at the federal level during the past few years that relate to the safety of children riding transit buses to and from school:

- On April 2, 1996, Senator Mike DeWine of Ohio chaired a hearing of the Labor and Human Relations Committee of the United States Senate on school transportation safety. Senator DeWine "called on every state to ... explore the potential hazards of school children using public transportation." He cited two examples of students being killed or seriously injured after exiting a transit bus and noted that "there's an obvious danger to children who do not ride school buses." Senator DeWine noted that there is a need to gather information on school bus operations and transit operations.
- On September 30, 1997, the National Transportation Safety Board, after completing its investigation of a fatal crash involving a student pedestrian that had exited a transit bus, issued the following Safety Recommendation to the U.S. Department of Transportation: "Collect accident data involving school children riding on transit buses, including pedestrian accidents, to assist development of appropriate means to ensure that school children riding on transit buses are afforded an equivalent level of operational safety as school children riding on school buses." The Safety Board further recommended that the U.S. Department of Transportation work with the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, the American Public Transit Association, and the Community Transportation Association of America to implement the findings of the accident data analyses.

In response to the Safety Board's recommendation, a \$75,000 study was undertaken by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences to review data availability to assess the relative safety of children riding on transit buses versus school buses. The technical data analysis is being completed under contract to the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute. A final report on "Data Collection for Pupil Safety on Transit Bus Systems" is expected by the end of 2000.

- The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century included a provision (Section 4030) to conduct a study of the safety issues attendant to the transportation of children to and from school and school-related activities by various transportation modes. The 2-year study was initiated by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences in July 2000. It is designed to determine the relative safety of children in school buses versus transit vehicles, passenger motor vehicles, bicycles and walking. The results of this study will provide a basis for identifying safety problems in transporting students, and will allow for the development of countermeasures to those safety problems.

The State Directors Association believes the studies underway will provide the critical information necessary to properly assess the safety of children using various modes of travel to and from school and school-related activities. It is anticipated that the studies will identify the extent to which public transit vehicles are used to transport students to and from school. Additionally, it is anticipated that the studies will develop risk factors using available data on crash-related injuries to passengers and pedestrians riding school buses and transit buses. This information will allow for an assessment of the differences between school buses and transit buses, both in terms of vehicle characteristics and vehicle operations, and how these differences effect safety. This assessment should allow the relevant federal agencies to evaluate their respective standards/recommendations/guidelines to determine if changes are necessary to ensure safe transportation of the Nation's school children.