



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
STATE DIRECTORS OF
PUPIL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Position Paper

Pupil Transportation System Security – More Attention from Terrorists Demands More Attention from Us

Background:

Schools attacked. Student hostages. Pupils killed.

Terrorists with copies of building and emergency plans for schools.

School bus drivers with possible ties to terrorist organizations.

Federal advisories to schools.

Based on the above examples of recent events, is there evidence to suggest that domestic and international terrorists are now turning their attention to more emotional targets? Are schools, school children, school staff and school buses at a greater risk? Are the risks to our children gradually increasing, but at a rate where it is hard to notice the change?

In June 2004, the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (State Directors Association) developed and released two documents that addressed security issues within the pupil transportation industry. The first document was designed to: (1) raise the awareness of security within the context of pupil transportation; (2) offer guidance for improving operational security; and (3) provide an action plan to strengthen our industry's ability to avoid or minimize the effects of possible acts of terrorism.

The second document recommended specific actions to the pupil transportation industry for vigilance, system security and audits. These suggestions addressed policies, procedures, training, and responsibilities at the system, supervisor, and driver levels.

Discussion of Recent Events:

- In September 2004, a two-day siege and hostage situation, which included hundreds of school children and their families, took place in Beslan, Russia. The world anxiously watched the events unfold. In the end, 331 people, including more than 150 children, were killed. The graphic pictures of the bodies of so many school children, and the way the terrorists used the school and school children to attract attention to their political cause, shocked the world.

- About the same time in the village of Naik Nam, Afghanistan, a bomb detonated in a school yard where 25 students ages 9 to 19 were in a classroom with their teacher. Nine students and the teacher were killed in this attack.
- In July 2004, media reports revealed that the U.S. military in Iraq found materials in terrorist hideouts with information about some United States schools.
- In September 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) notified school districts in six states that unidentified individuals had obtained copies of photographs, diagrams of buildings and emergency preparedness plans for specific school districts in those states.
- In July 2004, a former school bus driver was indicted on multiple charges concerning his alleged involvement with and support of al Qaeda activities.
- In October 2004, the U.S. Department of Education issued a letter to school districts across the nation alerting them to possible terrorist targeting of school facilities, including school buses. This alert was based on analyses of information by the FBI and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. While the federal agencies specifically noted that they were not aware of “any specific information indicating that there is a terrorist threat to any schools or universities in the United States,” sufficient concern justified this proactive advice to schools.
- In October 2004, a car bomb attack was staged against the Iraq Ministry of Education.

These recent events clearly demonstrate that terrorists (and others who use violence as a means of achieving a political, social or religious goal) totally disregard the sanctity of educational facilities and school children. Individual terrorists and/or terrorist organizations constantly look for targets that will strike fear into our society. Terrorists select emotional targets when actions against the more traditional military, government and economic targets do not achieve their desired goals.

Analyses by experts of recent terrorist activities indicate a change in tactics and targets. It appears that more emotional acts, including beheadings and the execution of women, are becoming more prevalent since they attract more media attention and public outrage.

Discussion of Pupil Transportation Industry:

The pupil transportation industry has a long tradition of reliable, dependable and safe transportation. Nearly a half million yellow school buses are woven into the daily fabric of our society. These buses are relied upon to provide the vital task of transporting 25 million children to and from the magical and exciting world of education and learning each day. We transport children to school, to museums, to sporting events and historical sites. Every year, school buses provide about 10 billion student trips in the safest motor vehicle on the nation’s highways. Society rarely gives school bus transportation a second thought – unless something goes wrong -- and that is a relatively rare event.

School transportation is a lot like the electric and water companies -- service performed flawlessly attracts little notice. School bus service is taken for granted because the school bus transportation industry provides a reliable public service to families. We do this with the utmost of care and concern for the safety and security of the 25 million children that ride school buses every day. By its very nature, the pupil transportation industry is a “soft target” for those who would attempt to harm our children.

Conclusions:

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services believes the pupil transportation industry must take security even more seriously. Complacency and the attitude that “it won’t happen here” sets the stage for terrorists to perpetrate their crimes. The State Directors Association’s previous efforts to “raise the awareness of security,” “offer guidance” and “recommend actions” in the areas of vigilance and system security were appropriate at the time. But times have changed.

Definitive actions must augment awareness, increased guidance, and suggestions to mitigate the potential for terrorist attack on our school transportation system. The State Directors Association believes that the federal government, state agencies and school districts across the country should demonstrate a primary commitment and responsibility to the security of the children we transport.

National level action:

As noted in a resolution from its 2004 annual conference, the State Directors Association believes the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security should “include school and school bus transportation security in the highest category of risk.” Public policy decisions about security rely on risk-based assessments to determine where to allocate resources. Given that schools and school children, including those in school buses, represent “soft” and “emotional” targets, the State Directors Association believes it is imperative that those in charge of security pay particular attention to schools and pupil transportation.

The Association’s resolution to TSA also requests that the agency:

- “Add experienced and knowledgeable school bus transportation staff to its organization.
- Work with all of the relevant and knowledgeable school bus transportation associations and organizations to develop and disseminate training and education programs that directly address school bus transportation security situations.
- Establish an on-going means for tracking security-related incidents involving school children and school bus transportation.”

At the national level, the pupil transportation industry must continue its involvement with federal programs to ensure the unique needs of school children and school buses are included. The State Directors Association is committed to working with federal agencies and other experts in the area of pupil transportation security. The State Directors Association will advocate for the development and dissemination of information and training programs and the resources needed to get those programs to the industry.

State level action:

Programs succeed when they are endorsed and encouraged at the highest organizational levels. While national level activity is needed, the closest link of government to many of our school districts is at a state level. The State Directors Association, therefore, believes that states must make a firm commitment to the security of school children, including those in school buses.

As discussed in the State Directors Association's June 2004 pupil transportation security documents, there is a need for security audits, policies and procedures. Security training needs to be developed and given to everyone in the pupil transportation industry. Actions at the state level are needed to accelerate support for these important actions.

School district level action:

The State Directors Association believes it is important for school districts to work with state-level school officials, as well as local law enforcement, first responders and emergency preparedness personnel, to coordinate and exchange critical information relevant to the security of pupil transportation.

School districts should look for ways to incorporate security training into training already being performed at both the entry level and in-service level.

The State Directors Association believes the advice contained in the October 6, 2004, letter from the U.S. Department of Education to schools across the nation is reasonable and appropriate. The advice includes both short-term and long-term protective measures. While aimed primarily at school facilities, much of the information and resources have applicability to school bus transportation.

For example, one of the short-term measures is to work with local law enforcement organizations to focus police patrols on and around school grounds. The same concept can be applied to focusing police patrols along school bus routes during normal school transportation hours. While this recommendation may be feasible in urban and suburban areas, it may not be as practicable in rural areas. In areas where law enforcement does not have the resources to dedicate patrols along school routes, the school bus drivers can serve as the "eyes and ears" of the community.

The Department of Education letter also discusses the importance of ensuring that school officials will always be able to contact school buses. A complete copy of the Department of Education letter is available in the Security section of the State Directors Association's website – www.nasdpts.org.

In its continuing effort to provide current information and guidance on security issues, the State Directors Association encourages all stakeholders in the pupil transportation industry to review the Security section of its website regularly. New information is constantly being added to the website or the other websites listed. The State Directors Association's goal is to make it easier for all levels of the pupil transportation industry to formulate and take definitive actions which will continue to maximize the safety and security of our school children as they continue to receive the benefits of effective school transportation.