

Regulating School Bus Safety

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An estimated [25% of students ride school buses](#) to school and school-related events annually. Nationwide, an average of [six school bus passengers die each year](#) in traffic crashes. School buses have the lowest death rate of any mode of transporting children to school in the United States. Yet incidents such as the fatal May 17 crash of a school bus and a dump truck in New Jersey may revive a debate about whether federal regulations could make school buses even safer. The National Transportation Safety Board is meeting on May 22 to consider a Special Investigation Report based on investigation of two 2016 school bus crashes; the report may include recommendations to improve school bus transportation safety.

School bus safety has been of interest to Congress for many years. In 1974, Congress directed the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) to regulate school bus safety ([P.L. 93-492](#)). In 1987 and again in 1998, Congress directed DOT to contract with the National Academies of Sciences to study school transportation safety ([P.L. 100-17](#), [P.L. 105-134](#)). In 2015 ([P.L. 114-94](#)) Congress directed the Government Accountability Office to review school bus safety. In the [review](#) stakeholders suggested additional data or guidance on preventing illegal passing of school buses, and on training of school bus drivers, would be useful. DOT is researching the use of [cameras to enforce laws regarding passing school buses](#), and has issued minimum standards for entry level school bus drivers applying for a commercial driver's license.

None of these recent initiatives has led to significant changes in federal laws or regulations. There are two main reasons for this. First, school buses already have a relatively good safety record so any improvement in the form of reduced accident or fatality rates would be comparatively small. Second, compliance with new regulations would likely increase the cost of school buses, which could lead to communities buying fewer buses and thus requiring some students to get to school using other, riskier means such as automobiles, potentially resulting in no overall improvement in the safety of student transportation.

The Seat Belt Debate

There are two classes of school buses, based on weight. Type I, the most common, includes buses that weigh 10,000 pounds or more when fully loaded; generally, a loaded Type I bus weighs around 24,000 pounds. Type II buses are smaller van-like vehicles which weigh less than 10,000 pounds when fully loaded.

Key safety features of Type I school buses include their height (so that passengers are sitting above the point where passenger vehicles would typically strike a bus in a crash) and mass (which helps to protect passengers from the force of

crashes). Internally, most Type I school buses rely on compartmentalization—a passive protection design using padded high-backed seats spaced closely together in rows—to protect passengers. Compartmentalization has been shown to be effective in protecting passengers in front- and rear-end crashes (provided the passengers are properly seated), but is less effective in protecting passengers in side-impact and rollover crashes.

The federal government regulates school buses (with vehicle safety standards) and school bus drivers (who are required to pass both knowledge and skills tests to get a commercial driver's license). However, while the federal government has required that passenger cars and light trucks be equipped with seat belts since 1970, and also requires seat belts on Type II school buses, seat belts are not required for large (Type I) buses.

The safety impact of requiring seat belts on large buses has been debated for decades. Seat belt usage in passenger cars is credited with saving thousands of lives each year, and supporters of requiring seat belts on school buses contend that they would reduce injuries and deaths, especially in side-impact and rollover crashes. Supporters also assert that belts would offer related benefits, such as reducing student misbehavior on buses and reducing distractions to school bus drivers. Others caution that merely equipping buses with belts does not mean that students would use them, and that the additional costs of installing belts could reduce the number of buses that districts buy. Given the relatively small number of deaths to school bus passengers and the cost of equipping buses with seat belts, studies have generally found that adding seat belts to school buses is not a cost-effective safety improvement. The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration has considered requiring seat belts on large school buses several times and each time has concluded that a [federal requirement is not justified](#), though the head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said in 2015 that [all school buses should have lap/shoulder seat belts](#).

State and Local Roles

Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, and Texas have passed some version of a requirement that large school buses be equipped with lap or lap/shoulder belts. Press reports indicate that the bus involved in the New Jersey crash was equipped with seat belts.

Transporting students to school is typically the responsibility of individual school districts (and parents). Districts may purchase their own buses and hire drivers, or may contract with private companies that have their own buses and drivers. Federal funding is generally not available to help communities purchase school buses.

One challenge facing districts seeking to transport students by bus is having enough school bus drivers. Drivers' work day is typically divided into two parts, with a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the afternoon. Drivers of buses designed to carry more than 16 passengers are required to have a commercial driver's license. However, the national average wage for school bus drivers is \$17.69 per hour, less than the \$21.20 average paid to truckers driving local routes, and school bus drivers typically work significantly fewer hours per week. These economic factors likely have an impact on the number of drivers choosing to work as school bus drivers.