

School Transportation Issues, Laws and Concerns:  
Implications for Future Administrators

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Abstract:

Nearly all building administrators are confronted with a variety of transportation issues. Challenges, concerns and questions can arise from various aspects, including student misbehaviors, transportation laws and its implications at the school level, to importance and implementation of a school bus safety program. As new and upcoming future administrators begin to gather a deeper understanding of managing and dealing with transportation issues, it is important to understand the implications of various data surrounding transportation concerns, so that educated decisions can be made with regards to working effectively at the building level with school transportation. Throughout an examination of literature regarding transportation issues, concerns and problems, three major areas preside: issues regarding school bus safety and particular laws, the trends within school bus transportation, and its effects on school bus transportation safety education. Information gathered from the literature review, indicates that an increased knowledge of the aspects of student transportation, coupled with an awareness of transportation laws, can lead to creating and/or effectively implementing a school bus safety education program. Amid all of the school transportation laws, research and issues, the implications for future administrators can be best summarized by stating, that collaborative efforts amongst all community stakeholders can play a vital role in assisting with the safety of children and the implementation of an effective school transportation safety program.

School bus transportation is the nation's largest mass transportation system, as well as one of the safest. According to School Transportation News (2008-2010), "the federal government considers school buses to be about nine times safer than other passenger vehicles during the normal school commute" (p. 1). Despite various factors, such as the physical features of the design and build of school buses, leading to higher safety ratings, other factors exist which causes a variety of stakeholders to examine various transportation issues. Throughout an examination of literature regarding transportation issues, concerns and problems, three major areas reside: issues regarding school bus safety and particular laws, the trends within school bus transportation, and its effects on school bus transportation safety education.

After reviewing various school bus safety issues and laws, one of the biggest controversial issues in bus safety is seat belts. A reoccurring debate exists about whether seat belts should exist on school buses or not. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) (2006) states, "seat belts have been required on passenger cars since 1968, however, school buses are different by design and use a different kind of safety restraint system that works extremely well" (p. 1). The NHTSA decided that compartmentalization is the best way to provide crash protection to passengers of large school buses (2006, p.1). Compartmentalization requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection in a manner that protects the children without the need to buckle-up. "Through compartmentalization, occupant crash protection is provided by a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing, passive occupant protection system" (School Transportation News, 2010). Many studies, along with the NHTSA have repeatedly concluded that compartmentalization provides a high level of safety protection that disqualifies the safety need for a federal requirement mandating the installation of seat belts.

Despite evidence presented in many studies, along with statements from the Federal Government, The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and other accredited agencies, proponents of seatbelts argue that compartmentalization is incomplete. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), found that compartmentalization, “does not protect passengers during lateral impacts with vehicles of large mass, in rollovers and from ejection” (School Transportation News, 2010). In addition, proponents of seatbelts believe supporting the use of seatbelts on school buses will increase the child’s habit of utilizing seatbelts within passenger cars, if they are being asked to buckle up everywhere, along with easing parents’ anxieties about their children riding safely on the bus. Also, the use of seatbelts is believed to impact disciplinary issues, promoting fewer opportunities for situations to arise, when children are fastened in and seated. Currently, 3 states, FL, NJ and NY, require seatbelts on buses. Within NY, the following law has been implemented:

“New York State's school bus seat belt law requires all school buses manufactured after July 1, 1987 to be equipped with seat belts. New York State does not currently mandate seat belt use on school buses, but rather, leaves the a decision to each school district” (SafeNY, 2010).

The controversy surrounding the use of seatbelts on school buses is still occurring. More studies are happening, but one thing is consistent across the nation. According to the Federal Register (2008), The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), The Department of Transportation, (2008), set a final rule upgrading the school bus passenger crash protection requirements of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) No. 222 (p. 2). The new rule effective April 20, 2009, requires the following:

- a. New school buses of 10,000 pounds or less will be required to have lap/shoulder belts in lieu of the lap belts currently required (manufactured on or after October 21, 2011)
- b. Each State or local jurisdiction may decide whether to install seat belts on large school buses
  - a. Refer to the performance standards for seat belts voluntarily installed on large school buses (manufactured on or after October 21, 2011)
- c. All new school buses must raise the height of seat backs from 20 inches to 24 inches, while also having a self-latching mechanism on seat bottom cushions that are designed to flip up or be removable without tools (manufactured on or after October 21, 2011)

In addition to researching the transportation laws, and how the actual physical structure and features of school buses, relate to school transportation issues and safety, an examination of circumstances and causes of school bus student fatalities is crucial for all stakeholders to be aware of. Through an analysis of the causes and circumstances surrounding student fatalities, further developments can be made regarding prevention. The New York State Education Department Office Of Pupil Transportation Unit (2008), presents an examination of trends in student fatalities within school transportation. The document (2008) highlights the following five trends identified by an analysis of school bus accidents in New York State since 1960:

1. Youngest students at risk: children ages 4 to 8 were most susceptible to a school bus fatality
2. Most fatalities occurred outside the bus, primarily during the loading or unloading process at the bus stop or school
3. Most injuries occur inside the bus
4. Most dangerous times-afternoon and mid-year
5. Driver and Student Training programs have reduced fatalities dramatically

The question is, “what are the implications of understanding this data?” As a future administrator, this awareness, coupled with an understanding of the laws, can lead to creating and/or effectively implementing a school bus safety education program. A study by Lartey, Telljohann, & Price (2006), states, “mandating bus safety education in states and the provision of more training would assist primary grade teachers to start providing bus safety education to the students” (p. 7). The NHTSA (2004), states, “pupil bus safety education should be a priority to reduce school bus-related injury and death” (Lartey, et. al, 2006, p. 7), whether bus safety education is mandated or not within a state.

School bus safety education does not have to be a separate entity from a school-wide positive behavioral program. A study by Putnam, Handler, Ramirez-Platt & Luiselli (2003), described an intervention to improve student bus-riding behavior through a whole-school intervention.

The participants of the study included the entire student population, grades K-5, attending a public elementary school located in a low-socioeconomic urban area. “The primary intervention procedures were identifying appropriate behaviors during transportation (“bus rules”), training bus drivers to deliver positive reinforcement, and rewarding student performance through a weekly school-based lottery” (p. 583). The mode of measurement was the number of bus office referrals and bus suspensions. The evaluation occurred over 3 consecutive school years. This intervention was a collaborative effort among administrators, teachers, bus drivers and all students, with a prevention focus. Positive results prevailed, indicating a decrease in disruptive bus behaviors, as measured by the discipline referrals and suspensions, “were maintained over the long term, with school personnel assuming responsibility for intervention in the absence of ongoing consultation” (Putnam, et. al., 2003, p. 583). According to Lewis & Sugai (1999) and Mayer (2002), “positively directed whole-school intervention continues to evolve as an effective and preferred method of constructive student discipline” (Putnam, et. al., 2003, p. 589).

Ultimately, amid all of the school bus transportation laws, research and issues, The New York State Education Department Office of Pupil Transportation Unit (2008), summarizes the implications well by stating,

“an effective school transportation safety program requires that students, drivers, parents, school administrators and affiliated groups be aware of the basic characteristics most likely to lead to a school bus fatality. This awareness, coupled with a strong elementary grade level safety curriculum that utilized this information, is the most important action that can be taken to enhance the safety of a child’s ride to and from school and school activities” (p. 11).

So, ultimately, all school community stakeholders play a vital role in assisting with the safety of children and the implementation of an effective school transportation safety program. Collaborative efforts will lead to better results.

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