



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF PUPIL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

School Bus Drivers -- Their Importance and Training

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Background:

School buses are the safest vehicles on the road. This safety record is the result of the interaction among several items -- the design and construction of the school bus; the operating condition of the bus; the planning of the school bus route; the location of the loading zones; and, the school bus driver. The role of the school bus driver in ensuring the safe transportation of children to and from school and school-related activities is as important as any other link in the school transportation safety chain.

A modern, safe, well-maintained school bus operating on the best possible terrain with ideal loading zones can not compensate for an ill-trained school bus driver. Likewise, today's highly-trained school bus drivers can not provide the safest possible transportation to students with out-of-date, poorly-maintained school buses traveling over illogical routes, and stopping at undesirable loading zones.

While the construction and safety equipment of school buses is critical to providing safety to school bus occupants when a crash occurs, it is the school bus driver who often prevents incidents and crashes each school day. The safety record of school bus transportation is a testament to school bus drivers and the rest of the school transportation industry.

Discussion:

Over the years, a number of actions have been taken to improve school bus driver selection and training activities. Since the early 1920's when training manuals for school bus drivers were developed, private and public entities have continued their efforts to develop and improve school bus driver training. Then, in the 1970's, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued standards (which later became guidelines) for school bus driver training.

In the early 1990's, the Federal Highway Administration issued a requirement that all school bus drivers possess a Commercial Drivers License (CDL). To attain this license, school bus drivers must pass knowledge and skills tests, be subject to random drug and alcohol testing, and pass a biennial physical. As with other individuals that come in contact with school children, school bus drivers must pass a criminal background check. While actions at the federal level have been important and beneficial in terms of improving school bus safety, there are equally important activities that occur at the state and/or local level.

States long have required school bus drivers to take written exams designed to test an applicant's knowledge of state laws and regulations affecting school transportation. In addition, behind-the-wheel road tests are used to evaluate an applicant's driving skills. Each state develops its own written and road tests based on the unique operational characteristics of its school transportation system. States continue to develop training curricula and support materials for both new drivers and in-service and re-certification testing for existing school bus drivers, often utilizing the latest technologies available. States also have made great efforts in sharing this information with other interested parties.

For example, at the National Conference on School Transportation (which is held approximately every five years), state delegations meet to develop guidelines for school buses and their operation. Some of these guidelines address suggested classroom and behind-the-wheel training that school bus drivers should receive, as well as the basic requirements for selecting and evaluating school bus drivers.

Driving the school bus is not the only task required of school bus drivers. Before the school bus is driven each day, the driver is personally responsible for conducting a physical check of various vehicle systems, e.g., brakes, tires, lights, steering, etc., to ensure that all systems meet requirements for safe and proper operation. Drivers are responsible not only for the discipline of the children on the bus, but also any medical or other emergencies that may arise during the trip to and from school or school-related activity. Finally, many school bus drivers must attend to the unique requirements of students with special needs, which frequently requires additional special training and dedication.

Selecting and training men and women to be school bus drivers is an important task. School bus drivers must be knowledgeable about school transportation, have excellent driving skills, be mechanically knowledgeable, and be a disciplinarian, health provider, and a friend. This is not an easy combination of skills and personality traits to find in individuals, but ones that are important in the selection and training of school bus drivers. In addition, school bus drivers need to be in sound physical and mental health.

Since the students see the same school bus driver every school day, the driver usually becomes a "friend" to the children. For the parents of the children, especially those with children just starting school, the school bus driver is the person they entrust with the safety of their children.

Recent and Current Activities:

A number of activities at the national level either have occurred recently or are underway. In 1998, NHTSA, with the assistance of the pupil transportation industry, developed and provided wide distribution of its training program, "School Bus Driver In-Service Safety Series." This program provides state and local school districts with training information and materials in the following areas:

Driver Attitude

- Student Management
- Highway-Rail Grade Crossing Safety
- Vehicle Training Knowing Your Route
- Loading and Unloading
- Transporting Infants and Toddlers

While these training modules are intended to provide refresher training on important topics, they are not intended to be training for new school bus drivers.

During 2000, NHTSA will complete the development and distribution of two additional in-service training modules on:

- Driving in Inclement Weather
- Wheelchair Securement and Wheelchair Lifts

In December 1999, the Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act was signed into law, and created the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) within the U.S. Department of Transportation. One of the responsibilities given to FMCSA is the oversight of the Commercial Drivers License Program. Within that area of responsibility, the Act directed FMCSA to initiate rulemaking on the feasibility of amending various aspects of the Commercial Drivers License Program. One of the rulemakings will deal with the potential for creating a special CDL endorsement for drivers of school buses. As stated in the Act, the rulemaking for considering a school bus drivers' endorsement "shall, at a minimum:

- include a driving skills test in a school bus; and
- address proper safety procedures for loading and unloading children; using emergency exits; and traversing highway rail grade crossings."

Conclusions:

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services supports efforts at federal, state, and local levels that are designed to improve the knowledge and skills of school bus drivers. The State Directors Association will be actively involved in any federal initiatives or rulemaking activities that impact school bus drivers.

The State Directors Association notes that the demands on school bus drivers have increased in recent years. For example, school bus drivers must deal with inattentive and distracted motorists; disruptive students on the school bus; inappropriate or even illegal activities on school buses and at school bus stops; and a myriad of daily incidents. These factors highlight the importance of on-going training.

The State Directors Association notes that there is a shortage of school bus drivers in many parts of the Nation, which is typical when the Nation's economy is good and there are many competing job opportunities. Many school bus drivers are part-time, rather than full-time employees which also impacts the job benefits (for example, insurance and retirement). The State Directors Association encourages states and local school districts to develop programs for training and hiring school bus drivers, and to compensate school bus drivers at a level that is commensurate with the job they perform.

Finally, the State Directors Association commends school bus drivers and driver trainers for the outstanding jobs they do every school day in providing safe transportation to the Nation's children.

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