



Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials

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SEAT BELTS/SCHOOL BUSES FACT SHEET June 17, 2008

SEAT BELTS AND 24" SEATBACKS IN SCHOOL BUSES: The Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials (PASBO) supports the installation of lap/shoulder seat belts in school buses, provided that scientific testing, studies and analyses prove that lap/shoulder belts enhance the safety of children on school buses, and sufficient, dedicated state and/or federal funding is made available. Otherwise, PASBO believes funding for seat belt installation could be better spent on safety measures such as school bus safety and safe riding practices.

BACKGROUND: In January 2008, Representative Thomas Blackwell, Jr. introduced House Bill 2173 to require a minimum seatback height of 24" and lap/shoulder belts for every school bus. A seat belt shall be provided for each passenger; no passenger shall be transported for whom a seat belt is not available and used. The bill does not provide any funding.

Earlier, in November 2007, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) proposed amendments to federal regulations governing school bus passenger crash protection requirements. The proposed rulemaking (72 Fed. Reg. 65509, Nov. 21, 2007) calls for, among other things, a minimum seatback height of 24"; lap/shoulder belts in small school buses (under 10,000 lbs.); lap belts in large school buses; and use of Section 402 highway safety funds for lap/shoulder belt installation.

PASBO's members, which include more than 3,000 members, including transportation directors/supervisors, who are primarily employed full time by public or private schools in Pennsylvania, are directly affected by the proposed legislation and federal regulations.

TALKING POINTS

- School buses abide by federal, state and local regulations. In Pennsylvania, regulations already require that seats be a minimum height of 24 inches.¹ Additionally, federal NHTSA regulations already require the installation of lap or lap/shoulder belts on small school buses (under 10,000 lbs.).²
- U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters says, "school buses already are the safest form of motor vehicle transportation, with a fatality rate that is nearly six times lower than passenger vehicles." Each year, some 474,000 school buses travel more than 4.8 billion miles, transporting 25.1 million children to and from schools and school-related activities.³
- Children are safer riding the school bus than being driven to school in their parents' car. According to the School Bus Information Council, supported by data of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (2002), approximately 800 students are killed going to and from school each year. Of these deaths, "about 20 (2 percent) - 5 school bus passengers and 15 pedestrians - are school bus-related. The other 98 percent of the school-aged deaths occur in other motor vehicles or to pedestrians, bicyclists, or motorcyclists."⁴
- School buses are specifically designed with safety in mind, making them already the safest vehicles on the road. They are heavier, experience less crash force than smaller cars and trucks, and utilize "compartmentalization," a passive occupant crash protection system. The

NHTSA “determined that requiring lap belts on large, new school buses would appear to have little, if any, benefit in reducing serious –to-fatal injuries in severe frontal crashes. In rare circumstances, tests indicate that in some severe frontal crashes there may be increased risk of serious neck injuries and possibly abdominal injury...”⁵

- Various reports have been issued regarding school bus safety. They concluded: seat belts would not have prevented injuries and fatalities that occurred because the occupant seating positions were directly in line with the crash forces; the overall potential benefits of requiring seat belts on large school buses were insufficient to justify a Federal mandate for installation; seat belts might be better spent on other school bus safety programs; compartmentalization is an effective means of protecting passengers in school bus crashes; compartmentalization effectively lowered injury measures by distributing crash forces with the padded seating surface; lap belts showed little to no benefit in reducing serious/fatal injuries; and the addition of lap/shoulder belts on buses would increase capital costs and reduce seating capacity on buses.⁶
- There is no guarantee that once installed, students will use seatbelts. Seat belts also can be used as weapons to strike or choke other passengers.⁷
- At \$1,500 to \$2,000 to the cost of a new, 66- to 78-passanger bus, adding seatbelts at the time of manufacture would certainly increase their costs. The cost to retrofit an existing bus has been estimated at \$2,700 to \$3,400 for a 66- to 78-passenger school bus. Retrofitting, however, may be prohibited by law on an older bus unless the bus was originally manufactured “seat belt ready.” School districts would be faced with repairing and replacing damaged belts which can add \$100 to \$500 per bus to annual maintenance costs.⁸
- Without a dedicated funding stream, any legislation requiring seat belts on school buses would, in effect, be another unfunded mandated upon the Commonwealth’s school districts.
- Costs would be in addition to the cost of additional buses and finding drivers to fill these openings. The seating capacity on school buses would be adversely affected, requiring the purchase of 30 percent to 40 percent more school buses at the cost of taxpayers.⁹

¹ 67 Pa. Code Chapter 171.69(c)

² FMVSS No. 222

³ NHTSA 19-07

⁴ National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, 2002

⁵ NHTSA Sends School Bus Report to Congress, 2002; NHTSA Report to Congress: School Bus Safety: Crashworthiness Research at p. v April 2002

⁶ National Transportation Safety Board, 1987; National Academy of Sciences, 1998; National Transportation Safety Board, 1999; Ibid.

⁷ PASBO Report, February 2007

⁸ School Bus Transportation News, Seat Belt FAQs

⁹ Supra note 7