

Mark Makuch  
Transportation Committee – HB 5033  
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My name is Mark Makuch I'm the chairman of the Willington Board of Education. Our board voted unanimously to take a position opposed to legislation mandating seat belts on school buses, and asked me to come to explain our position to you.

It's normal to react to a tragedy, and there are many positive reasons to do so. It's better, however, to act before a tragedy, for several reasons. Though we've all heard of Megan's law, the best laws are not named after a victim, because they came in time. Passion and grief are strong motivators but they don't always yield the best decisions. It's for these reasons that we in Willington considered this issue some time ago, at my request.

I should say at this point that I was quite sure, for the same reasons I suppose that the majority responding to a recent Quinnipiac poll felt, that we should have seat belts on buses. Seat belts are miraculous in cars, I don't think anyone still believes there's a question about that, and on the surface it makes no sense to deny our most vulnerable passengers the same protection. I should add that I have unfortunately been in car crashes and have personally experienced the benefits of both seat belts and airbags, and I have no doubt they've saved my life. Despite these impressions, before jumping to a conclusion we gathered many studies on this issue. It was through the process of reviewing those studies that I realized seat belts on school buses can hurt children. It was certainly a surprise to me, but nonetheless clear.

The detail is too much for the time I have, but school buses are different than cars, and the physics acting on a small person in a large vehicle are different than those acting on a large person in a small vehicle, so seat belts are much less necessary on a bus. School buses have an incredible safety record. Over a span of 11 years, from 1994-2004, a total of 71 passengers on school buses died in crashes. In the year 2004 alone, 31,693 people died in cars. It's for these and other reasons that the National Transportation Safety Board has declined to require or even recommend seat belts on school buses after taking up the issue.

That didn't stop me in my quest for seat belts on school buses because no matter how rare the need for them is, if they don't hurt children why not have them? The problem is that they do hurt children. School bus accidents can be of many types. In the type experienced in Rocky Hill, a properly installed and worn seat belt would probably have provided a major, possibly life-saving safety benefit. The problem is you don't know in advance what type of accident you might have, so there's little choice left than to use probability to make the best choice you can. The probability is higher that a school bus will have an accident where seat belts are a danger. In a fire, or if the bus is in water, or, as is most likely, the bus comes to rest in a dangerous position where it may be struck

by another vehicle, getting children off the bus fast is the most important safety factor. Seat belts are deadly in this type of situation, with a high number of immature and panic prone passengers and few exits.

Lap belts are harmful to children's bodies in almost any accident. Shoulder belts are very safe if worn at the proper height. The incredible variety of size and shape in school bus passengers makes this fit difficult. When shoulder belts are too low chest injuries result. Too high and necks can be broken. With row-style seating it's hard to imagine a properly adjustable shoulder belt mounting point for all passengers, so the only solution likely to yield a safely worn seat belt is an incredible variety of booster seats, just like in a car, one chosen for each passenger and changed between bus runs, since our buses are often used several times each morning and afternoon.

One of the most interesting studies I read asked school bus drivers what they thought, and I took this idea on by asking our school bus driver her opinion. The drivers in the study as well as on my route all said the same thing, which I will paraphrase as 'you're going to give the kids a hunk of metal on a strap? They'll beat each other to a pulp' Seat belts on a bus are very unlikely to stay fastened. Functionally, they are much more likely to be used like a lock in a sock in a prison fight than they are to be used like the shoulder belt in our cars.

This concept, of asking school bus drivers, raises an important larger point. We in school systems, especially small town ones like mine, lack the resources and sophistication of the legislature. But because we are so close to the actual operation of the schools, we know things about what is needed, and what is safe that the legislature will never have the time to learn, no matter how much it cares. We can decide this for ourselves, we care more about our own kids than anyone else ever will. Never in our consideration of seat belts was money discussed. This is a simple issue of safety, and seat belts on school buses hurt children. I realize voting against a law called 'to improve the safety of school bus transportation' may be awkward, but I'm in an even more sensitive position, my two children ride these buses. No one is more motivated than I am to find out the truth about this issue, and the truth is that seat belts on school buses hurt children.

Thank you.