

School Bus Accidents: Reducing Incidents and Injuries

By Daniel Mahoney, CIH, CSP



The number of children injured in nonfatal school bus accidents annually is more than double the number previously estimated. In Ohio alone, approximately 20,800 children younger than 18 were occupants of school buses that were involved in crashes in 2003 and 2004 (McGeehan 2007). Among those children, most had minor or no injuries. However, there were two skull fractures, one incident of intracranial bleeding, one broken back, one serious injury to the spleen, and 28 head injuries, including concussions (McGeehan 2007).

How can school districts lower the risk of both accident and injury? Here are some suggestions:

- Schools should have a second adult on each bus to supervise the students and thus allow the driver to concentrate solely on the driving task.
- Each school district should have a written student rider discipline policy in place that includes a statement that identifies the school bus as an extension of the school; defines responsibilities for student riders, drivers, parents, and school administrators; clarifies that riding a bus is a privilege, not a right; defines acceptable student behavior for riding and boarding a bus; and outlines a disciplinary procedure that is consistently enforced and backed by the school administration.
- Bus driver training in student rider discipline should be provided that addresses professional responsibilities, student relationship building, public relations, student-driver interactions, student discipline, student age-appropriate behaviors, hints for controlling behaviors, and working with school authorities.
- Bus loading and unloading zones are often the sites of vehicle and pedestrian accidents. Each school district should have the ability and authority to evaluate each school for traffic flow patterns and vehicle separation in relation to bus loading/unloading zones, evaluate the configuration of each bus stop for physical conditions and traffic hazards, evaluate the bus loading procedures at each school, change the design and/or location of the stops and/or school traffic patterns, and monitor changing conditions and respond to observations and driver feedback regarding bus loading/unloading zone safety.
- Bus design and maintenance play a role in reducing the potential for and severity of accidents. Each school should have policies and procedures in place for selecting buses with design features appropriate for the intended use, replacing buses before experiencing significant maintenance problems, having buses inspected daily by the drivers and on a scheduled basis by the mechanics, and reporting and repairing defects in the bus and related equipment.

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Should a bus accident occur, the bus driver should be aware of the subsequent actions to take immediately. The following measures for drivers are intended to enhance the safety of the students and facilitate a rapid response by authorities to assist at the accident scene:

- Do not leave the accident scene until directed by the district transportation manager. If a noncollision incident occurs, such as an injury to a student on the bus while the bus is moving, pull the bus over at the first safe location and contact base.
- Do not move the bus following an accident unless absolutely necessary. Documenting the final positions of vehicles involved in a collision is important. You can use a Vehicle Accident Report form to document the accident details. Unless directed by the police or your supervisor, do not move the bus. Move it only if there is danger of another collision. Note exactly where the bus was stopped after the collision.
- Remain calm so you can assess the situation immediately after the accident. Do there appear to be student injuries? Is there danger of fire, downed wires, or another collision? Are your students safer on the bus or should you evacuate? What is your exact location?
- Take a moment to reassure students. Remaining calm can have an enormous effect on your students, especially young children or children with special needs. The children are your first priority after an accident.
- Use your school district or company emergency or accident code, if any. If there are no prearranged codes in your operation, make it clear that your message is urgent. State the bus number since it allows the dispatcher to locate where your vehicle should be, even if no other information is forthcoming.
- Protect the scene after determining that there are no serious injuries to students. Place reflectors far enough back to protect the bus from another collision. Activate four-way flashers. If the children have been evacuated, ensure that they are located in a safe place and remain in the area.
- Initiate first aid if necessary, but do not exceed the limits of your first-aid training. Attend to life-threatening injuries, such as severe bleeding, inability to breathe, and shock. Follow universal precautions; use rubber gloves. Do not move an injured student unless absolutely necessary.
- Make an accurate passenger list. Document the exact seat location of each passenger (students, bus attendant, etc.) at the time of the accident. Note whether seat belts were worn. Be prepared to provide emergency responders with the precise number of passengers on board. Be prepared to notify emergency responders of children with special needs and the nature of those special needs. Ensure that all children are accounted for.
- Ask witnesses to wait for the police to arrive. Jot down license plate numbers of vehicles at the scene

and the names of witnesses who are leaving before the police arrive. If no witnesses are available, identify the first people who arrived at the scene.

- Keep students at the scene until authorities arrive. Do not release students to Good Samaritans or neighbors or allow any students to walk home on their own, even in minor accidents. Keep students at the scene until authorities arrive. If parents arrive at the scene, ask them to remain with their children until authorities arrive. If a parent insists on taking a child from the scene, ask the parent to leave a signed note.
- When emergency personnel arrive, they will take over. Let them do their job.
- Be professional and polite, but admit nothing, promise nothing, and don't argue with the other motorist. Do not discuss the accident with anyone other than law enforcement, your supervisors, your school district, or company lawyer.
- Ask reporters to talk to your supervisor. If approached by the news media, politely explain that district/company policy does not allow drivers to comment at the scene.

These few simple strategies can go a long way toward reducing the risk of injury in the event of a school bus accident.

Reference

McGeehan, J., J. Annett, M. Vajani, and others. 2007. *School bus-related injuries among children and teenagers in the United States, 2001–2003*. Center for Innovation in Pediatric Practice, Columbus Children's Research Institute, Children's Hospital, Columbus, Ohio.

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