



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
STATE DIRECTORS OF
PUPIL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Position Paper

Speed Limits for School Buses

Background:

On December 8, 1995, the National Speed Limit ceased to exist. States were free to establish whatever speed limits they wished on their highways. While some states chose to leave the speed limits at existing levels, typically 55 or 65 miles per hour, others raised the speed limits, typically back to the pre-1970's energy crisis levels of 70 miles per hour or higher.

Safety experts agree that higher travel speeds result in more severe crashes. Even though improved safety technology in modern motor vehicles provides higher levels of occupant crash protection compared to motor vehicles of the 1960's and 1970's, safety experts agree that higher speed limits often result in additional fatalities and serious injuries in motor vehicle crashes.

Modern highway designs and features afford motorists with a high level of safety. Aggressive driving behavior and speeding are counterproductive to that level of safety, and often result in high-speed crashes, fatalities, and serious injuries.

What does this mean with respect to school bus safety? Should school buses be driven at the higher speed limits?

Discussion:

Throughout their history, school buses consistently have been one of the safest forms of motor vehicle transportation. During the 1960's and 1970's when higher speed limits were in effect across the Nation, school buses were transporting students safely to and from school and school-related activities at speeds 10-15 miles per hour slower than the posted speed limit. These slower travel speeds reduced the potential crash severity for school buses. In fact, the numbers of school bus passenger fatalities in those years were only slightly higher than they have been in recent years. The reduction in school bus passenger fatalities in recent years is the result of several factors, including generally slower travel speeds, safer designs of modern school buses versus those in use during the 1960's and 1970's, improved school bus driver training, and better route planning.

Traffic volume on the Nation's highways has increased dramatically over the past twenty years. Also, there have been increases in the number of school buses, the number of miles traveled by school buses, and the number of students transported in school buses. Thus, there is a greater exposure to potential school bus crashes now than in the 1970's.

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services has supported efforts to enhance the conspicuity of school buses. Examples include the color of the bus (National School Bus Yellow), retro-reflective markings, roof-mounted strobe lights, and daytime running lights. These items play a significant role in making the school bus a highly identifiable vehicle on the road. This allows other drivers to recognize the school bus and realize that it may be traveling at a slower speed.

Conclusions:

In consideration of the above, the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services believes that school buses should continue to operate at the speed limits in effect for school buses in each state prior to December 8, 1995. In some areas of the country, this would result in school buses operating at speeds 10-15 miles per hour under the posted speed limit.

There is ample evidence that this differential in travel speeds does not present a safety risk to school buses or other vehicles. Slower travel speeds reduce the potential crash severity level in vehicle-to-vehicle crashes involving a school bus, while also reducing fuel consumption. Driving at higher speeds in school buses so as to shorten the travel time by a few minutes may not be worth the inherent increase in risk. Local school districts should evaluate all transportation programs to ensure all students are afforded the highest level of safety.