

**Testimony by Philip J Weiser
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Before the Connecticut Transportation Committee on
School Bus Passenger Crash Protection**

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Thank you for inviting me to provide written testimony. My name is Philip Weiser, Regional Administrator for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Region 1. In response to the request from the Committee Co-Chairs, I appreciate the opportunity to present to the Connecticut Transportation Committee information and research on school bus passenger safety.

We all share the same goal: to keep the nation's school children as safe as possible on their way to and from school. The challenge facing the Committee is to determine the most effective way to achieve this goal.

School buses are among the safest vehicles on our nation's highways. Every year, approximately 25 million children are transported safely to and from school by an estimated 500,000 school buses nationwide. A 2002 Transportation Research Board (TRB) report documented that school buses are the safest way for children to get to and from school¹.

The TRB report noted that each school year approximately 800 school-aged children are killed in motor vehicle crashes during normal school travel hours. Of those 800 deaths, about 20 are school bus-related -- 5 school bus passengers and 15 pedestrians. The other 780 deaths occur in passenger vehicles or to other pedestrians, bicyclists, or motorcyclists. A disproportionate share of these deaths occurs when a teenager is the vehicle operator (approximately 500 of the 800).

Because of the efforts of Government at all levels to promote adoption of seat belt use laws and to promote seat belt use by all passenger vehicle occupants on every trip, many people wonder why seat belt use is not required on large school buses as well.

Large school buses provide passenger crash protection in a different way from passenger vehicles. School buses provide passenger crash protection through “compartmentalization” which is a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs. Compartmentalization ensures that passengers are cushioned and contained by the seats in the event of a collision. It is similar to the system for protecting eggs in a carton, where they are packaged in a small protective cushioned area.

These safety features, together with its large size and mass, and required compliance with additional Federal motor vehicle safety standards, give school buses a tremendous safety advantage over other vehicles. To give you some perspective, of the 37,000 fatalitiesⁱⁱ that took place on our roads in 2008, only 9 were child occupants of large school buses.

NHTSA shares the view of all parents that even 9 deaths are too many. Over the past 30 years, NHTSA has conducted a number of studies on school bus occupant protection. The most recent study led NHTSA to upgrade the current occupant protection standards on school buses. In 2008, NHTSA published a Final Rule that made the following changes to the Federal safety standards:

- Increased the seat back height from 20 to 24 inches to provide an even greater envelope of protection to occupants through compartmentalization;
- Required small school buses, (with a gross vehicle weight of 10,000 pounds or less), to have lap/shoulder belts instead of the previous lap belt requirement ;

- Established technical requirements and specifications for voluntarily-installed seat belts on large school buses 10,000 pounds and above; and
- Allowed States to use certain Federal highway safety grant funding to equip school buses with seat belts.

I should point out that small school buses are different from large ones in that they are built on the same chassis and frame as a light truck and thereby share similar crash characteristics with a light truck. The upgraded seat belt requirements from lap belts to lap/shoulder point belts on these vehicles reflect the similar change to lap/shoulder belt requirements in other passenger vehicles.

In the 2008 rulemaking, NHTSA carefully considered the question of whether seat belts should be required on large school buses and concluded that compartmentalization provides a high level of crash protection that precludes the need for a Federal requirement necessitating the installation of seat belts on large buses.

However, as noted in the 2008 Final Rule, States now have a Federal standard to use if they choose to require lap/shoulder belts on large school buses. But States should take into consideration the possible unintended consequences resulting from the increased costs and reduced seating capacities related to lap/shoulder belts that could reduce school bus service overall. This reduction could result in more children seeking alternative, less safe means of traveling to and from school that puts them at greater risk.

On a related note, if seat belts on school buses are to be beneficial, States would need to ensure that they are worn properly by all school bus passengers. Studies have shown that even when available, some older students choose to not wear the seat belts.

In summary, school buses are one of the safest vehicles on the road today. States do have the option of requiring lap/shoulder belts on large school buses. Given the high

standard of safety associated with school buses today, States should ensure that any change to the current system does not have the unintended consequence of putting more children at risk while going to and from school by moving students off very safe school bus transportation to other forms of transportation.

Again, I would like to thank the Co-Chairs for the Transportation Committee for inviting me to submit this testimony and the Committee for your interest in this transportation safety issue. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

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ⁱ Transportation Research Board of the National Academies, Special Report 269, June 2002.

ⁱⁱ DOT HS 811 162, Traffic Safety Facts 2008; Overview.