

Will seat belts on school buses become law in PA? Not likely, officials say

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Brandi Proctor
CBS 21*

A serious bus crash in Central Pennsylvania is raising the question about the possibility of seat belts on school buses.

Buses in Pennsylvania aren't equipped with seat belts, still state transportation officials say, buses are the safest form of ground transportation.

According to the national highway traffic safety administration, on average six student passengers die in school bus crashes each year, compared to approximately 2,000 children who are killed in motor vehicle crashes annually.

The Pennsylvania Department of transportation says in 2016, 3400 people were involved in school bus crashes statewide. More than 90 percent weren't hurt at all. Six people died, none of them were passengers on a bus. Officials say the design of the bus makes it safe.

Joe Anne Ward-Cottrel from Safe Kids York says, "Buses are big, bright, yellow, people see them and usually avoid them." She says it's been the same design for years on school buses, and they are actually eight times safer for a child, than riding in a vehicle.

Not just the size or the color, the design of the interior, to be like an "egg carton", with the seats very padded and close together also adds to the safety.

The National Conference of State Legislatures agrees that school buses are a safe mode of transportation but they say concerns have been raised about their safety in side impact crashes. There are also concerns about rollovers, like the one in Lancaster Wednesday. Six states now require that school buses be equipped with seat belts, at least 32 states have considered it over the past ten years, but parents in Central PA shouldn't expect to see them on a local bus anytime soon.

While costs and capacity are an issue, experts say a child is more likely to be hurt walking to, or even on the bus stop.

With the serious crash in our area, PennDOT is reassuring parents, that their children are safe.

Should states require seatbelts on school buses?

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Stateline

Dawn Prescott doesn't recall all the details of when the school bus she was riding on more than 15 years ago careened off a bridge in Omaha, Nebraska, plunged nearly 50 feet into a creek bed, and landed on its side.

She was a chaperone for the high school band, which was returning from a competition in October 2001. Her son Benjamin, 14, was sitting a few rows up, behind the driver.

"I remember that I grabbed the luggage rack and was hanging from it," Prescott, 55, recalled. "Kids were screaming and hurt and in tangled heaps that I stepped over. All I could think of was that I had to get to my son. But when I finally did, I found he was unconscious."

Benjamin, along with two other students and a parent, died as a result of the crash. Twenty-six passengers were injured. So was the driver, the only one on the bus who was wearing a seat belt. Seat belts weren't required on school buses, and the bus didn't have any for passengers.

Since then, Prescott, a middle school teacher, has been urging Nebraska lawmakers to require what she says are lifesaving seat belts on new school buses. So far, they haven't.

But they're **considering a seat belt bill** again this year, and similar legislation has been introduced in at least 19 other states, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. That's far more states than usual — a change some safety experts attribute to a federal recommendation in late 2015 that school buses have seat belts.

So far, none of the bills — many of which would require that new school buses purchased after a certain date be equipped with seat belts — have been passed. And if history is any indication, many of them will fail amid questions about the seat belts' effectiveness in preventing death and injury, and whether they are worth the cost to financially strapped school districts.

Nationwide, only six school-age passengers die in bus crashes each year, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

For seat belt advocates, there's little question what states should do. "Kids have to be on these buses, and I think we have to do everything we can to protect them," said Connecticut state Rep. Fred Camillo, a Republican who is **sponsoring a bill** that would require seat belts on new buses from model year 2022 on.

Others aren't so sure. They point to the good safety records, question whether children can quickly unbuckle and evacuate buses in some emergencies, and balk at the estimated \$7,000 to \$10,000 cost of adding seat belts to a new school bus already priced at \$80,000 to \$120,000. Retrofitting buses already on the road would cost even more.

“Nobody cares more about kids’ lives than I do. That’s my job,” said Rich Casey, transportation director for Bellevue Public Schools in Nebraska. “If I really believed school buses were unsafe with their current configuration, I would be 100 percent behind putting seat belts on school buses. But there is no scientific or empirical data that shows they would offer more protection than the current system.”

Only six states — California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York and Texas — have laws requiring seat belts on school buses. In Louisiana and Texas, however, the requirements are contingent upon funds being appropriated by the state, and that hasn’t happened.

School bus safety.

Safety experts agree that school buses are the safest way to transport students. Every day, about 485,000 buses carry more than 25 million children to and from school and related activities in the U.S., according to the National Association for Pupil Transportation, which represents school transportation directors.

Most of the 301 children killed in **school bus crashes** from 2006 to 2015 were pedestrians or occupants of other vehicles, NHTSA data show. Only 54 were bus passengers.

School buses can be equipped with one of two types of seat belts: lap belts that go over the waist or three-point lap and shoulder belts that go across the body and that experts say are much safer.

Federal law requires seat belts on school buses weighing 10,000 pounds or less, which are smaller, lighter and built more like cars and vans. They often carry preschoolers or special needs children.

Federal law doesn’t require them on the big yellow school buses that most students ride. The buses are designed to protect riders through “compartmentalization,” structural safety features such as high, energy-absorbing seat backs and closely spaced seats so children are kept snug like eggs in a carton.

But those features don’t necessarily protect children during side-impact crashes or high-speed rollovers because passengers don’t always remain within their seating compartment, according to the National Transportation Safety Board, which **recommends putting three-point seat belts** on new buses.

For many years, groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National PTA recommended seat belts on every new school bus.

But NHTSA, the agency responsible for writing vehicle safety rules, maintained that large buses were adequately protected and didn’t need seat belts. Its position changed in late 2015, when then-administrator Mark Rosekind announced that “every child on every school bus should have a three-point seat belt” and that his agency **was launching a nationwide effort** to reach that goal.

NHTSA's turnaround didn't result in a federal rule mandating seat belts. But it has had an effect in state capitols, said Amanda Essex, an NCSL policy specialist.

The agency's reversal, along with the attention paid to a major crash in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in November in which six elementary school students died and 31 were injured, has prompted more legislators than ever to file seat belt bills, Essex said.

"Typically, this issue comes up in about 10 states each year," she said. "This year, that number has doubled."

John Bonaiuto, a lobbyist for the Nebraska Association of School Boards, which strongly opposed previous seat belt bills, said NHTSA's new position has changed his group's attitude this year.

Bonaiuto said his group now is suggesting that if legislators want to require seat belts, they should consider creating a state fund to help pay for it, at least initially. They also should require seat belts not just on new buses but on current ones, to create the same safety standard, he said.

Worries about cost

Despite changes in attitudes, the high cost of paying for seat belts remains a major stumbling block to adopting mandatory laws.

In Maryland, a legislative fiscal analysis this year concluded that local school systems would need to spend \$23.7 million to put three-point seat belts on new school buses from 2019 through 2022.

In Connecticut, several groups opposing Camillo's seat belt bill, including state associations representing public school superintendents and school business officials, also have financial concerns.

"We're in a very difficult budget situation in Connecticut," said Patrice McCarthy, deputy director of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, which opposes the measure. "Requiring seat belts on school buses would be one more new thing where dollars would have to go."

McCarthy said her group also worries about the costs that would stem from hiring monitors on buses to ensure young passengers stay buckled up.

Some national groups are cautious about throwing their support behind mandatory seat belt laws. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit research group funded by auto insurance companies, favors putting three-point belts on school buses and encourages school districts to do so if they have the money. But it stops short of recommending that states require them. Jessica Jermakian, a senior research engineer at the institute, said that mandating them could have unintended consequences.

Cash-strapped school districts could put off buying new, safer buses, she said. Or they could try to save transportation dollars by changing boundaries for bus service, forcing more students to walk to school or get a ride.

“That puts children at substantially increased risk of injuries or fatalities if they walk or if their parents are driving them,” Jermakian said.

Some school transportation experts argue money would be better spent on efforts to prevent fatalities outside the school bus, which are far more common, for example **putting cameras on buses** to catch “fly by” drivers who illegally pass and strike children trying to cross the street.

A hindrance to escape?

Some opponents of mandatory seat belts on school buses also are concerned about their effectiveness during certain types of emergencies.

They worry that making children buckle up could lead to a disaster if they must evacuate quickly in a fire or the bus is submerged in water.

“Young children may not be able to unbuckle themselves without assistance, and panicked or disoriented students could be trapped by their belts,” said Danielle Batchelder, business services director for Windsor Public Schools in Connecticut, in her January testimony before a state House committee.

Utah Republican state Rep. Craig Hall, who sponsored a seat belt bill this year that failed, doesn’t buy the evacuation argument. If a bus catches fire or falls into a lake or pond, he said, it often would be the result of a crash. Seat belts can help protect passengers, leaving them in better shape to escape.

“Seat belts help in evacuations,” Hall said. “An uninjured child can evacuate much more quickly than an injured or unconscious child.”

Dawn Prescott, the Nebraska mother whose son died in the 2001 bus crash, has no doubt about the effectiveness. “If my son had a seat belt on, he would be here today,” she said.

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Views differ on use of seat belts on school buses

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David Wenner
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The school bus crash on Interstate 81 that sent two dozen people to the hospital Sunday raises that nagging question about why school buses lack seat belts.

It's an emotional and complicated subject, but this is probably true: It has grown less likely schools will equip buses with seat belts or that governments will require them.

That's because of research that has convinced many people that school buses are the safest mode of transportation, even with children unbuckled.

"I'd rather have my kids, my grandkids, riding in a school bus without seat belts, than riding in someone's vehicle with seat belts," says John Allison, a former school superintendent who is safety director for Rohrer Bus Service, based in Duncannon.

Most U.S. school buses don't have seat belts. Beginning this year, new school buses that are smaller — the kind that seat up to about a dozen children — must have seat belts.

It's not that anyone is arguing seat belts wouldn't make a difference.

An Alabama study released last year concluded that seat belts would save the life of about one child every eight years.

The retired University of Alabama professor who led the study said riding in a school bus is six to eight times safer than riding with a parent.

MSNBC.com, which examined the issue in December, reported that about six children die each year in school bus accidents nationwide, while about 800 die while walking, biking or riding to school in other vehicles.

The website cited a study that said school buses are about 40 times safer than the family car.

The Pennsylvania School Bus Association, in a statement on its website, says modern school bus design uses a concept called "compartmentalization" that works very well to protect school bus passengers during a crash.

The concept involves using close seat spacing and high seat backs to prevent passengers from being thrown during a crash, and using padding to cushion any impact.

The association also details several potential problems with seat belts, such as their misuse, which could increase the risk of neck and abdominal injuries, and the possibility that school

districts would recoup seat belt costs by reducing the number of bused children, thereby forcing some children into more dangerous situations.

Experts note additional safety advantages of school buses, including their height, their attention-grabbing color and lights, the safety training of drivers and traffic regulations intended to protect them.

Allison spent 35 years in education and was superintendent of Northern York County School District. Since 1998 he has worked for Rohrer, which provides busing for about eight Harrisburg-area school districts.

Allison says the seat belt issue is one he wrestles with.

He's bothered by the "mixed message" given to children who are lectured on the need to buckle up, yet loaded onto buses that lack belts.

He also believes belts would make it easier for school bus drivers to maintain order and would provide a safety benefit in some rollover crashes.

Yet he also believes seat belts would create an assortment of problems that would offset the benefit.

The problems include the effort it would take to make sure all children were belted properly and the time this would add to the bus ride.

He also stresses that effective use of seat belts would require an educational campaign for staff and students, penalties for students who fail to buckle up and willingness on the part of parents to accept punishments.

The Alabama study cited the cost of seat belts as a negative, saying they cost about \$11,000 to \$15,000 per bus. The authors argued that the money would be better spent making conditions safer for students as they get on and off school buses.

Allison has no exact figure but estimates adding seat belts would cost \$2,000 to \$2,500 per bus.

He notes that if a school district wanted belts, Rohrer would provide them, with the cost built into the contract.

But he is aware of no local district ever seriously looking into adding seat belts and says he doesn't believe the cost of seat belts has been a major deterrent to their use in school buses.

Bud Shaffner, president of the Cumberland Valley School Board, has no strong view on the subject, mainly because he can't recall it being a major issue during his 14 years on the board.

Shaffner's biggest worry is that seat belts would be required by the state or federal

government. He says he would gladly discuss the subject with anyone who feels strongly about it but would want any policy regarding seat belts to be based on opinions in his district.