

Testimony for Raised Bill No. 5462
An Act Requiring the Installation of Seat Safety Belts on School Buses

I am Sandi Carbonari, a practicing primary care pediatrician and the immediate past president of the CT Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. I am writing in support of Raised Bill No. 5462, requiring the installation of age and size appropriate safety restraints on school buses.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a long history of research regarding the safety of the transportation of school children. The following is an excerpt from the "Policy Statement on School Transportation Safety" written by the AAP Committee on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention and the Council on School Health. The entire statement can be found at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/120/1/213.full.pdf>

ABSTRACT

This policy statement replaces the previous version published in 1996. It provides new information, studies, regulations, and recommendations related to the safe transportation of children to and from school and school-related activities. Pediatricians can play an important role at the patient/family, community, state, and national levels as child advocates and consultants to schools and early education programs about transportation safety.

INTRODUCTION

School transportation plays a consistent and long-term role in the lives of children from preschool through high school. Pediatricians can participate by serving as resources, educators, consultants, and advocates for school transportation safety at the local, state, and federal levels. This revised policy statement provides updated recommendations that can enhance community systems for addressing safe transportation for children to and from school and school-related activities.

Expectations for school transportation and school bus safety should be upheld in an ongoing commitment from communities and states to ensure that children travel to and from school safely. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) School Bus Safety Program is committed to reducing school bus crashes, injuries, and fatalities. Congress has indicated that school transportation should be held to the highest level of safety. In addressing school transportation, all modes of travel must be considered, and measures must be taken to promote safety for each mode.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School Bus Travel

There are 35 federal motor vehicle safety standards (FMVSSs) that apply to school buses. Large school buses that carry more than 16 passengers are not required to be equipped with seat belts. Small school buses (weighing >10 000 pounds) built in accordance with FMVSSs are equipped with lap belts. Vehicles, including multipurpose vehicles that carry 11 or more persons that are sold or leased for transporting students to or from school or school-related events, are required to meet the FMVSS requirements applicable to school buses. States may prescribe additional regulations that apply to the use of any vehicle used to transport preprimary, primary, and secondary school students. The AAP recommends that all guidelines for safe transportation of all preschool- and school-aged children be applied during all school and school-related trips regardless of the hours of operation.

School-Aged Children

Occupant Protection on School Buses Compartmentalization has been the occupant-protection system for children in large school buses for more than 30 years and was the only available protection before child-restraint systems and seat belts were available for use in the school bus environment. Compartmentalization is provided by seats that are closely spaced with high, energy-absorbing seat backs. Data from real world crashes comparing seat belt use versus compartmentalization only do not exist.

However, recent studies have revealed that compartmentalization does not offer optimal protection and is not consistent with current technology and messages for children and families regarding the use of car safety seats and seat belts in all motor vehicles. The NTSB, through a series of crash investigations, determined that compartmentalization as a method of occupant protection on school buses is incomplete. Compartmentalization does not provide protection during lateral (side) impacts with vehicles of large mass or in rollover collisions, because passengers do not always remain completely within the compartment.

The NTSB recommended the development and implementation of a seat and restraint system that restrains passengers in the seating compartment. The NTSB also recommended the development of performance standards and requirements for school bus occupant-protection systems on newly manufactured school buses. The NTSB further recommended on-board recording devices to facilitate improved data collection in crashes. For optimal protection of all children, the AAP concurs with these recommendations.

The NHTSA conducted a study of school bus occupant protection in 2000 and determined that lap/shoulder belts on school buses performed best in dummy crash testing compared with unbelted occupants, compartmentalization, and lap belts. Head-injury measurements were significantly lower with use of lap/shoulder belts than for use of compartmentalization or lap belts. In crash tests, the lap/shoulder belt restraint systems effectively kept the dummies in their seats.¹⁶

The State of California Vehicle Code requires newly manufactured school buses to have a lap/shoulder belt restraint system, effective 2004 for small school buses and 2005 for large school buses.¹⁷ At the time of this publication, the states of Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, and New York and many local school districts have passed school bus seat belt laws.

The AAP recommends that all children travel in age appropriate, properly secured child-restraint systems when transported in all motor vehicles, including school buses, to ensure the safest ride possible. The AAP further recommends that all newly manufactured school buses be equipped with lap/shoulder restraint systems that can also accommodate car safety seats, booster seats, and harness systems. The AAP recognizes the added benefit of improved student behavior and consistent habits of restraint use when traveling in motor vehicles. Policies on seat belt use have been found to improve student behavior and reduce driver distraction. School districts must ensure the appropriate education of administrators, students, teachers, drivers, and parents in the use of occupant-protection devices.