

Seat Belts, School Buses And Safety

At first blush, the question of whether seat belts should be required on school buses seems obvious. Seat belts save lives in cars, so it seems logical that they would make school buses safer. It appears a lot of people agree with this logic: the results of an on-line poll conducted by *NEA Today* magazine found that 53% of respondents favored seat belts, while 47% were opposed.

But it turns out that the question isn't so simple. When the NEA members with the most hand-on experience in bus safety — bus drivers — are asked, most of those who have expressed an opinion on the question are strongly opposed to seat belts. And the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration has found that seat belts would not add to the safety of school bus passengers. So what's going on here?

Bus Drivers' Concerns

Some of the concerns that drivers express about seat belts are:

- Students can and do use the heavy belt buckles as weapons, injuring other riders.
- It is next to impossible to make sure that all students keep their belts properly fastened, so that they are not injured by the belts in an accident.
- If a bus has to be evacuated in an emergency, such as a fire, panicked or disoriented students might be trapped by their belts.

When drivers balance these concerns against the many safety features already built into the design of school buses, they conclude that given the way buses are presently operated, they are safer without seat belts.

The Bigger Issues

To understand the question of school bus seat belts, one really has to look at the larger questions of student supervision, discipline, and safety on and around buses. There has been a lot of recent attention given to the problems that disruptive, or even violent, students can cause in schools. Bus drivers must contend with these same students.

Unlike teachers, bus drivers must care for up to 50-70 student charges at a time, while maneuvering a large vehicle, contending with traffic, bad weather, and adverse road conditions. And do it all with their backs turned to the students!

Most school districts do not provide bus aides, who can help with discipline and safety (such as ensuring that seat belts are properly worn, or evacuating a bus in an emergency), except on special education buses. Also, many bus drivers complain they are not supported by administrators when they encounter student discipline problems on their buses.

Bus drivers feel strongly that students' time on the bus needs to be considered a part of the school day, and point out that the ride to school in the morning sets the tone for the entire day.

The bottom line? Many drivers feel that strong administrative support for their efforts to maintain discipline, and bus aides to assist the drivers, would do a lot more to protect students than would a "quick fix" like seat belts.

The NHTSA Position

The [National Highway Transportation Administration](#) (NHTSA) has issued a position statement on seat belts on school buses, concluding that "there is insufficient reason for a Federal mandate for seat belts on large school buses." The statement points out that:

"School bus transportation is one of the safest forms of transportation in the United States. We require all new school buses to 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."

NHTSA feels that the best way to provide crash protection to passengers is through "compartmentalization," in which "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." [Read the NHTSA statement, "Seatbelts on School Buses."](#)