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# The Yellow School Bus Industry

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NATIONAL SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION

Industry white paper prepared by the  
National School Transportation Association

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## Note to Readers

The school bus transportation industry has been quietly and effectively doing its work for over a century. It is the dedication that we put into this important, yet complex service that has made the yellow school bus the safest way to get kids to school.

We have a terrific story to tell – and we're proud to tell it. Our drivers have been delivering generations of schoolchildren safely. We are pleased to be part of the school day for the several million children we safely transport. Caring for our children is not a part-time job; it's a way of life.

The safe transportation of children has been and continues to be our primary focus. We not only respond to research, but proactively innovate to improve upon our already impressive record. Federal studies have proven the simple fact: The yellow school bus is the safest way to get kids to school.

This white paper explores what goes on “behind the scenes” and the various public policy discussions to make safe transportation a reality.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THE YELLOW SCHOOL BUS INDUSTRY IS REMARKABLE

School bus carriers operate the largest mass transportation fleet in the country. Each day, 480,000 yellow school buses travel the nation's roads. Compare that to transit, with 140,000 total vehicles, 96,000 of which are buses; to the motor coach industry, with 35,000 buses; to commercial airlines, with 7,400 airplanes; and to rail, with 1,200 passenger cars. In fact, our school bus fleet is 2.5 times the size of all other forms of mass transportation combined.

The safety record of the school bus industry is unparalleled. Of the average 40,000 deaths from traffic accidents every year, only six are in school buses.

It is a unique institution: symbolic, practical and highly effective.

The industry has overcome many major challenges – and will face new ones. Changes in society, the economy and the education system mean changes for the yellow school bus industry. This white paper examines the industry in the broadest context. When considering the challenges of change, it is essential to understand what has brought the industry to this point.

## INDUSTRY STRUCTURE

The school bus industry is highly regulated, and one that has not only cooperated with regulators, customers and suppliers to address changing needs, but has proactively researched and developed much of the innovation found on the buses today. This paper



first examines the industry infrastructure. Once dominated by small family businesses, it now has a much more complex structure. We will review the many functions of a school bus company, some of which are unique to this sector.

We will also examine ways in which the industry relates to the federal government and to other stakeholders.

As in the past, the industry will continue to exercise its leadership, serving as a model for other industries in combining self-regulation and government standards to ensure safety on the roads. Understanding the full scope of the industry structure offers insight on how to apply these lessons.

## DRIVERS AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL

The yellow school bus industry wears a very human face – the welcoming face of the school bus driver. In most instances, the driver is the first person outside the immediate family to greet a child each morning. It is this driver who manages the important role of getting students to and from school, as well as to their games, field and class trips, and after-school activities.

The industry is justifiably proud of its drivers. Among the least celebrated heroes of American life, they are committed to the safety and well-being of each and every child they transport. In this paper, we will look at the exacting standards for school bus drivers and the social and economic changes that have influenced the driver force.

Maintaining a viable pool of current and potential drivers and driver support personnel is one of the industry's greatest challenges. The industry will continue to find ways to develop this human resource while recognizing the changes that make that challenge even more daunting.

## BUSES AND OTHER EQUIPMENT

The second major contributor to the industry's safety record and record of achievement is the yellow school bus. Its history of innovation and development is important to an understanding of where we are today. This paper explores that history.

The school bus is the safest vehicle on the road because of a unique level of cooperation between the industry and government regulators. This paper examines the particular characteristics of the vehicle, as well as controversies surrounding fuel choices and optional equipment. It also looks at less-safe vehicle choices that are sometimes used for student transportation.

The school bus continues to evolve. But as new and costly changes are considered, proposed benefits must be weighed against the available resources. The most effective safety expenditure is one that provides safe, reliable school bus transportation for all students.

## TRANSPORTATION AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

It is important to remember that the student transportation industry is much more than a transportation provider or the iconic yellow bus. It is an integral part of the education system. An understanding of the context in which it operates is critical when considering reforms or changing functions.

## ECONOMIC ISSUES

No examination of the industry would be complete without looking at the flow of revenue, taxation and the overall financial health of its customers.

Any consideration of reforms, additional mandates, or changes in transportation funding must be informed by the unique challenges faced by a private industry performing a public service with extremely high performance accountability.

## PUBLIC POLICY CONCERNS

The industry will continue to evolve over the upcoming decade. The five major overarching concerns that we will review are:

- Ensuring students' access to safe transportation (including consideration of alternate vehicles);
- Maintaining a viable private sector;
- Maintaining a secure school transportation system;
- Promoting clean-air solutions; and
- Encouraging coordinated transportation.

## CONCLUSION

School transportation cannot be taken for granted. The industry is a sophisticated system with many interrelated and complex processes and operations with the sole focus being safe student transportation.

From time to time, special interest groups will focus on a single element of the system as

part of a larger campaign. These campaigns do great harm by frightening parents into taking children off school buses, which have been proven to be the safest means of transportation, and using alternate means of daily transport, such as private cars or public transit. These alternatives are more deadly, and can expose a child to additional dangers.

Questioning parties need to take a broader look at all the factors and implications of any issue affecting school transportation. Intense regulation and reporting has helped define the school bus as the safest and most efficient means of transporting students. Additionally, having a scheduled ride has been linked to higher attendance and better performance. The iconic yellow bus continues to grow in importance.





# INTRODUCTION

The school bus industry has an unparalleled record of safety and achievement. Each school day, the industry transports 26 million students, logging millions of miles annually.

The industry's safety record is the result of three foundational elements:

*The industry infrastructure.* The industry is made up of a dedicated group of professionals whose sole focus is on the communities, parents, and students they serve. Its manufacturers, suppliers and contractors come from both traditional family businesses and large, sophisticated corporations. The customers and clients are the professionals in school districts who oversee the transportation function. The industry trade associations are in the forefront of promoting safety and advancing public policies that protect student passengers.

*The drivers.* School bus drivers are specially trained, regulated and monitored. No other driver on the nation's roads is required to have as much training and testing as school bus drivers.

*The equipment.* School buses are specifically designed to protect occupants against crashes and incidents on the road. Over the years, standards for construction and operation have evolved from the industry itself, from regulation and legislation, and from public concerns.

The result is a specifically-designed, meticulously-manufactured vehicle that is far superior to any other in transporting children.

This report offers an overview of the “big picture” of the school bus transportation industry with a special emphasis on the private companies who provide approximately one-third of pupil transportation. It is an explanation of the current state of affairs, a description of its history and a candid look at the future.

In addition to the elements above, this report considers how transportation fits into the educational system, the economic issues that inform the industry and the public policy issues that are most significant to the industry.

The yellow color of a school bus was originally designed to attract attention on the road, lending to its overall safety. The yellow bus of today however attracts an unfair share of attention from special interest groups that may create the damaging perception that it is unsafe. A school-aged child is many times more likely to be killed in a private vehicle than in a yellow school bus.

The industry will continue to see significant changes. There will be changes to the configuration of the school buses as well as to the environment in which they operate. Recent research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Transportation Research Board clearly affirm the direction of the industry’s evolution and its many successes. Nevertheless, legislation at the federal level, in the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, the No Child Left Behind Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and others, will challenge the industry to continue growing. Federal regulation in a number of agencies, including the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Transportation Security Administration and others, also will affect the industry.

At the same time, pressures on state and local economies threaten school bus service in many communities. Budget restraints are prompting some to consider other less-safe means of transporting their children.

The men and women of the private companies providing this safe transportation are actively working with individuals throughout the federal government to educate the public, drive additional security measures, and build on its success. They provide private-sector solutions to maximize the likelihood that school children in the United States – the future of our nation – will arrive at school safely, on time and ready to learn. This has been a “win-win” story for the children and the companies that serve their needs. This is a success story to build upon.



# INDUSTRY STRUCTURE

Transportation to and from school and for activity trips is provided either by school districts that operate their own fleets or by private companies in partnership with the districts. Private companies transport approximately one-third of the nation's schoolchildren. A private school bus company has one main focus – and that is on providing safe, reliable, cost-effective and timely transportation. Schools, whether private or public, have much broader roles and mandates.

This section begins with a description of the roles or functions in pupil transportation. It examines both the scope and the environmental factors inherent in the process of getting children to and from school, which together form the context in which the industry continues to evolve.

## FUNCTIONS AND ROLES

There are some functions or roles that are common among all private transportation providers, regardless of size. In larger companies, these functions may be developed and executed by entire departments; in smaller companies, the owner may handle many or all of them. Regardless of how they are managed, they are critical to the success of any transportation system.

### *Drivers*

The bus drivers are the front-line personnel – the individuals who interact directly with students, parents and school staff. Many owners and managers have been drivers, and they often fill in when appropriate. Drivers are required to pass background and dexterity tests,

physicals, initial and drug/alcohol tests, and have a special license, known as a Commercial Driver's License (CDL), with specific passenger or school bus endorsements. Drivers are also required to have special training.

### *Driver trainers and support staff*

Most states require that drivers receive refresher courses and annual updates. Many states mandate that this training, along with the new driver training, be provided by certified instructors. The transportation provider is responsible for ensuring all covered employees receive training, though the actual classroom or behind-the-wheel training may be conducted by others.

### *Human resources*

The person or persons charged with recruiting, hiring and maintaining standards of drivers and other personnel must be trained in specific regulations of the state and federal government, and also must have a sense for the kind of person who will succeed as a school bus driver. The human resources department is responsible for implementing drug and alcohol testing, conducting driving history and criminal background checks, maintaining training records and developing carrier policies.

### *School Bus Technicians*

Technicians ensure that buses are kept in good operating condition. Depending on the size of the organization and the number of buses, this function may be very sophisticated. There are thousands of parts on a bus, including some specialized equipment. For example, stop arms, crossing gates, back-up alarms, child reminders and flashing lights are specific to school buses. Specialized training is required to maintain and repair industry-specific equipment, which is increasingly becoming more complex through regular advances in technology. School bus technicians receive ongoing training and are often Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certified.

### *Cleaners*

The interior and exterior of each bus must be kept clean and sanitized as well as in good working order. The bright yellow of the school bus must be clearly visible to be effective. In smaller operations, drivers and technicians will perform many of the cleaning functions.

### *Dispatchers*

Dispatchers form the link between the drivers on the buses and the customers. This is a critical function, since buses have fixed pickup and delivery schedules.

### *Record keeping and Administration*

Detailed records are not only maintained for the business, but are additionally kept for drivers, vehicles and related staff. Unlike school districts, private-sector providers are subject to Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) regulations and the detailed record keeping they require.

### *Routing*

Each bus route must be designed to ensure that all student riders get to school on time and that buses are used efficiently. Buses have set schedules to be at each bus stop to pick up and discharge students. Effective routing is required to reduce travel time, mileage, and to avoid hazardous roads and conditions.

### *Safety*

Safety is the primary concern of the industry. Buses operate on public roads - often sharing the same heavily-traveled routes as commuters near large urban areas. In addition, the passengers are exuberant schoolchildren who may not always make their personal safety their number-one concern.

While smaller businesses might be exempt from some federal regulations, safety regulations and industry standards cover all school transportation companies regardless of size.

## SIZE AND STRUCTURE OF BUSINESSES

The largest school bus companies have several thousand employees and buses covering several states. There are also many small businesses – some with a single bus. As might be expected, these differing sizes affect the structure of the individual companies. Businesses may be proprietorships, partnerships, limited liability corporations or corporations.

Both large carriers, with their economies of scale and specialized functions, and small carriers, with their hands-on performance and community ties, bring their own distinct advantages to the individual school districts they serve. It is important to note that private companies of all sizes strive to provide a high level of expertise and service to their customers.

## SERVICE OPTIONS

Most state governments generally require their school districts to provide transportation to and from schools. The federal government does not require transportation except as part of another program.

Each school district has two basic options to provide transportation service to their students. Under the first option, it may assume the responsibility of providing the transportation itself. The school district purchases and maintains the equipment, sets the routes, and covers all



functions described above - in addition to teaching, counseling, and supporting all the other administrative activities associated with education.

The second option is to contract with a private student transportation provider. With this option, districts find a contractor and arrangement that best suited the needs of their community. Typical contract elements include:

- *Vehicles:* May be owned by a contractor or the school district.
- *Facilities:* May be owned by or leased from the school district, or they may be owned and operated by a contractor exclusively.
- *Staff:* Generally employed by the contractor, there are some “hybrid” situations where employees may continue to be employed by the school district or a third-party firm (“employee leasing”).

## SETTING STANDARDS

The school bus transportation industry has proactively organized programs that set standards for equipment and operations. It has also worked with regulators and is subject to regulations at the federal, state and local levels.

The national conference on school transportation first met in 1939. Representatives of the industry, state directors of transportation, manufacturers, the National Safety Council and academia have continued to meet every five years to review the published document and recommend changes.

The specifications and guidelines in this document are the basis of the regulations for many states, and they cover:

- The bus chassis;
- The bus body;
- Specially equipped buses;
- Fuels;
- Operations; and
- Inspections.

The last conference was held in 2010 and work is underway for the conference in 2015.



# GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

At the national level, there are ten Congressional committees whose work directly affects the industry:

- Senate Finance Committee
- Senate Appropriations Committee
- Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee
- Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
- Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
- House Ways and Means Committee
- House Appropriations Committee
- House Education and the Workforce Committee
- House Energy and Commerce Committee
- House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee

There are also a number of departments and federal agencies that directly affect the industry:

- Department of Education
- Department of Energy
  - Environmental Protection Administration
- Department of Health and Human Services
  - Head Start Bureau
- Department of Homeland Security
  - Transportation Security Administration
- Department of Labor
  - Occupational Safety and Health Administration
- Department of Transportation
  - Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration
  - Federal Transit Administration
  - National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- Department of the Treasury
- Federal Transit Administration
- General Accountability Office
- National Transportation Safety Board

Some legislation and regulations affect the industry directly. For example, changes to the federal motor vehicle safety standards for school buses have a direct financial impact, as do any federal labor laws, like minimum wage standards.

Other regulations, such as commercial driver's licensing requirements, may be adopted at the federal level, but enforcement and execution is at the state level. Often, compliance with federal standards is a condition for transportation and other funding grants. If states do not adopt the federal standards, they may lose federal funding.

The greatest impact on school transportation operations, however, comes from the states. That is where operational requirements and restrictions, additional vehicle specifications, and inspection standards are generated and enforced.

## NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

There are three major trade associations. The National School Transportation Association is the organization that represents private school bus companies. The National Association for Pupil Transportation primarily represents school district transportation supervisors. The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services represents the state government officials in charge of pupil transportation. All three focus on the safety of the pupils being transported and often work jointly on projects surrounding this focus.

There are two major publications serving the industry: School Bus Fleet, published by Bobit Publishing, and School Transportation News, published by STN Media. Both have useful websites to complement their monthly magazines. Several newsletters, such as School Transportation Director and Transporting Students with Disabilities, also provide useful industry-related information. In addition to the National Conference on School Transportation held every five years, each of the national associations has an annual conference. And the industry showcases drivers at two international safety competitions, and sponsors an annual nationwide poster contest for students in conjunction with National School Bus Safety Week, celebrated in October each year. There are also many meetings and forums sponsored by the federal government during which officials and industry representatives work together to advance safety concerns

## CONCLUSION

Although school transportation may not be universal, it is widespread. Whether service is provided by the school district or by a private company in partnership with the district, transportation is available to the vast majority of our county's school-aged children. Student transportation is a highly regulated industry with a history of cooperation between regulators, customers and suppliers to meet changing and emerging safety concerns.



# DRIVERS AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL

Underpinning every school transportation operation is a solid team of professional drivers. Drivers are the link between transportation management and the community, and they are the key to safety. A provider's driver force very often makes the difference between a successful operation and a struggling one.

The days of an employer hiring a walk-in applicant, showing the route, and putting him/ her to work the next day are gone, along with the old practice of allowing high-school students to drive buses. Today, school bus drivers are the most highly trained, tested and scrutinized drivers on the road.

As is the school bus, the school bus driver is subject to layers of regulation. To begin at the federal level, all school bus drivers must obtain a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). The standards for the CDL are set at the federal level but implemented by the states since exact testing and licensing procedures vary by state. An applicant for a CDL must be at least 18 years old (21 to drive outside the licensing state), and pass rigorous written and skills tests. Federal regulations require driver applicants to obtain a school bus endorsement to their CDL, which requires additional knowledge and skills tests. All school bus drivers must undergo pre-employment drug testing, and must be in an on-going drug and alcohol testing program that includes random testing. Drivers are also subject to rigorous physical examinations and must meet strict medical requirements to ensure that they are physically fit for the demands of their job.

Once they have their licenses, their driving is carefully monitored. Drivers can be temporarily disqualified from driving a school bus for as few as two traffic violations in three years. Most states add their own requirements for school bus driver applicants, including background investigations of both driving and criminal history.

They also require specific training for drivers prior to transporting children, ranging from about 10 hours to 40 hours, and additional annual training to maintain the license. This training goes beyond the skills needed to maneuver a large bus through challenging urban traffic and along narrow rural roads, and includes such topics as behavior management of students, emergency procedures, crisis intervention, communication skills, vehicle inspection and training in first aid. Every school bus driver is part commercial driver, part teacher, part navigator and part emergency responder. This means that all drivers must have comprehensive training in all facets of their various roles.

On top of the federal and state requirements, private school bus transportation providers add their own standards. Company training, familiarization with school-district and employer policies, and related evaluations add many hours, making the time it takes to get a school bus driver safely on the road a matter of several weeks rather than days.

## DRIVER AVAILABILITY

A continual and growing problem for school bus operations is the supply of available school bus driver applicants. Changes in both our culture and our economy have had a significant and lasting effect on the industry. Fifty years ago, the mainstay of the school bus driver force was the married mother of school-age children. Driving a school bus was a good fit for her because it allowed her to earn money for her own use or to supplement her husband's income and still be at home when her children were at home. These drivers were stable and conscientious, and generally stayed with the job throughout their children's school years.

Cultural and economic changes have made this driver situation rare. As women have become more interested in developing careers, part-time work has become less attractive. Today, more mothers have the sole responsibility for supporting their families, and need full-time jobs. Even in two-parent households, rising costs and higher standards of living have made the part-time wages of a school bus driver an inadequate supplement.

Student transportation providers now look to other population groups for potential drivers. Retirees are good prospects. Driving a bus fulfills a need for these healthy, vital individuals to remain active while providing a service to their community. But even that pool is shrinking, as economic factors keep people in their full-time jobs and careers longer.

With the decrease in part-time working mothers and available retirees, employers depend more on short-term prospects such as college students and workers in transition than they

have in the past. The result is a higher turnover rate in the driver force, and increased costs for recruitment, training and licensing.

The shortage of potential school bus drivers will vary by community and link to an area's economic status. During periods of low unemployment, it is more difficult to find good drivers. Conversely, the driver shortage eases somewhat when people have fewer employment choices. Not many of the drivers who take the job as a last resort stay with it when other opportunities arise. And even when part-time jobs are the only choices, carriers must compete with other employers, such as fast-food restaurants, who may be able to offer more flexible work schedules and more attractive working conditions.

The heart of the dilemma for those employers trying to fill driving positions is that the basic job requires a split shift. Drivers take the kids to school in the morning and take them home in the afternoon. For four or five hours' pay, the driver feels they essentially give up a whole day. Even though wages are competitive, there are not enough hours of work to provide a family income. Many drivers use their school bus jobs for a second income, but this can present problems. Drivers who come to work from an eight-hour shift elsewhere risk fatigue as well as violation of federal and state rules which limit the number of hours commercial drivers can be on duty.

Private transportation providers have had some success making driving jobs more attractive and lucrative by supplementing a driver's basic hours with additional midday routes or activity trips, while not exceeding allowable duty hours.

Like most part-time workers, school bus drivers traditionally have received fewer benefits. In recent years, however, more private transportation providers have extended insurance coverage, retirement programs, personal leave days, and other benefits to their part-time drivers in order to make the job more attractive.

Union organizers have become more interested in school bus drivers in recent years. Unions from the Teamsters International to the United Food Workers have viewed school bus drivers as a possible extension of their core membership, and have waged organizing campaigns in various locations around the country with various degrees of success. School bus drivers who work for a school district are more likely to belong to a union than those who work for a contractor.

Financial factors are only a part of the employment picture, however. The most prominent complaint of school bus drivers is not about wages or benefits; it's about the behavior of students. Student behavior has deteriorated steadily during the past four decades, and the same discipline problems – ranging from rudeness to physical attacks – that plague schools also occur on buses. But on buses, bad behavior is intensified by the confined space and absence of adults other than the driver, whose attention must be on the road. Drivers'

complaints about student behavior are compounded by administrators who fail to support drivers' attempts at discipline and by parents who treat drivers with a lack of respect.

As a rule, school bus drivers perform well and truly enjoy their work. Beyond all else, they care about their passengers. This is particularly true of the special group of drivers who transport students with special needs. For many student transportation providers, the fastest-growing populations are students who have extraordinary health or emotional needs, and preschool children. These populations are especially challenging for drivers, and require both skill and compassion. Drivers of special-needs children are often the most committed. Their care and diligence make a school bus operation successful.

## DRIVER SUPPORT PERSONNEL (AIDE/MONITOR)

On a small percentage of school bus routes one or more adults accompanies the driver. Common for routes or buses that transport students with special needs, this person is usually referred to as an aide or a monitor.

More specifically, an aide (also called an assistant or paraprofessional) is usually assigned to assist a particular student who may need care while being transported, whereas a monitor is assigned to assist the driver in ensuring student safety.

School bus aides are not responsible for the entire population of the bus, but have very specific responsibilities directed to one or more select passengers on the bus. The aide's responsibilities are outlined in response to a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The aide is trained to provide the medical or behavioral intervention that the student may need.

School bus monitors are assigned to bus routes rather than to individual students and are broken into three types: safety, discipline, and preschool. The safety monitor, as used in the state of Rhode Island and various school districts around the country, is responsible for ensuring student safety during the loading and unloading process. The discipline monitor is responsible for maintaining order on the school bus. And the preschool monitor is specific to younger children and provides support with securing child restraints and is available for help during emergency evacuations.

Whether the additional adult on board is an aide or a monitor, the relationship between him/her and the driver must be understood by both. Though they work as a team for the benefit of the students, the driver is in charge at all times.

## CONCLUSION

Drivers are crucial elements of the system. The nature of the job demands special skills and



special temperament. Though they are often placed in the same category as motor coach, transit and truck drivers, there are important factors that distinguish school bus drivers from these other groups.

School bus drivers are regularly monitored and subject to a wide variety of state and federal regulations. No other drivers are subject to more oversight. Drivers are held to increasingly higher standards of performance.

The industry will reach a point in the very near future at which drivers cannot be asked to do more without additional support. The growth of support personnel in the past decade lends to this argument, especially in the area of transporting children with special needs.



# BUSES AND OTHER EQUIPMENT

The yellow school bus is an amazing vehicle. While some consider it “just another big bus”, in fact, it is superbly designed and built to protect its passengers. Since its inception, it has been unlike any other vehicle – and its safety features and other enhancements over the past several decades has further separated it from motor coaches and transit buses.

The amount of regulation surrounding a school bus is impressive. In fact, no other motor vehicle is held to its level of federal safety standards. No other motor vehicle is governed by its extensive level of state regulations. And no other motor vehicle is subject to the strict inspection standards as a school bus. While public policy may dictate certain regulations surrounding the transportation of our children, the school bus industry already takes their responsibility for the care and safe transportation of our children seriously. Unlike many industries, school bus people – both manufacturers and transportation providers – do not routinely oppose regulation. The industry not only supports stringent safety standards, but in many cases, these very standards evolve from within. The result of this unique level of cooperation is a vehicle that has the best safety record of any transportation mode.

## EVOLUTION OF THE SCHOOL BUS

While it may look as though the yellow school bus never changes, it is in fact a much different vehicle today than it was even 30 years ago.

The school bus has been around for over a century, with the first steel model appearing

around 1930's; at that time, however, there were no standards for manufacturers to follow.

In 1939, the first national conference on school transportation safety produced a document called "Minimum Standards for School Buses," which included the delegates' choice for a standard color of school buses – a bright orange yellow, considered the most visible color in all weather conditions. Though one of the sponsors of this and several subsequent conferences was the federal Office of Education, now known as the U.S. Department of Education.

The forces behind the conferences were members of the school transportation community. This is truly a clear example of self-regulation.

Between 1939 and 1965, there were seven conferences that developed, expanded and clarified the national standards for school buses. The results were published, and states were encouraged to adopt the standards. By 1967, 38 states had adopted minimum standards for school buses. The national conference continues to meet every five years.

## GOVERNMENT REGULATION

In 1966, Congress passed two laws which marked the entry of the federal government into the regulation of school buses: the Highway Safety Act and the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act. The Highway Safety Act provided funding for states to improve their pupil transportation programs by adopting certain equipment, training – and operational standards. The Motor Vehicle Safety Act established the federal motor vehicle safety standards. The first full-scale school bus crash tests were also conducted that year as researchers at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles looked for better ways to protect school bus occupants.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, a flurry of reports and research driven by the newly established National Transportation Safety Board prompted Congress to pass the School Bus Safety Amendments of 1974. The resulting safety standards went into effect on April 1, 1977, and played a significant role in elevating the protective characteristics of the school bus.

Among the 33 crash-avoidance, crash-survival, and post-crash standards that school buses must meet, five are unique to school buses. This makes the school bus the most stringently regulated vehicle on the road.

They five additional standards are:

- School bus rollover protection, to minimize the crush of the roof if the bus lands upside down;

- School bus body joint strength, to prevent the bus from coming apart at the seams in a crash;
- School bus fuel system integrity, to prevent fuel leaks and fires after a crash by enclosing the fuel tank in a steel cage;
- School bus seating and crash protection (also known as compartmentalization), to protect passengers by enclosing them in a passive safety system; and
- School bus pedestrian safety devices, to control traffic and create a safety zone for students getting on and off school buses.

While 1977 is known as the watershed year in school bus safety, that doesn't mean enhancements stopped. Several major improvements have occurred since then, including improved mirror systems to afford drivers a better view of small children who may be near the school bus, higher seat backs to improve compartmentalization, and increased emergency exit space to facilitate evacuation following a crash.

In fact, the active involvement of the Federal Department of Transportation, the National Transportation Safety Board and the school bus industry ensures that the school bus will continue to evolve, as safety needs become apparent and new technologies become available.

## SCHOOL BUS VARIATIONS

Against the backdrop of this brief account of the evolution of the school bus, it is worthwhile to examine more closely some particular features. It is important to note that while all school buses must be built to federal standards, not all school buses are alike. On top of the federal standards, each state imposes its own set of regulations; so a school bus built for use in New York is different from a school bus built for use in New Mexico. Sometimes the variations are a reflection of different operating conditions. For example, a Southern state may require white roofs to reflect the sun's heat, while a Mountain state may require brake retarders. In other cases, a state may impose an additional safety feature that the federal government has determined does not meet the cost/benefit test for a mandate. Finally, individual bus owners may add a third layer of features to satisfy contract requirements or personal preferences. No matter what the buses look like in the end, they all start out as the basic federal school bus – which is the safest vehicle on the road.

## SCHOOL BUS TYPES

There is more than one basic federal school bus. Following is a list of distinguishing characteristics of the three common types:

*Type A:* The Type A bus is built on a van-style chassis, with a left-side driver's door. It is often referred to as a mini school bus, and in its most common configuration carries 16 to 30 passengers. It is popular for specialized transportation, including students with disabilities, and for routes that are inaccessible to full-size buses.

*Type C:* Also known as the conventional bus, the Type C bus is the most recognizable. It has the common hood configuration, with the door behind the front wheels, and is usually built to accommodate 36 to 72 passengers.

*Type D:* The Type D bus is shaped like a transit bus, with a flat front and the entry door in front of the wheels. It is the largest type and can be built for up to 90 passengers.

Which school bus type is “better” depends on the needs of the operator carrier.

## OCCUPANT PROTECTION

For over 30 years, the most consistent controversy about school buses has focused on seat belts. As part of the 1977 standards, NHTSA required a passive restraint system for school buses, commonly referred to as “compartmentalization.” With this system, passengers are cocooned within well-padded, high-backed seats that are designed to absorb rather than transfer crash forces to the passenger. The beauty of compartmentalization is that it works without any action from the passenger; in other words, it does not depend on the student to “buckle up.”

Seat belt proponents, arguing that seat belts have proven their effectiveness in automobiles, have petitioned for a lap belt requirement to be added to the school bus standard. NHTSA rejected the petition, stating that lap belts added no safety benefit to school bus passengers. While NHTSA does not require lap belts, they did not prohibit them either. States and school districts were free to add them as optional equipment. Despite the fact that compartmentalization was repeatedly proven effective in real-world crashes, and lap belts were shown to be risky for small children, the seat-belt controversy continued as parents became more accustomed to using active restraints for their children in their own vehicles.

Finally, in 1998, Congress directed NHTSA to undertake a comprehensive research program to determine whether compartmentalization was still the best approach to occupant protection. After more than two years of intensive testing, NHTSA reported that compartmentalization remains extremely effective and lap belts have no safety benefit – in fact, they can cause injury in severe crashes. The agency also concluded, however, that a seat design that incorporates both compartmentalization and a three-point active safety restraint provides the best protection to school bus passengers when properly used. The caveat is that it can be as dangerous as a lap belt if worn incorrectly. Because the possibility that the restraint will be used improperly is relatively high, and because the statistical benefit to requiring the

three-point system is low, NHTSA declined to require seat restraints in large school buses, but encouraged states and local school districts to consider lap/shoulder belts as optional equipment. A primary concern voiced by NHTSA is that if lap/shoulder belts were mandated, the additional cost of the restraints might force districts to reduce the number of students transported by school bus, which could result in more, not fewer, injuries and fatalities.

The final rule adopted by NHTSA in 2008 does require lap/shoulder belts on all small school buses, an upgrade from the lap belts previously required. Small buses do not have the same degree of crash protection as large buses due to their size and weight, so the additional protection is warranted. The rule also requires higher seat backs on large buses to prevent bigger students from overriding the seat back in a frontal crash.

Following the publication of the final rule, seat belt advocates again petitioned NHTSA to require lap/shoulder belts on large buses. They argued that compartmentalization does not protect students in side-impact and rollover crashes. As recently as August 2011, NHTSA denied such a petition, citing the safety record of large school buses and the absence of any safety reason to mandate seat belts. The agency is investigating other ways to improve side impact protection.

Meanwhile, the National Transportation Safety Board issued two school bus crash investigation reports in 2010 in which they concluded that lap/shoulder belts either did mitigate or would have mitigated occupant injuries. The controversy has not disappeared; but in an era of budget cutting, it has taken a back seat to most districts' efforts to keep their school buses on the road.

## OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT

Active restraints are one item on a long list of optional equipment that can legally be added to the basic federal school bus. As long as an item does not conflict with the federal safety standards or with state regulations, owners can choose to use it.

Some equipment has gained widespread acceptance and has proven effective enough through optional use to be included as required equipment. Two examples are the stop arm, which is now part of the federal standard, and the crossing control arm, which is required by many states. Other items which may appear to be beneficial at first, have not stood up to daily operations and were eventually abandoned by carriers who installed them in good faith. Because school buses run so well and so safely, it takes a long time to determine the value of any piece of optional equipment; and claims that an item will save lives are extremely difficult to prove.

Nonetheless, there are always new devices intended to make school buses safer. Many of these devices add warning lights and bells to the dashboard and similar areas in the



'cockpit'. School bus drivers have no copilots. Their attention belongs on the road when the bus is moving and on the students when the bus is stopped. Adding optional equipment with lights and alarms that distract the driver from his or her proper focus does not enhance school bus safety.

## GREEN TECHNOLOGY

The EPA standards that took effect in 2007 and 2010 have resulted in school buses that run 95% cleaner than their older counterparts. Most school buses still run on diesel fuel, but now it is ultra low sulfur diesel fuel in clean diesel engines. Older buses can be retrofitted with devices such as particulate traps and diesel oxidation catalysts to reduce exhaust emissions, making them almost as clean as new buses; and many contractors have taken advantage of grants from EPA or their state clean air agencies to upgrade their buses.

An increasing number of contractors are using biodiesel fuel in their buses. This fuel, made from natural sources such as animal fats and vegetable oils, can be blended in small proportions (up to 20%) with petroleum diesel for use in most engines without modification. It provides a small reduction both in harmful emissions and in our reliance on fossil fuels.

Alternative-fuel school buses are gaining acceptance as well. Compressed natural gas (CNG) buses are popular in districts where the infrastructure is available to support them, especially when grants can help with the purchase price. Natural gas is often less expensive than diesel fuel, but the initial cost of a CNG bus is much higher than a clean diesel bus, and the infrastructure is costly to install.

Hybrid-electric buses continue to gain acceptance since a separate fueling infrastructure is not required. The cost however still remains prohibitive for some, thereby slowing adoption. Propane is another alternative for clean buses, though not as popular as CNG. Propane also needs additional fueling infrastructure, and requires particular safety training and facility accommodations.

One way all school bus fleets can reduce their environmental impact is by limiting idling time. Many contractors have installed idle reduction technology, such as engine heaters, in their fleets. This technology eliminates the need to start buses early in cold weather and to run them during wait times. Even without additional devices, most carriers have reduced school bus idling through driver and technician training and working with school administrators to implement procedures that will limit the need for buses to idle.

The school bus industry takes its responsibility for children's health and safety seriously. By running cleaner buses and reducing idling, we are providing students and entire communities with cleaner air and healthier lives.

## OTHER VEHICLES

There is no vehicle as safe as a school bus; therefore, any student who is transported in a vehicle other than a school bus is receiving inferior – and riskier – transportation. Nonetheless, for reasons of cost and convenience, some states either allow or actively choose to have students to be transported in other vehicles. Some vehicle types include:

*Large vans:* Vans do not meet the safety standards for school buses and cannot legally be sold for transporting students to school or to school-related activities. Regardless of this law, large vans designed for more than ten passengers are being used in hundreds of school district and private schools because they are cheaper than school buses and their drivers are not required to have a Commercial Driver's License.

*Small vans and passenger cars:* Vehicles designed to carry fewer than ten passengers are outside the federal school bus regulations, and most states allow their use for transporting students. Schools choose them for economy and convenience when transporting small numbers of students, but their smaller mass and lower weight does not offer sufficient protection in the event of a crash.

*Taxis, transit buses, paratransit vans:* Not only are these vehicles inferior, students transported in them lack the protection of the controlled school bus environment and the trained bus driver.

Considerations of responsibility and liability should be taken into account when choosing a means other than a school bus for student transportation. All students deserve equal access to safety.

## CONCLUSION

The yellow school bus is a highly specialized vehicle designed and built to transport children safely. As with drivers, the vehicles have met increasingly higher standards of performance.

The existing school bus fleet is made up of hundreds of thousands of vehicles. Any significant changes to the vehicle configuration will require investments in the billions of dollars. While there are continuing discussions about the interiors of the buses and fuel systems, the costs to implement any proposed benefits must be justified. Meanwhile, the most effective safety expenditure is providing school bus transportation for all students.



# TRANSPORTATION AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The traditional view of education surrounds the learning process, thought to begin when the child arrives at the school for the day. Transportation providers – both private and public – know the process begins much earlier in the morning.

Transportation professionals want the students to arrive safely, on time and ready to learn. For this reason, most states require in-school safety programs to emphasize safe riding, boarding and exiting behaviors as well as emergency evacuations. In addition, carriers often provide “new rider” orientation for entering kindergartners and their parents to ensure that their school journey begins and continues smoothly and safely.

One key element of the larger education process involves ensuring that adequate student discipline is maintained. While drivers need to focus on the road and equipment, they are also to ensure their passengers’ safety. For example, children must be seated properly for compartmentalization, as discussed in the previous section. Bullying and other offensive behaviors occur on buses as often as in school. Drivers and monitors are part of the school’s discipline team, and need to receive the same training and support provided to other school staff.

School administrators also must cooperate with transportation officials in the discipline of students who vandalize buses. While vandalism always has financial impact, it can have serious safety consequences as well. In addition, transportation staff and officials are increasingly concerned about threats to drivers, as students and parents become more

abusive, and weapons and assaults become more numerous.

Transportation is a critical element in emergencies. School buses can be dispatched quickly to evacuate students in the event of a sudden weather crisis, an environmental threat, or a security breach. Carriers can work with school officials to develop emergency plans and map alternate routes in the event of road closures. Parents expect their children to arrive safely, regardless of the weather or road conditions.

Another element to consider is the transportation provider's role in school field trips, sport competitions and other activities. Scheduling trips, routing and providing safe transportation are critical to the success of these activities.

## THE BUS STOP

The school bus stop is the most dangerous part of the school bus journey. Twice as many children are killed getting on and off school buses as are killed in school bus crashes. One reason is that drivers who do not want to be behind buses may dangerously pass - either when the bus is stopped or as it begins moving. Drivers of vehicles who pass stopped school buses are in violation of the law and endanger students. Some states have initiated campaigns to remind drivers of the consequences of passing stopped school buses, and have stepped up enforcement of the law.

Drivers, contractors, associations and transportation professionals all work with the schools to emphasize the need for students to act safely when waiting for, boarding and leaving buses. Students can be excited about going to school or returning home, and may not exhibit ideal behavior. When they fail to exercise caution, run into the road without waiting for the driver's signal, roughhouse too close to the road, or fail to pay attention, they are risking their safety. School buses are designed to protect students, but they have no protection when outside the bus.

Drivers act as the "first-line responders," and work closely with the schools to alert them to issues and safety concerns at bus stops. In return, drivers need the support of school administrators in dealing with discipline behavior issues. Children can be exposed to significant dangers when walking or biking to school or on the way to a bus stop. School administrators and contractors can work together to create "hazard maps" to identify and avoid the most dangerous areas in which children may gather or travel.

While the bus stop selection is generally the responsibility of the school administration, it is important for the school bus contractor and the transportation coordinator to work together to assess and regularly reevaluate the safety of each stop. Such factors as exposure to traffic, sight lines, speed of traffic, security, and width of road must be taken into account.

Bus stops are much safer when an adult is present. Encouraging parents to accompany their children to the bus stop is one way to improve safety.

## STUDENT POPULATIONS SERVED

The kindergarten-to-12th-grade segment has been the traditional focus for the school bus industry. Nationwide, about 50 percent of students in this age group are transported in yellow buses.

Within the last few decades, the focus has expanded to include preschool children where federal regulations to address safety concerns are bringing that transportation more in line with the traditional yellow school bus requirement. In addition, summer camp attendees and college students may ride buses as part of their activities programs.

There are differences among age populations and how they can use the buses. For instance, while the seats will usually accommodate three primary grade-school students, the same seat in the same bus will safely seat only two high-school teens. Furthermore, preschoolers may require age and weight-appropriate child-restraint systems.

The transportation of medically fragile or disabled students is yet another important segment of the market. There are separate and distinct issues that affect these students and the buses that transport them. These include legal and medical issues, liability concerns, communication constraints, operational matters and more. While many school districts and contractors effectively manage these requirements, this topic is beyond the scope of this document.

## CONCLUSION

As the education system takes a broader view of their processes and areas of responsibility, transportation must be included. This becomes especially relevant when considering security, safety, the needs of students with disabilities and new alternative and inter-district programs.





# ECONOMIC ISSUES

## FUNDING AND SOURCES OF REVENUE

School transportation is funded almost entirely by states and local governments. The federal government has limited funding for specialized transportation, and none for routine home-to-school transportation.

Among the states, there is no standard formula for transportation funding therefore it varies considerably in both mechanisms and amounts. Some school districts get 100 percent of their funding from the state; others get none from the state and rely entirely on local government. More often, it's a combination of monies from both sources.

In addition to funding variations, there are considerable differences among states in their requirements for local districts to provide transportation. Eleven states have no mandated school transportation; in the others, the percentage of students transported ranges from 14 percent in California to 97 percent in Vermont.

As school districts face diminishing funds from the government, some look at transportation as a luxury they can no longer afford. Where state law does not require transportation, communities are considering reducing or eliminating the service. In those states where elimination is not a choice, districts are looking at other sources for transportation funding. One of these sources is parents; where state law allows it, some districts are charging parents for transportation.

School bus companies receive most of their revenue from the schools they service. Contractors may, however, maximize the use of buses by coordinating school transportation



with other community transportation. This practice allows the company to make full use of both equipment and human resources, and consequently reduce the cost of transportation for schools.

In general, contractors are paid according to the school calendar. If the school district is in operation all year, transportation and payment are provided all year. If the schools run from August/September to May/June, transportation and payments follow that schedule. Thus, cash flow must be carefully monitored since business expenses occur all year long, while revenue may be received only during 10 months.

Contracts normally run from a minimum of one year (based on the school calendar) up to five years. Based on simple economics, longer contracts can allow contractors to provide better pricing to a school district.

Financing for bus purchases may come from operations, through loans or through leasing arrangements with the manufacturers or third parties. In general, parts are purchased, though in some cases, tires are leased rather than purchased.

It should be noted that when regulations are imposed at either the federal or state level, the school districts or contractors must absorb the cost of those regulations, which are essentially unfunded mandates. School districts can sometimes receive state funding or subsidies to help with the costs of new equipment, whereas these remedies are not typically available to private companies.

## TAXATION

Although school bus companies are exempt from some fuel taxes, they are required to pay a variety of other taxes, including: income tax on the business, sales tax, property tax, excises tax, etc. Specific tax requirements vary from state to state and among local jurisdictions. School districts are tax-exempt entities, and in some jurisdictions (and by contractual arrangement) contractors may use tax-exempt fuel purchased by the schools for school transportation.

## HEALTH OF CUSTOMER BASE

When school districts face financial crises or difficulties, these problems have an impact on the transportation services. In some cases, this becomes an opportunity to outsource the operation. By doing so the district may save money and reduce overhead.

In other cases, the transportation of students is curtailed. Several states and local jurisdictions have reduced the potential riding population by redrawing the limits of their service zones. For example, where transportation was previously provided to students who lived more than

1.5 miles from school, it is now provided to those who live over 2 miles. While this may solve a financial problem in the short run, it clearly creates greater risk for the students. Students are far more likely to be injured or killed in private vehicles, while walking or while biking than while riding the yellow school bus.

A complication arises from federal mandates that create additional services without adequate support. For example, two high-profile laws – the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – create new kinds of services; yet, school districts have received no additional funding to help them fulfill the new requirements. This situation has placed added strains on many already strapped school systems.



# CONTRACTING

Contracting has proven to be successful in almost all cases where schools have partnered with private companies to provide transportation. School administrators who convert to contracted transportation increase their control by redirecting both energies and resources to their core function: education.

While districts contract transportation services for a variety of reasons, most fall into one of the following categories:

- The district fleet is aged, and funding is not available to upgrade it.
- New equipment regulations, or safety/environmental innovations make new buses desirable, but district funding or regulations limit turnover of the fleet.
- Transportation cost increases have outpaced funding.
- Economies of scale are not available, and benchmarked transportation costs exceed those for familiar districts.
- System inefficiencies have resulted in overextended resources and scheduling difficulties.
- Federal, state and administrative changes (redistricting, addition of interdistrict magnet schools, parental choice prerogatives) challenge the system.

- Administrative headaches (dealing with parents, employee absenteeism, drug and alcohol testing, mandated paperwork) require an inordinate share of administrators' time and attention.

Contracting can solve any and all of these problems. Private contractors whose primary business is pupil transportation have a single focus: to provide school bus service in the most efficient and cost effective way possible while maintaining the highest levels of safety and reliable service. Just as school districts are experts at providing education, private school bus companies are experts at providing transportation.

Through contracting, a school district can upgrade or completely replace an aging fleet with new buses equipped with the latest technology without making a capital investment. Additionally, a district is able to control and accurately predict transportation costs through the life of the contract. It can protect current employees' wages and benefits through contract specifications, or reduce inflated employee costs by allowing the contractor to use market standards.

Contractors can provide school districts with enhanced efficiency from expert planning and routing, and greater cost savings from economies of scale, coordinated services, shared facilities and dedicated personnel. Contracting also frees up capital for investment in other areas, and may provide revenue from leasing land or buildings for bus parking, maintenance and terminal offices.

When a district compares its current costs to the cost of contracted transportation, it is important to recognize all expenses. Indirect or hidden costs must be reviewed in addition to the obvious direct costs of driver and technician wages and benefits, vehicles and parts, maintenance, fuel, insurance, garage and parking facilities. Many times, expenses that are related to transportation are included in general administration or another department's budget. Other expenses are frequently overlooked, but critical to providing a district with a complete analysis. These include payroll taxes, clerical and support services, utilities, legal fees, fuel tank testing and repair, Workers' Compensation premiums and losses, depreciation, office supplies and hazardous materials disposal.

A change as significant as contracting transportation services does not always occur quickly or smoothly. It requires advance preparation, diplomacy and sensitivity to those who will be affected by the change, including drivers and other personnel, parents, members of the board of education, and taxpayers. Student transportation contractors are aware of the concerns of the stakeholders and know that a full understanding of the process is imperative.

Boards of education are very concerned with maintaining control over transportation. This is easily accomplished through contract specifications, which include detailed requirements for equipment, personnel and service, and enforcement provisions. Furthermore, a district

that is dissatisfied with a contractor can change service providers. This competition aspect encourages high levels of service and efficiency among contractors.

Driver resistance is probably the most difficult barrier. Drivers mistakenly worry that outsourcing means their jobs are at risk. In fact, contractors view the district's drivers as their most valuable asset. Drivers' experience and goodwill in the community are invaluable to the contractor. If a district wants to maintain drivers' current levels of wages and benefits, they can do so by writing those specifications into the contract.

In addition, drivers often benefit from the opportunity to pick up extra work driving charters or other coordinated transportation for the contractor. And in some states they can collect unemployment compensation during school vacation periods. Drivers' benefits may also be subtle, such as professional training and more direct influence on operations.

Once all parties fully understand the advantages of outsourcing, they rarely reverse course. It is highly unusual for a district that has contracted transportation to take that function back in house.

## CONCLUSION

Contracting is a successful strategy for solving a variety of transportation problems. Partnering with a private school bus company whose expertise is pupil transportation allows school administration to concentrate on their primary function – educating students. Additional benefits include a community-based yellow bus service that is safer, more efficient, and much more cost-effective.



# PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES

There is very little that is more public than school transportation. The yellow school bus has become an icon for public education, for children, and for the comfort and stability of American life. It is important that public policy reflect society's interest in maintaining safe and stable transportation for our children. Some of the significant public policy issues that concern the industry follow.

## ENSURING STUDENT'S ACCESS TO SAFE TRANSPORTATION

The biggest threat to student safety is elimination or reduction of the yellow bus fleet. In states where school districts are not required by law to transport students, boards of education often view transportation as a luxury that can be sacrificed for other budgetary concerns. In a battle between books and buses, books usually win.

As the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences reported in 2002, the victims of that battle are not the buses - but the kids. And too often they are victims in the most literal sense. Of 815 annual student fatalities during school transport hours, only two 2 percent are school-bus related. Of the children who have died going to and from school, 98 percent were using some other means of transportation. If we are losing more than 800 students annually now because they are not in school buses, imagine the cost if we reduce school buses.

The cost to a community would not only be student lives, but would include the monetary cost of litigation as school districts are held accountable for their failure to provide safe transportation; it includes the environmental cost of increased numbers of personal vehicles



traveling to and from school; it includes the convenience cost for parents who have to chauffeur their children; and it includes the emotional cost to families of students who are injured and killed in less-safe vehicles, on bicycles, and while walking.

Even without further reduction, we currently transport only about half of our public-school students nationwide, and fewer than 25 percent in some states. Millions of children are facing unnecessary risks every day.

Clearly, society has a human and economic interest in ensuring that children get to and from school as safely as possible. That means providing the necessary funding to maintain the nation's school bus fleet in numbers sufficient to transport all students who live beyond a reasonable walking distance from their school, and providing pedestrian amenities such as safe sidewalks and crossing guards for those who are within the walking distance.

## ALTERNATIVE VEHICLES

In the search for transportation savings, schools may turn to vehicles other than school buses to transport students. Where smaller numbers of students are involved, the choice may be a 12- or 15-passenger van. This is a lopsided trade of safety for economy. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has repeatedly warned against using large vans for school transportation, because they do not meet the construction standards of school buses and have none of the safety features of school buses. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has twice published consumer alerts warning that large vans have a high rate of rollover. In light of both the government warnings and several tragic fatal crashes some insurance companies have declined to insure these vehicles for school transportation. Drivers of large vans are not held to the commercial driving standards of school bus drivers, nor are they subject under federal regulations to drug and alcohol testing. And large vans often escape the strict inspection requirements that states impose on school buses. Yet 22 states allow students to be transported in these vehicles. It is in the public's interest to protect children by prohibiting the use of large vans that do not meet school bus safety standards for transporting students.

Another alternative that urban schools in particular employ is the use of student passes for mass transit. These schools delegate their responsibility by letting the city transit authority do the driving for them. While this may result in savings for the schools, it comes at a risk for students. There is little statistical difference in the overall injury and fatality record of school buses and transit buses, but common sense tells us that transit buses do not offer the protections of secure school transportation system. Students who use mass transit to get to and from school are in an uncontrolled environment, subject to the potential dangers inherent in large, indiscriminate public gatherings. They are exposed to greater traffic risks as they walk to and from public bus stops. They are not protected by the safety zone created by the school bus flashing lights and motorist stop laws when they board and exit.

They do not have the security of a driver trained in passenger safety and management. Students who are forced to use mass transit for their school transportation are receiving inferior transportation service, which compromises the public's interest in providing safe transportation for our children.

## MAINTAINING A VIABLE PRIVATE SECTOR

Slightly over one third of the nation's school bus fleet is privately operated. The many reasons that school districts choose to outsource or contract their transportation functions are detailed elsewhere in this paper, but in general, contracting results in savings, increased efficiency, or both.

When private school bus companies compete for a district's business, the district often benefits through lower costs and better service.

Congress recognized the importance of promoting private-sector involvement in transportation when it passed P.L. 93-87 in 1973. Part of this Highway Aid Act, and the Urban Mass Transportation Act of the following year, prohibits any recipient of certain highway or mass transit funds from providing exclusive school bus service and from competing with private school bus operators. Congress was so intent on separating specialized school transportation operations from mass transit operations that the definition of "mass transportation" specifically excludes school bus operations.

Unfortunately, the former Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) and its successor, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), have not clearly honored Congress's intent to maintain this separation in their administration of the act. In promulgating the initial school bus regulations, UMTA adopted a new concept of "tripper service," which is defined as mass transportation "designed or modified to accommodate the needs of school students and personnel, using various fare collections or subsidy systems." Tripper service is exempt from the prohibitions against using federally-funded equipment for school service.

Although the regulations limit tripper service to regular route buses open to the public, numerous cases over the years indicate a widespread disregard for the intent of the law. And although the law clearly states that any FTA grantee that engages in illegal school bus operations will lose future federal assistance, FTA administrators who handle complaints generally give the transit authority a simple slap on the wrist and require it to make only cosmetic changes.

In a nation dedicated to private enterprise, this is an important public policy issue. The reason is obvious. Publicly funded agencies have an enormous economic advantage over private companies. They not only enjoy exemptions from state and federal taxes and fees

that private companies must pay. But they also use federal funds - and often state funds - to subsidize equipment, facilities and operations.

While the abuse of tripper service by transit systems has been ongoing since the regulations were adopted in 1976, another manifestation of the same problem has cropped up in recent years.

This involves small vehicles for specialized services, usually transporting students with disabilities. Increasingly, paratransit systems and nonprofit agencies bid on school contracts, intending to use their publicly funded vehicles and facilities for student transportation.

If the agency receives FTA funds, they are held to the FTA regulations on school bus operations; if the public funds are from the state, there may be no restrictions on their use. But the effect on private school bus companies is the same from these smaller agencies as from the transit authorities - private carriers can't compete with subsidized operators. Aside from the policy issue, there is a significant safety issue since neither transit buses nor the vans that paratransit agencies operate meet school bus safety standards.

Additionally, their drivers do not meet school bus driver standards. Students transported by either kind of operation are outside the protective cocoon of the exclusive, dedicated yellow school bus operation.

It is in the public's interest to preserve healthy competition in school transportation, with its benefits of reduced costs and increased efficiencies; and to ensure that public transit funds are used for their intended purposes rather than to compete with private operators in defiance of Congressional intent.

## MAINTAINING A SECURE SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

In the wake of September 11, 2001, the nation has concerned itself with transportation security issues, primarily focusing on its air-transport system. Some attention, and some funding, has gone to the rail system and to intercity motor coaches, but school transportation has received little if any public attention, despite the potential for devastating results if terrorists were to systematically target school buses. Reports from the Middle East should warn us that buses carrying children are popular targets, for there is very little that human beings fear as much as a threat to their children.

Congress did include school bus operations in the Patriot Act passed in 2001, making it a crime to attack a school bus driver or school bus facility. But without specific funding to increase security, school bus operations are vulnerable. Within the industry, most carriers have increased training in security issues, but funding is not available for capital improvements to

secure bus facilities or to equip school buses with sophisticated communication or warning devices.

The Transportation Security Administration recognizes the importance of protecting the nation's children as they travel to and from school, but school bus security has been a low priority. It is in the public's interest to provide the resources to protect our children from internal or external attack.

## ENCOURAGING COORDINATED TRANSPORTATION

School buses comprise the largest mass transportation fleet in the nation. Many small, rural, and even suburban communities have no mass transportation available for senior citizens, persons with disabilities, low-income wage earners and others whose mobility is limited by a lack of transportation. But nearly every community has a school bus fleet.

Private school bus companies operate more than 150,000 buses, the majority of which are not fully utilized.

School buses are idle for many hours of the day and for many days of the year. If the needs of the community for mass transportation and the excess capacity of the school bus fleet could be married, both the community and the school bus company would benefit.

It's a good fit. School buses are generally available between the hours of 9 and 2 daily, when seniors and persons with disabilities need transportation for doctor appointments, health care and nutritional programs, shopping, recreational trips and personal business.

They are available again from 4 pm through the evening and the night hours, when second- and third-shift workers need transportation to job sites, and throughout the weekend for shopping and other errands.

This availability would benefit local communities. School bus operators would benefit as well, by maximizing the use of their vehicles and equipment and, more important, by increasing opportunities for their drivers. Coordinating community transportation with school transportation would provide full-time employment for many drivers who are now part-time workers. Finally, school districts would benefit as the driver work force became more stable, and as capital costs were shared with other agencies in the community. It is in the public's interest to encourage full use of existing resources to provide expanded services to its citizens.



# CONCLUSION

The professionals of the school bus industry have a long history of innovation, good safety records, concern for the children they transport and cooperation with government agencies. Most of their success and achievements are unheralded. Day after day, drivers safely log hundreds of millions of miles transporting hundreds of thousands of students to school and home without incident.

The industry may, in fact, be a captive of its success: School transportation is taken for granted.

School transportation is a complex sophisticated system with many interrelated and complex processes and operations. As stated in the Executive Summary, special-interest groups sometimes target the yellow school bus as part of a larger campaign, and do great harm when they frighten parents into taking children off school buses and using alternative means of daily transport. All of these alternatives are more deadly.

Where the concern is safety of children, policy makers must take a broader look at all the factors and implications of the full range of issues affecting school transportation. Solving the challenges of the years ahead may lie beyond the capacity of the school transportation industry alone.

For example, new concerns about homeland security after the terrorist attacks and continuing threats have heightened awareness of the potential vulnerability of the system. Given the size, complexity and scope of school transportation, even modest proposals for change involve huge expenditures in an era when schools are already faced with severe budgetary problems.

# ENDNOTES

- During the 2001 – 2010 timeframe, an average 40,000 deaths occurred from traffic accidents every year. Only 6 of the 40,000 were school bus occupants. (Source: NHSTA)
- School bus statistics from American School Bus Council
- Motorcoach statistics from buses.org
- The standards include protections against drug usage and restrictions on concerns about medical conditions that may affect driving performance.
- While there are some federal standards and guidelines, the bulk of the regulations and requirements affecting the industry originates with the states. Licensing and training requirements are two such state-controlled areas.
- The certification of the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence.
- Eleven states do not mandate school transportation. Among those that do, there is no uniform state transportation requirement. Even within states, there are variations. Some local jurisdictions may decide to set limits – typically at a certain radius from the school –within which students are not provided school bus transportation. The Transportation Research Board has developed guidelines for school district to use when evaluation school transportation options.
- For example, the No Child Left Behind Act requires transportation for homeless children and alternative public school but leaves it up to the local education authority to determine how the children will be transported.
- National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures, Recommendations of the Thirteenth National Conference on School Transportation, May 2000.
- The National School Transportation Association was a moving force behind this research effort.
- Gasoline is highly flammable and explosive when mixed with air. Diesel fuel is neither. In a crash, the danger of fire is greatly reduced with diesel fuel.
- The Transportation Research Board study, “The Relative Risks of School Travel: A National Perspective and Guidance for Local Community Risk Assessment,” released in June 2002, provides guidance on how to examine this question. The study established that school buses are by far the safest way to transport school children, and it warns against relying on purely financial consideration in reducing the eligible ridership population.





