

SCHOOL BUS SAFETY

Adopted by Convention Delegates May 5, 1993

Reviewed by Board of Managers July 2012

- WHEREAS, In California in 1989-90 (calendar year 1990), nearly 3,000 school buses were involved in accidents; and
- WHEREAS, Buses that carry school children as well as other passengers as a part of the operation are not held to the same standards of physical inspection and driver training as school buses, and any injuries or fatalities to school children on the way to and from school on these buses are not included in government statistics; and
- WHEREAS, California state law requires that all passengers riding in private passenger motor vehicles and taxis wear safety belts and that children under four years or weighing less than forty pounds be in a child passenger restraint system; and
- WHEREAS, There is no federal or California state law requiring safety belts on school buses weighing more than 10,000 pounds; and
- WHEREAS, In 1977, federal standards improving safety requirements on school buses were issued for all buses manufactured after April 1, 1977; and
- WHEREAS, The State of New York requires all school buses manufactured after June 30, 1987 and operated within its jurisdiction to be equipped with seat belts, and the State of New Jersey requires safety belts on all school buses purchased after September 1, 1992 and, in New York state, it is illegal to transport pupils in school buses manufactured or assembled prior to April 1, 1977; and
- WHEREAS, In 1991, 33% of all school buses in operation in the state were of pre-1977 manufacture, making California the leading state in their continued use; and
- WHEREAS, Studies indicate that seat belts on post-1977 buses may reduce the likelihood of fatalities and injuries and may lead to improved student conduct on buses; and
- WHEREAS, The California Highway Patrol now supports safety belts in school buses if the federal government can develop standards for the buses and safety belts to ensure they enhance the safety of children; now therefore be it
- RESOLVED,** That the California State PTA seek and support legislation requiring that all school buses and drivers transporting children be held to the same safety standards regardless of origin or destination; and be it further

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RESOLVED, That the California State PTA seek federal or state guidelines and support legislation requiring one passenger restraint per child on every new school bus purchased for use in California, and that each child be required to wear his or her restraint in order to ride the bus, and that all parents, teachers, and students receive school bus safety instruction.

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BACKGROUND SUMMARY

School bus safety should no longer be a controversial issue. There are many more fatalities and injuries on buses that carry school children as well as other passengers than are reported in government statistics. One need only look at the school bus accident of July 31, 1991 in Palm Springs involving Girl Scouts which had 7 fatalities to realize that the government excludes some school buses from their data. Ron Kinney, Director of Pupil Transportation Services, California Department of Education, states that from “1982 through 1991, there were only three fatalities on school buses.” This is because “Vehicles that are designed and built as school buses, but are operated by the military or other federal, state, or local agencies; churches; or colleges or universities are not classified as school buses.”

In 1977, the National Highway Transportation Safety Act (NHTSA) issued standards that everyone agrees substantially improved the crash worthiness of school buses through an approach known as compartmentalization (seats with higher backs and more padding). At that time NHTSA said that seat belts were not warranted on Type 1 school buses (buses greater than 10,000 pounds). In 1985, NHTSA again found no compelling reason to require seat belts. However, in its report, “School Safety and Security Management,” dated January 31, 1990, NHTSA responded to the continuing debate about seat belts by quoting the portion of its 1977 standards that said, “It is important to emphasize that the federal standards specify the minimum safety requirements applicable to school buses. Nothing prohibits a state or local jurisdiction from purchasing buses equipped with safety belts.”

The major problem with relying on compartmentalization to protect our children is that this concept ignores the fact that young children often get out of their “compartment.” They stand, hang over the seat backs to talk to their friends behind them, and simply are not always stationary. Smaller children are often out of their compartment simply because they do not have the size or weight to withstand moving about as the result of normal driving. Perhaps most importantly, compartmentalization cannot protect children from a side or rollover collision.

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In 1989, the Transportation Research Board (TRB) found that “Seat lap belts, when properly used on post-1977 Type 1 school buses, may reduce the likelihood of death or injury to passengers involved in school bus crashes by up to 20 percent.” The TRB further said that “Some members (of the committee) believe that a uniform occupant restraint policy for all motor vehicles is important enough that states and local school districts should be encouraged to equip new school buses with seat belts.” In reaching its conclusions that seat belts are beneficial, the TRB relied on both a 1967 University of California, Los Angeles study and the 1972 Wojcik and Sande study.

New Jersey state law now requires that seat belts be included on all school buses. New York no longer allows pre-1977 school buses to transport children. Unless California outlaws the purchase of any more pre-1977 school buses, California runs the very real risk of becoming a dumping ground for the rest of the nation’s pre-1977 buses.

Lastly, the Transportation Research Board, the Federal Department of Transportation, and National Highway Transportation Safety Act all concluded that student behavior improved when students used seat belts.