

North Carolina Pupil



Transportation Association



Issues Regarding Safety Restraints on School Buses – April 2008

- Statistics show that school buses are the safest form of transportation for students. The current “compartmentalization” design utilized in the construction of school buses along with the weight and height of the vehicle provide a high degree of protection for passengers. The fact that buses only travel at a speed of 45 mph or less also contributes in a positive way to ensuring safety.
- U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary E. Peters suggested that seat back heights be increased to 24 inches. North Carolina officials had already seen the value of high seat backs to prevent students from being thrown over seat backs during a crash. Buses delivered in early 2008 were equipped with a seat back height of 28 inches. All future North Carolina school buses will meet this requirement.
- Implementation of lap belts should not be considered as a viable option. There are many credible transportation associations nationwide that oppose the installation of lap belts due to cumulative research indicating that lap belts may cause serious injury to young children whose bodies are not yet fully developed.
- Implementation of lap/shoulder belts may cause capacity to be reduced on buses. There are newer seat designs that tend to better accommodate 3 seating positions, but this issue should be studied carefully so that the full impact of the installation of restraint systems on school bus capacity can be successfully gauged.
- If the addition of restraint systems creates a favorable view of school bus transportation which in turn increases the number of student riders, that is a good thing for passenger safety. However, the added cost of increasing the number of student riders must be considered. The current fleet of school buses in North Carolina may be able to absorb a slight increase in student riders, but the impact of any increase must be evaluated for each LEA. Most LEAs that must buy new school buses to keep pace with rider demand will use capital outlay funds for the purchase; these LEAs may have a problem with a source of funding.
- According to information supplied by school bus manufacturers, the cost of a restraint system is approximately \$10,000 per bus. It is estimated that 825 buses per year will be replaced in North Carolina over the next 3 years, thus requiring \$25 million for safety restraint installations during that time period. This funding might be more effectively used on efforts to increase the number of student riders utilizing school bus transportation services. Such efforts could include funding to add cameras to help ensure safety and funding for a limited number of safety assistants per LEA to assist drivers with student discipline.
- The current school bus replacement cycle in North Carolina is 20 years or 200,000 miles. Therefore, using current replacement guidelines, it will be 20 years before all buses have passenger restraint systems installed if the state requires them only on all new buses. Should there be an acceleration of the replacement schedule to facilitate quicker installation of the restraint systems?
- School bus evacuation could present an issue, particularly in a situation involving smoke, fire or water. During an accident situation, students who are restrained will need to be freed from their restraint before evacuation. If the driver is injured or any of the above mentioned elements is present, could students be evacuated in a timely manner?
- If restraint systems are added, should usage be required as a matter of law? Given the utilization by high school students highlighted in a recent pilot program in North Carolina, it seems irresponsible not to require usage if restraint systems are mandated for school buses.

- How will local LEAs respond to the mandate? If a student refuses to wear the restraint, will the student be denied transportation on a yellow school bus, which now is the only transportation alternative for many students? Will LEAs be required to provide another form of transportation to students who refuse to use the restraint system?
- If usage is required, the issue of maintenance on the restraint systems must be addressed.
 - What happens if a restraint system for a certain “seating position” becomes inoperable?
 - What are the requirements for repair from a time perspective?
 - Will there be a requirement for routine inspection or maintenance of the restraint system?
 - Are students permitted to ride in seats with inoperable restraint systems?
 - Are buses removed from service until repairs are made?
 - What if parts are not available?
 - Who will ensure that restraints are utilized and worn properly each day?
- Aisle width may be a concern as some of the seats on the market tend to reduce the width of space available in the aisle of the school bus; reducing this space impacts the accessibility of larger students. Installation of restraint systems should maintain the integrity of aisle width so as not to interfere with loading or unloading, particularly during emergency situations.
- Larger students may not be able to use the system as provided due to the length of the belt; what would happen when one of the belts is not long enough to properly secure a student?
 - Will drivers be required to keep “seat belt extensions” on the bus and use them for students who cannot properly wear restraints as installed? What if a driver does not have an ample number of “seat belt extensions” on a particular day?
- How does the school or transportation department respond to parents who want their child to ride in a bus with seatbelts when not all buses are equipped with the restraint system?
- What is the lifespan of the restraint system? Will there be funding for replacement or maintenance of the system? Will there be added funding for vandalism-related damages?
- Installation of restraint systems on school buses may create a new liability issue for school districts and thus may require either additional legal protection and/or increased funding for responding to litigation.
- The issue of seatbelt straps being used as a weapon needs some attention. While it is our desire that students never have an altercation on the school bus, unfortunately such events do occur. The potential for buckles or straps to be used as weapons present a real concern and should not go without consideration.
- Any initiative to retrofit existing school buses should consider the impact on the structural integrity of the bus. Since all seats will have to be replaced and new holes will need to be drilled in the frame of the bus, a structural engineer should evaluate the impact of the retrofit prior to approving such an initiative.
- Any mandate to add seatbelts to school buses should also include consideration for school activity buses. These buses, while not funded by the state, also transport our students. While manufactured to the same standards as school buses, activity buses are allowed to travel at a higher rate of speed (55 mph). Activity buses also use roadways that are heavily traveled where speed limits are set as high as 70 mph, thus increasing the likelihood of a crash. The standards for passenger safety should be the same for activity buses and school buses alike, and state funds should be provided to cover the increased costs to the LEA

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