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Bus Safety

A Handout for Parents and Teachers

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Background

Approximately 400,000 yellow school buses serve elementary and high school students in the United States. In all, about 22.5 million school-age children ride yellow school buses to and from school. After-school activities provide an estimated 5 million additional student rides on a daily basis. It is also estimated by the American Public Transit Association that public transportation provides an additional 900 million student rides per year. You may also be surprised to learn that this makes school transportation the single largest system of public transportation in the United States, resulting in over 94.2 billion total pupil-passenger miles per year.

Most of us recall one incident or another whereby a student was harmed from some avoidable mishap that occurred while riding or walking to the school bus. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, an average of 41 school-age children are killed in school bus-related traffic accidents each year. During the past ten years, 300 school-age pedestrians (less than 19 years old) have died in school-bus related crashes. Numerous injuries also have occurred when riding, boarding or unloading from a school bus.

Issues Involving School Bus Safety

While school bus transportation is regarded by many as one of the safest forms of transportation, accidents do happen. Typically, children are no longer under the supervision of teachers or parental figures when riding the school bus. Such unstructured situations often lead to misconduct and episodes of poor judgment on the part of some students. Situations that may arise resulting from disruptive behavior may be distracting to the driver or may encourage a student to take unnecessary risks, such as

waving an arm out a school bus window, often to the dismay of a parent.

School bus drivers often report that they are overwhelmed by what they see as students' lack of respect and failure to follow school bus rules and regulations. Typically, a large school bus will transport 54 students, a number of students far in excess of what a certified teacher would be permitted to supervise without assistance. Yet, this is asked of school bus drivers across the country on a daily basis.

Of students who have died in school bus-related incidents, almost two thirds were killed by school buses, 6% by vehicles functioning as school buses and 30% by other vehicles involved in crashes with school buses. Five- and six-year-olds represented more than half of all school-aged pedestrians killed by school buses over the past ten years. On average, 21 school-age pedestrians are killed by school buses each year and 9 are killed by other vehicles involved in school bus crashes. Of those children killed, 42% are killed in crashes between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. enroute home from school. "Inattention" and "failure to yield" were factors most often reported by police for school bus drivers striking school-age pedestrians.

While efforts have been made to require seat belts on large school buses, only two states currently mandate seat belts in school buses (New Jersey and New York), while the federal Government mandates seat belts in all small buses (under 10,000 lb.). Ironically, studies dating back to 1969 have repeatedly concluded that compartmentalization provides better protection in accidents than two-point seat belts on school buses. To date, there have been no studies conducted on three-point seat belts and safety.

School Bus Safety: Prevention

The best solution to the issue of school-bus safety is one of prevention. Children and their parents, as well as educators and community members, need to be aware of the risks involved with children and school buses. Motorists also need to obey all state regulations regarding driving in the vicinity of school buses and their designated drop-off zones.

A good way to raise the level of awareness in the community is through the implementation of a school bus safety program. "Operation School Bus Safety" is one such program available from the National PTA¹ and Navistar International, designed to help communities improve bus safety records and protect children. Moreover, school bus safety week is usually held in late October, which is a good time to highlight such programs. In

general, children should understand that riding on the bus is a privilege, that the bus is an extension of school and they are expected to behave as well as they would in their classroom. Parents and educators wishing to initiate a prevention program are encouraged to contact their local PTA for information on "Operation School Bus Safety." Educators and parents can also help by reminding students to follow some very simple safety rules which are outlined below:

School Bus Safety Rules

On the way to the bus:

- Be alert, arrive at your stop at least five minutes early.
- Always obey all traffic lights and signals.
- Plan to walk with schoolmates whenever possible, facing the traffic.
- When crossing streets, always cross at crosswalks and intersections.
- Look both ways before crossing the street.

At the bus stop:

- Stand back from the curb.
- Don't push or shove when entering or exiting and always use the steps and hand rail.
- Always obey the bus driver and wait for the driver's signal before crossing.
- Always cross at least 10 feet in front of the school bus.
- Never, never crawl under the bus.

When riding the bus:

- Take your seat quietly and quickly, remain seated when the bus is moving and don't get out of your seat when the bus is moving.
- Keep your feet on the floor and never ever extend your hands, arms, head or any object out the window of a bus.
- Talk in a conversational tone, be courteous to the driver and

schoolmates, and try not to distract the driver through misbehavior.

¹Contact the National PTA at 330 N. Wabash Av., #2100, Chicago IL 60611; (312) 670-6782.

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