

Information About School Bus Safety & Seat Belts

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is responsible for establishing Federal motor vehicle safety standards to reduce the number of fatalities and injuries from motor vehicle crashes, including those involving school buses. The NHTSA also works with the states on school bus safety and occupant protection programs. School bus safety is one of the organization's highest priorities. The following information about seatbelts and school buses is from the NHTSA website (<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>):

- *School bus transportation is one of the safest forms of transportation in the United States. All new school buses must meet safety requirements over and above those applying to all other passenger vehicles. These include requirements for improved emergency exits, roof structure, seating and fuel systems, and bus body joint integrity. These requirements help ensure that school buses are extremely safe.*
- *Every year, approximately 394,000 public school buses travel approximately 4.3 billion miles to transport 23.5 million children to and from school and school-related activities. Since 1984, on the average, 11 passengers per year have died in school bus crashes. While each of these fatalities is tragic, it should be noted that the numbers of fatalities among school bus occupants are small when compared to those in other types of motor vehicles. For example, in 1995, twelve occupants in a school-bus-body type vehicle died in a crash. During the same year, 8,168 children between the ages of 5 and 20 died as passengers or drivers in all other types of motor vehicles.*
- *School bus crash data show that a Federal requirement for belts on buses would provide little, if any, added protection in a crash. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) have come to the same conclusion. NTSB concluded in a 1987 study of school bus crashes that most fatalities and injuries were due to occupant seating positions being in direct line with the crash forces. NTSB stated that seat belts would not have prevented most of the serious injuries and fatalities occurring in school bus crashes.*
- *In 1989, NAS completed a study of ways to improve school bus safety and concluded that the overall potential benefits of requiring seat belts on large school buses are insufficient to justify a Federal requirement for mandatory installation. NAS also stated that the funds used to purchase and maintain seat belts might better be spent on other school bus safety programs and devices that could save more lives and reduce more injuries.*

Rather than requiring seat belts, NHTSA decided that the best way to provide crash protection to passengers is through a concept called "compartmentalization." This requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection so that children are protected without the need to buckle-up. Occupant crash protection is provided by a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs. The effectiveness of compartmentalization has been confirmed in the NTSB and NAS studies.

School bus pedestrian fatalities account for the highest number of school bus related fatalities each year. There are about 31 such fatalities per year, about two-thirds of which involve the school bus itself and about one-third of which involve motorists illegally passing the stopped school bus. In its 1989 report, NAS stated that since children are at "greater risk of being killed in school bus loading zones (i.e., boarding and leaving the bus) than in the bus, a larger share of the school bus safety effort should be directed to improving the safety of school bus loading zones." NHTSA agrees with NAS that states and localities should focus their efforts toward improving school bus loading zones.

School buses are heavier, experience less crash forces, and distribute crash forces differently than do passenger cars and light trucks. Because of this, the crash force experienced by the passengers of large buses is much less than that experienced by occupants of passenger cars, light trucks, or vans. Federal regulations require the installation of occupant restraints in motor vehicles based on the vehicle type and size. Because the safety record of school buses is outstanding, and because there is no compelling evidence to suggest that seat belts would provide even higher levels of occupant protection in crashes, NHTSA agrees with the NAS report that there is insufficient reason for a Federal mandate for seat belts on large school buses.