



School Buses and the Danger of Driver Distraction

Transportation accidents are among the worst tragedies that can befall a school, having ramifications not only for those injured but also their families, friends, and the school population. And while the human cost is significant, bus accidents have acute financial tolls as well. According to a United Educators (UE) study, these accidents amount to 16 percent of the total number of public school claims, costing more than \$7 million in losses. Two claims approached the \$1 million mark, demonstrating how easily costs can skyrocket.

Although school bus accidents may result from the negligence of other drivers, too often they involve driver inattentiveness. The subject of driver distraction has consumed the attention of law makers and regulators. The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) website, www.distraction.gov, is designed to combat the issue of driving while distracted, and the DOT has declared April as National Distracted Driver Awareness Month.

Public school administrators can help reduce the risk of accidents by better understanding the types of distractions drivers are likely to encounter and undertaking strategies to address distracted driving.

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Sources of Driver Distraction

Numerous studies have examined driver distraction and the frequency with which distraction causes accidents. While the challenges of driving a passenger vehicle differ from those of driving a school bus, both automobile and school bus drivers confront similar distractions. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimated in a 2012 study that 3,328 people were killed and approximately 421,000 injured due to crashes caused by distractions. Distractions came from both inside and outside the vehicles.

Distraction From Within the Vehicle

The most hazardous activity for automobile drivers is reaching for objects that have been dropped or are moving around the vehicle, such as purses, backpacks, and cell phones. Drivers reaching for objects within the vehicle were nine times more likely to crash than those whose attention was focused solely on their driving.

One claim handled by UE involved a school bus driver who crashed while reaching for an object that he had dropped. The bus ran into the rear of a parked, fully loaded asphalt truck, killing a student and a construction worker and injuring 32 other students. The total cost of the claim reached nearly \$2 million.



In a 2011 study of cognitive distraction in automobiles by the AAA Foundation, talking to a passenger ranked right behind cell phone usage as an action that required the most cognitive workload. With bus drivers routinely carrying between 30 and 100 young passengers, it's easy to understand the great potential for distractions.

If managing students in the classroom is challenging, that same responsibility while controlling a bus is magnified. Student misbehavior on school buses can easily divert drivers' attention from the road. A search of the Internet for examples of students misbehaving on school buses quickly produces a long list of news stories describing fights and assaults.

Complicating the problem of student misbehavior is the fact that school bus drivers are not always properly trained to handle disciplinary issues. Drivers in Missouri participating in a statewide survey noted that student discipline was the most important subject in which they required additional training, ranking ahead of loading and unloading procedures and poor weather driving.

Studies also identified a few other activities that can cause drivers to be distracted, including:

- Using a cellphone
- Adjusting a radio or MP3 player
- Adjusting vehicle/climate controls
- Eating or drinking
- Smoking

Distraction From Outside the Vehicle

Distractions also come from situations outside the vehicle. A joint University of North Carolina and AAA study of more than 32,000 crashes determined that external diversions, such as roadwork, construction projects, or another accident, were a considerable distraction, leading to just over 29 percent of crashes.

Driving a vehicle is a complex task that requires instantaneous decisions about speed, lane changes, braking, and maintaining appropriate distance from other vehicles. Stimuli outside the vehicle, including electronic billboards, pedestrians, accidents, work zones, and active construction projects can take a driver's attention from the primary task of safely operating the vehicle.

Another UE school bus claim involved a driver who was distracted by a skateboarder on the street. The driver had come to a stop and was unloading students when he began to watch the skateboarder to ensure he would not be in the path of the bus. With his attention elsewhere, the driver neglected his normal procedures and pulled away from the stop before he had accounted for all unloaded passengers. The bus struck a student, who was severely injured when he was run over by the rear wheels.



All districts should adopt policies that prohibit bus drivers from eating, drinking, and using cell phones.

Strategies for Dealing With Driver Distraction

Districts need to limit the risks of distractions by training drivers to stay alert and helping them maintain discipline. A comprehensive approach to tackling driver distraction includes adopting policies that address the problem, providing information and training on distracted driving, adopting appropriate conduct codes for students, and considering technologies that can help limit the effects of driver distraction. Public school administrators should consider the following strategies to enhance school bus driver performance.

1. Develop driver training programs and policies that address distraction.

All districts should adopt policies that prohibit bus drivers from eating, drinking, and using cell phones.

Train drivers not to reach for objects that have been dropped or that are moving about the vehicle. Develop a policy that buses must pull to the side of a road or another safe location before drivers can turn their attention to those items.

For distractions outside the bus, consider providing drivers with information about construction zones and other scheduled roadwork routinely reported by media sources. National studies suggest that simply calling a driver's attention to likely sources of distraction can help to limit their effect and keep drivers alert. Include information on the external sources of driver distraction in your annual bus driver training program.

Safety Suggestions for Drivers

The Pennsylvania School Bus Drivers' Manual encourages drivers to develop routines for scanning the environment and provides the following tips to help them stay alert:

- Observe traffic defensively—be on the lookout for what the other driver might do.
- Visualize the route and what you are going to do.
- Make a concentrated effort to keep extra space between you and the vehicle ahead of you.
- Have and follow a pattern of mirror checks.
- Keep watch to maintain the safety circle around the bus.
- Remind yourself of the responsibility you have transporting students.
- Drive mindfully, not mindlessly—keep tuned to the bus and the sounds it makes and how it feels.
- Count the students as they get off the bus and watch where each of them go.

Similarly, Illinois' school bus driver training curriculum encourages drivers to adjust vehicle controls and mirrors before starting on their routes. Drivers are also taught to pay particular attention to "traffic conflict points": road construction zones, on and off ramps, blind curves and intersections, and decelerating vehicles.

2. Adopt a school bus safety code or code of conduct.

Students' conduct on school buses can be a significant and dangerous driver distraction. Many schools rely on established discipline policies to govern student behavior, but those may prove inadequate because school bus drivers face different circumstances than classroom teachers. When a misbehaving student diverts a driver's attention from the road, lives are at risk. An approach specific to student behavior on school buses is needed to increase safety and curb driver distraction.

Model school bus policies are as explicit as possible when identifying expectations for student behavior. Two classes of prohibited behavior are identified in the Anoka-Hennepin Independent School District (Minneapolis) bus code of conduct, for example. Class I offenses include horseplay, moving around the bus while it is in motion, use of profanity or obscene gestures, and yelling out of the bus window. Class II offenses are more serious and include harassment of another student or the driver, sticking body parts outside the window, physical aggression toward a student or the driver, and tampering with bus equipment such as the emergency door.

Consequences for not adhering to the code of conduct should be progressive and provide administrators with some flexibility. Several model policies use a multi-tiered approach to responding to student misconduct on the bus. Anoka-Hennepin's policy identifies consequences for first, second, third, and fourth offenses. Responses to Class I infractions range from receiving a warning to loss of service. Class II infractions merit a five-day suspension upon the first offense and longer terms of suspension for second or third offenses. A fourth offense warrants loss of bus service.

When students and drivers understand expectations for passenger conduct, the school bus driver can respond to student misbehavior with greater assurance and authority. Posting rules and adopting seating charts in each bus can remind students of the expectations for their behavior.



Develop ongoing school bus safety programs for students. The annual National School Bus Safety Week during the third week of October is a good time to remind students about important school bus safety tips as well as expectations for behavior while riding the bus.

3. Provide students and parents with information about school bus safety and conduct policies.

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It is also important to educate students and parents about school bus conduct policies each year. These policies can be posted to a school website as well as sent home with students in hard copy. Increase parental awareness by offering to speak to parent associations about the school bus code of conduct and allow time for parents to ask questions. Require parents to sign a form acknowledging that they have received and read the school bus code of conduct. Doing so should reduce disputes over any punishment given to a student who has misbehaved on a bus.

4. Provide school bus drivers with additional training and resources for managing student behavior.

Several school districts have included courses on student management and conflict resolution in their bus driver training programs. Teachers and administrators have long been required to complete such training as part of their educational programs. Providing this training to bus drivers highlights the important role a bus driver has in ensuring student safety. Districts can turn to their staff development professionals or experts from nearby colleges and universities to help them develop driver training programs focused on student behavior management.

Another way to help bus drivers manage student behavior is to have adult bus monitors or attendants ride alongside students. Bus monitors are responsible for supervising students while loading, riding, and unloading buses. They also assist in maintaining a clean bus and ensuring that there are no items on the floor that can move around the vehicle and cause a distraction. Many districts employing school bus monitors require that they receive training in bus safety procedures, evacuation procedures, and student behavior management.

Some districts use bus monitors solely to assist bus drivers transporting special needs children. Monitors can ensure that special needs students are secured in their seats, attend to those students' needs, and maintain overall discipline.

If it is not possible to hire bus monitors, consider starting a volunteer program with the assistance of your parent-teacher organization. Don't forget that volunteer monitors will need to undergo a screening process, just as employees would. Volunteers should also receive training on school bus safety procedures and student behavior management.



Finally, some districts are helping maintain order by installing surveillance cameras on their buses. Administrators have found that the cameras provide irrefutable proof of student misbehavior and increase their ability to respond to student misconduct on buses.

5. Consider employing crash avoidance technology.

Vehicle manufacturers have long concentrated on engineering safer vehicles. With driver distraction at the root of most accidents, safety engineers turn their attention to developing systems to help drivers avoid crashes. Known as crash avoidance technology, these systems use a variety of infrared, radar, and global positioning devices to help drivers avoid collisions.

Some school districts use rear and side vision camera systems to improve drivers' ability to see into blind spots. Another system engages sonar or microwave technology when a bus is being reversed. An onboard monitor alerts the driver via lights and an audible signal when there is an object, such as cars or people, behind the bus.

Dealing With Driver Distraction

While no single solution will eliminate driver distraction, school systems that pursue a combination of these strategies will help schools turn bus drivers' attention back to the road.



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