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Prepared By: Joseph J. García

Witness: Royce Binns, Executive Director of Transportation, Albuquerque Public Schools; Antonio Ortiz, Director of Capital Outlay, Public Education Department

Student Transportation Safety

Public school transportation represents a commitment to one of the most basic principles in education: students must be present at school for learning to occur. Policymakers have committed over \$119 million for FY 2023, to removing barriers to students' education by providing transportation to and from school. In recent months school transportation safety has been highlighted due to the February 24 school bus accident in Albuquerque that left seven students as well as the bus driver hospitalized then the March 8 Española rollover that resulted in three teens being taken to the hospital with minor injuries.

The Safest Way to Travel on New Mexico Roads

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) regards school buses as the safest form of transportation to and from school. School bus fatalities are exceedingly rare. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, motor vehicle accidents cause approximately 40 thousand fatalities per year. The NHTSA reports that nationally between 2006 and 2015, the yearly average number of occupant fatalities in school transportation-related crashes was 11 (0.0003 percent of total motor vehicle fatalities), and the average number of pedestrian fatalities in school transportation-related crashes per year was 22 (0.0006 percent of total pedestrian fatalities).

Students are about 70 times more likely to get to school safely if they take a school bus instead of traveling by car.

Prior to the February and March accidents, the most recent school bus accidents in New Mexico occurred in 2013. The first involved a brand new bus and two semi-trucks; the driver of the bus died, however, there were no children on board at the time of the crash. The second was a bus carrying children that veered off the road near Ojo Caliente. The driver was killed, and nine children sustained injuries.

A 2021 NHTSA survey of bus drivers from 12 states noted a majority of school bus drivers believe seat belts on school buses contribute to calmer and less distracted environments, particularly for drivers. The survey also found that when a seat belt required use policy was in place, bus drivers observed students often did not move around the bus even if they were not wearing a seat belt because they did not want to advertise their non-compliance with the policy.

Key Takeaways

According to the NHTSA, school buses are the safest form of school transportation with school bus accident fatalities being exceedingly rare. The NHTSA survey of bus drivers found seat belt use contributed to calmer and less distracted drivers and less movement by students.

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The design of school buses makes them substantially safer than passenger vehicles for avoiding crashes and preventing injury. This has led to a decrease in fatalities even though there has been a slight upward trend in school bus related crashes.

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In May 2018, the NHTSA recommended that states pass legislation requiring all new large school buses be equipped with seat belts.

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An unofficial estimate from news reports and police data from 10 major cities, found at least 50 people die in these ten cities each year from street racing.

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School Bus Policy and Enforcement of Requirements

According to the NHTSA survey of bus drivers, the most important factors in school bus safety are bus driver training, student and parent education, consistent procedures and enforcement of passenger seat belt use requirements. Drivers with 3-point seat belt experience and drivers without seat belt experience were equally represented in the survey.

There are two types of school bus seatbelts: the 2-point lap belt used from origin of belt to buckle closure, and the 3-point lap/shoulder belt latched from origin covering lap and shoulder. The 3-point seat belt is standard in most passenger vehicles.

heavier size, other safety standards such as joint integrity of the bus body panels and fuel tank integrity also contribute to their status as some of the safest vehicles on the road. It is important to note, however, according to the Fatality Analysis Reporting System data, while total fatalities has decreased, there has been a slight upward trend in the total number of school bus related crashes nationwide due to bus trips outside the typical transportation peak hours such as school field trips or academic half-days.

The National Transportation Safety Board recommends 3-point lap/shoulder belts on all new buses. The NHTSA survey found 3-point lap/shoulder belts provide the safest restraint, although the survey also found that none of the surveyed school districts were undertaking initiatives to implement the use of such seat belts on buses. According the NCSL, only eight states require the use of seat belts on full-size school buses: Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New York, New Jersey, and Texas. School buses that weigh less than 10 thousand pounds are required to carry 3-point lap/shoulder belts.

Proper Use of Seat Belts on School Buses

Research from the NHTSA shows the bus driver has the largest impact on whether students use seat belts. The NHTSA survey found drivers who implemented, explained, and demonstrated clear use of seat belts experienced higher seat belt use compliance. Students on buses with seat belts showed better behavior compared to buses without seat belts.

The NHTSA survey demonstrated comprehensive training of all staff involved in the transportation of students is essential to support consistency. A key aspect of safety

Air Conditioning is Safety

According to PED, in the last three years all new school bus requests include funding for air conditioning, whether school district or contractor owned. Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) is one of the latest districts to get new, air-conditioned buses.

According to LCPS, making a commitment to safety includes three air-conditioning units per bus, radio and built-in intercom systems, and three to four cameras to monitor drivers and passengers.

training with students includes sending explanatory materials home to educate parents and guardians. Educational materials and demonstrations in the opening weeks of school about how to properly buckle into a seat belt helps to set expectations for proper behavior on school buses.

Enforcement of Seat Belt Use

In 2018 the NHTSA recommended states pass legislation that all new school buses over 10,000 pounds be equipped with seat belts. The NHTSA reports that while *requiring* seat

Sixty percent of drivers noted an improvement in student behavior when traveling in buses with seat belts. Drivers noted a reduction in the distracting “popcorn effect,” ongoing student movement when seat belts are not used.

belts is the most effective method for encouraging and enforcing use of seat belts, a bus driver conducting walk-through inspections before leaving the school in the afternoon and verbally reminding students in the morning about their use is also important. While seatbelts increase student safety, reduce bus driver distraction, and increase bus driver concentration, some bus drivers experienced more stress because of additional responsibilities to educate students about the proper use of seat belts. Currently, New Mexico

does not require seat belts to be equipped on school buses over 10,000 pounds. PED does not mandate seat belts on school buses. However, buses are retrofitted with seatbelts to be in compliance with IEPs. Only the required number of seats equipped with seat belts are retrofitted. The type of belt is a local school district decision with the 3-point belt being the most common.

When asked for ways to improve school bus seat belt programs, the survey found that the majority of bus drivers recommended more parent or guardian involvement, including requiring parent or guardians sign a seat belt agreement at the beginning of the school year. The drivers also suggested using videos and other methods such as technology to continuously reinforce the importance of seat belts. One example includes technology found in cars that notifies occupants of the need to buckle up.

Overall, the NHTSA study found the benefits of improving seat belt use on buses increased protection of students by maximizing the compartmentalization technology. In turn, those factors led to calmer and less distracted environments for drivers. Finally, bus drivers believe administrators could support compliance by following through with consequences when students are non-compliant.

Illegal Passing and Racing during School Hours

According to the NCSL, a growing number of states are trying to catch and punish drivers that pass school buses actively loading or unloading students by allowing cameras to be placed outside buses to capture illegal passing and possibly racing. NCSL reports 24 states have school bus stop-arm camera laws. Legislation was introduced in New Mexico in 2019 that would have required school buses to be equipped with cameras to record vehicles and license plates with date and time stamp images. The bill would have raised the fine from \$100 to \$300 for illegal passing of a school bus. This bill did not pass.

Research on street racing from both the Journal of Adolescent Health and the Insurance Journal shows the dangers of street racing. Often glorified by movies, data on street racing

accidents and deaths is difficult to obtain because neither the federal government nor the insurance industry specifically tracks street racing accidents. An unofficial estimate from news reports and police data from 10 major cities, found at least 50 people die in these 10 cities each year from street racing. Georgia has recently passed legislation to address street racing. Georgia law mandates at least 10 days of jail time for all drag racing convictions and requires persons convicted three times within five years forfeit their vehicles. Another approach is a creative longstanding effort by the Colorado State Patrol that lures street racers to a safer environment: its “take it to the track” program, which organizes weekly contests at a Denver area speedway allowing any type of legal car to race police cars. In 2021, legislation was introduced in New Mexico to amend the Crime Victims Reparation Act (CVRA) to include the crime of racing on highways or streets. Currently, the CVRA only addresses the crime of racing on highways.

Recommendations

In light of recent school bus accidents, the legislature could consider possible safety measures for New Mexico’s children:

- Require all school buses have 3-point lap/shoulder belts
- Require cameras inside and outside of buses
- Strengthen New Mexico laws in regards to street racing

