

Education



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Seat belts on school buses?

Long-time Choctaw Co. bus driver takes issue with possible new state law

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — “They should ask the bus drivers, and get the opinions of the ones who know,” says Randall Jacobs. “I’d love to tell them how I feel about this.”

A school bus accident that claimed the lives of 4 Huntsville students in November has prompted the state to investigate the need for more safety measures on school buses — in particular, seat belts.

On November 21, a school bus transporting Lee High School students to a local trade school was struck by another vehicle and plummeted 30 feet over a retaining wall on an elevated part of Interstate 565.

Three students were pronounced dead at the scene. A fourth died later, and 14 others were hospitalized.

Following the accident, Governor Bob Riley appointed a 7-member panel to determine whether seat belts on the bus may have made a difference in the number of fatalities. Those appointed to the committee included the superintendent of Huntsville City Schools, a member of the state Board of Education, student transportation director for the state, the director of the state Department of Public Safety, the director of the state Department of Transportation, and the commissioner of the state Department of Children’s Affairs.

The committee met for the first time on January 10, with its recommendations set for early March — in time for Riley to decide whether to present a measure requiring seat belts on buses to the state legislature during the regular session.

But drivers like Jacobs, who has been driving school buses in Choctaw County for over 23 years, are not convinced that the move would be a wise one.

“Several years ago, when they first passed the seat belt law for cars, I went to a state conference where they were talking about this issue,” Jacobs said. “They were saying that with seat belts on buses the evacuation time (in the event of an accident) would be 3 times as long. For 50 kids without seat belts, it would take less than 2 minutes to evacuate a bus. With seat belts, it would take a lot longer, and in some cases you may not have that long to get them all out.”

Jacobs views are echoed by a host of studies that have researched the issue on state and national levels.

The debate over whether school buses should be equipped with seat belts goes back to at least 1977, when NHTSA tightened school bus safety standards. At that time, following extensive research and analysis, NHTSA instituted “compartmentalization” as the primary means of protection in school buses, which includes the installment of strong, well-padded, well-anchored, high-backed, evenly spaced seats.

The NHTSA, however, has never recommended a federal requirement for seat belts on buses.

An analysis of test data by the NHTSA concluded that lap belts on buses appear to have little, if any, benefit in reducing serious or fatal



Choctaw Sun photos by Dee Ann Campbell
These Southern Choctaw Elementary students would be required to wear seat belts on their school bus if possible new state law is passed.



These seats could be required to have two shoulder/lap belts if new regulations are passed. The move would mean that fewer children could be transported per seat, and fewer per bus. Bus drivers could also be responsible for ensuring that each child wears his safety belt.

injuries in severe frontal crashes. In fact, the study suggested that lap belts could actually increase the incidence of serious neck and abdominal injuries among small passengers.

The use of the combination lap/shoulder belts could provide some benefit, the study said. But lap/shoulder belts can be misused, and the NHTSA’s research showed that serious neck injury and perhaps abdominal injury could result when lap/shoulder belts are not used properly.

School buses, however, must conform to other stringent safety standards required by the federal government and the State of Alabama, including requirements for rollover protection, joint and roof strength, fuel system integrity, and a host of other safety features.

Bus safety includes the employment of drivers who have been adequately trained, as well as well-

maintained buses — two issues that state officials say are part of Alabama’s school bus laws.

Alabama law requires all drivers to hold a Commercial Driver License (CDL) and an Alabama School Bus Driver Certificate. State and federal laws require background checks and random drug testing for bus drivers. Under Alabama law, school buses are inspected monthly by local personnel and annually by state school bus inspectors.

Federal law also requires other safety measures, including regulations dealing with maximum seating capacity on buses. While regulations do not specify the number of children that can safely sit on a school bus seat, school bus manufacturers base their determination for seating capacity on the space required for three small elementary school-age children to sit on a typical

39-inch school bus seat.

In fact, reduced seating capacities and the cost that it entails is one of the points often raised by opponents of seat belts on buses.

“There’s no doubt it will cost a lot of money,” Jacobs said. “One of the ways that will happen is that it will reduce the number of kids who can ride on a seat.”

Jacobs explained that most buses are authorized to hold 72 passengers with 3 on a seat — based on the size of most Kindergarten-age students. A seat belt requirement would mean fewer students on each seat — and more buses and drivers needed for the school system to transport the number of students who ride buses.

Opponents of seat belts on school buses also raise the possibility of bus fires and buses that crash into water. Studies show that a driver would not have time to unbuckle large numbers of small

How safe are kids on school buses?

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — Because of already-existing safety measures both in Alabama and throughout the country, the record of school bus safety is an impressive one.

Every year, approximately 450,000 public school buses travel about 4.3 billion miles to transport 23.5 million children to and from school and school-related activities. Over the past 11 years, school buses in the United States have annually averaged about 26,000 crashes resulting in 10 deaths — 25% were drivers; 75% were passengers.

An average of 30 school-age children do die in other school bus-related traffic accidents each year, but most are actually pedestrians getting on or off school buses. Pedestrian fatalities account for the highest number of school bus-related fatalities. There are about 17 such fatalities per year, two-thirds of which involve the school bus itself and the rest involving motorists illegally passing the stopped school bus.

The school bus occupant fatality rate of 0.2 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT) is considerably lower than the fatality rates for passenger cars or light trucks (1.44 per 100 million VMT). Nationally, a school bus is considered to be about 172 times safer than a passenger car, 8 times safer than a passenger train or scheduled airline, and 4 times safer than a transit bus, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

children in those cases, especially if that driver is incapacitated from injury. In addition, if a bus is upside down there could be too much pressure on the buckle to undo it.

Jacobs also raised the issue of the added responsibility of drivers to insure that the children are buckled up — a task that may seem overwhelming in an already-demanding job that requires maintaining good driving skills while keeping discipline for more than 60 kids with no additional help.

“You can put seat belts on the buses, but who’s going to see that the kids stay in them?” he wanted to know. “There is no way the driver can see in every seat while he’s driving to make sure the belts stay buckled, and if they aren’t buckled, what good are they anyway?”

In recent years, some states have demanded that new school buses purchased by state governments be equipped with safety belts. Currently, five states — Florida, California, New York and New Jersey — have passed laws requiring seat belts on all school buses.

The National Traffic Safety Board is also still considering the possibility of requiring seat belts on school buses throughout the country. The board has been pushing the NHTSA to carry out more tests to determine if safety belts should be among a set of performance standards set

by the federal government.

While legislation on school bus seat belts has been brought up in the Alabama legislature on two previous occasions, neither bill made it to the governor. Yet, this year, there is strong support for a new law. Many legislators believe that some form of legislation will be forthcoming this year in the wake of the Huntsville accident.

But Jacobs says that the accident could potentially have been worse if, in fact, the students had been wearing safety belts. “If those kids had been strapped in, they would have had the entire weight of those heavy seats on top of them,” Jacobs explains. “I believe there would have been more kids hurt or killed in that accident if they had been wearing seat belts.”

“And I wouldn’t want to have to be responsible for trying to get 72 kids out of their seat belts if the bus was on fire,” he added. “If they are going to bring this up, they need to ask the ones who sit in the driver’s seat every day of their life.”

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