

**KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
PUPIL TRANSPORTATION BRANCH
POSITION PAPER**

SAFETY BELTS ON LARGE SCHOOL BUSES

While everyone agrees that the safety of our Nation's children on school buses is important, often there are disagreements over the benefits of certain safety features. The issue of whether to require safety belts on large school buses is a topic that has been thoroughly studied and debated for many years.

The number of school bus passenger fatalities is small when compared to the number of children killed in other types of motor vehicles. Considering the number of miles that school buses travel compared to passenger cars, school buses are about four times safer.

One of the major reasons for the outstanding safety record of school buses is the manner in which they are constructed. As is the case with all motor vehicles sold in the United States, school buses have to meet a stringent series of federal motor vehicle safety standards designed to provide school bus occupants with high levels of safety should a crash occur. One of those federal standards, "School Bus Passenger Seating and Crash Protection," establishes minimum crash protection requirements for occupants of all school buses manufactured on or after April 1, 1977.

Large School Buses

The effectiveness of "compartmentalization" has been confirmed by independent studies by the National Transportation Safety Board and the National Academy of Sciences. In 1987, the National Transportation Safety Board completed a detailed analysis of 44 serious accidents involving large school buses. The board reached several conclusions concerning safety belts, most notable that most school bus occupant fatalities and serious injuries were "attributable to the occupants' seating position being in direct line with the crash forces. It is unlikely that the availability of any type of restraint would have improved their injury outcome."

In 1989, the National Academy of Sciences completed a study at the direction of the United States Congress on "the principal causes of fatalities and injuries to school children riding in school buses and of the use of seat belts in school buses and other measures that may improve the safety of school bus transportation." The Academy was directed to "determine those safety measures that are most effective in protecting the safety of school children while boarding, leaving, and riding in school buses." In its conclusions, the Academy noted that "the overall potential benefits of requiring safety belts on large school buses are insufficient to justify a Federal requirement for mandatory installation. Funds used to purchase and maintain seat belts might be better spent on other school bus safety programs

and devices that could save more lives and reduce more injuries.” The academy pointed out that children are at greater risk of being killed in the school bus loading zone (i.e., while boarding or leaving the bus.)

Small School Buses:

Safety belts are needed, and have been effective, in these vehicles because the size and weight of these smaller school buses is closer to that of passenger cars and light trucks. The National Transportation Safety Board also analyzed 24 crashes involving these small school buses and determined the available safety belts were worn by approximately two-thirds of the passengers in the small school buses. The board concluded that small school buses, which also utilize most of the “compartmentalization” features, required in large school buses, “provided good crash protection to both restrained and unrestrained passengers.”

While there are no federal requirements for safety belts on large school buses, some state and local governments have established such requirements. In its study, the National Academy of Sciences noted that in order for safety belts to be beneficial, “states and local school districts that require seat belts on school buses must insure not only that all bus passengers wear the belts, but that they wear them correctly.” In late 1995, in response to a recent requirement that all new large school buses in New Jersey be equipped with seat belts. The National Transportation Safety Board initiated another special study of crashes of large school buses equipped with safety belts to determine their safety consequences. Because serious school bus crashes are relatively rare, it will most likely take several years for the board for the board to collect sufficient information for its analysis.

In the meantime, the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services continues to support the conclusions reached by the National Transportation Safety Board and the National Academy of Sciences that there is no supportable need for safety belts on large school buses. With the limited resources available to our education system, we must allocate those resources where they will provide the maximum benefit to our children. To do otherwise would be irresponsible.