

Statement by  
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National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) School Bus Safety Meeting  
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Good morning, Dr. Rosekind. Thank you for inviting me to be here today and for your interest in the issues that affect student safety outside the school bus. When you spoke at the 2015 NAPT Summit in Richmond, VA everyone was pleased to hear you emphasize that your perspective on the installation and use of lap/shoulder belts is but one component in NHTSA's interest in further improving the excellent safety record of school buses, which, as you know, is the best in the transportation industry.

As you also know well, national data show there are twice as many school transportation-related fatalities outside the bus than inside. A school transportation-related crash is one that involves, either directly or indirectly, a school bus body vehicle, or a non-school bus functioning as a school bus, transporting children to or from school or school-related activities. To my knowledge, we are the only motorized vehicle that uses this expanded definition to monitor fatalities.

There are a variety of challenges to student safety that we face every day in school transportation operations, like pedestrians in the danger zone around the bus, clothing entanglements that can result in dragging and driver distraction. We have developed countermeasures for each of these long-standing safety challenges outside the bus and we work diligently to educate our passengers and drivers about these risks and train them to be safe.

There is, however, one challenge that currently stands above all the rest on the scale of risk – cars that illegally pass a stopped school bus.

As you heard from Charlie Hood, the magnitude of this problem is huge. And according to the most recent report by the Kansas State Department of Education, which has conducted a study of school transportation-related fatalities each year since 1970, during the last 5 years (FY 2011 thru FY 2015) an average of five (5) students per year are killed by cars that illegally pass a stopped school bus. Compare that with an average of three (3) students per year that are killed by their own bus.

Illegal passing of stopped school buses is anathema to our safety culture, and its increasing occurrence seems connected directly to the syndrome of dangerous behaviors on the road—distracted and aggressive driving, and excessive speed. It should be unacceptable for two reasons: That it puts children at risk, but also as a matter of fundamental law and order. Tacitly tolerating the illegal passing of a stopped school bus sends a much broader societal signal of indifference to safety and needs to be stopped in its tracks, literally.

Moreover, we believe many parents are not even aware it's happening and we believe they would be shocked if they did. They need to know the facts so they can help us be effective advocates to influence local decision-making to combat it.

We therefore encourage you to consider initiating a new “Learn the Facts” campaign about illegal passing. The materials that were developed collaboratively by NHTSA and the members of the American School Bus Council in the original “Learn the Facts” campaign target parents, school board administrators and school communities with messaging that highlights the safety benefits of yellow school bus transportation; the most common safety attributes of the yellow school bus; the benefits a community can realize by promoting yellow school bus transportation; the effects on commuters and parents if yellow school bus transportation were not an option; and, the true costs incurred in communities without yellow school bus transportation.

We created five infographics, explainer videos, and brochures that are available online, offered as downloads. We printed posters and related educational materials that have been distributed nationwide. And we use social media to announce the availability of this information and create safety messaging that is regularly seen on Facebook and via Twitter. Suffice it to say, I think we can all agree that this campaign has been valuable and successful.

Another “Learn the Facts” campaign, focused solely on illegal passing, would be equally valuable, perhaps even more so.

We envision a project where we collaboratively evaluate and discuss the need for countermeasures like a model state and/or local law regarding stopping for buses; a model training curricula for school bus drivers and students; and a model state law on photo-video enforcement, and then develop, disseminate and publicize them.

But clearly public information is not enough. As NHTSA knows well from its successful decades-long effort to increase seat belt and child seat use and decrease the incidence of DUI, information efforts can only go so far. There must be an enforcement component.

Indeed, the centerpiece of your success in other fields has been first the passage of state laws or in some cases strengthening of existing laws, and then effective enforcement of them, combined with compelling national communications.

Today, we ask NHTSA to apply this same proven formula to engage its state and local community partners, and the agency’s allied safety advocacy groups, to turn their sights on drivers who pass stopped school buses illegally. We implore you to foster a national priority on illegal passing enforcement, perhaps by providing financial incentives for law enforcement. We believe this effort is directly aligned with your program commitment to deter distracted and aggressive driving and excessive speed.

Ultimately, NHTSA’s national bully pulpit with the news media, and relationships through its Section 402 Highway Safety Program, is what it will take to change the paradigm. NAPT, NASDPTS, NSTA and others in our industry are committed to helping the effort enthusiastically, and we are confident we can make a significant difference for the better.

Thank you again for inviting us to participate today in this important conversation.

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