

NTSB URGES SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO PROTECT PROPANE TANKS ON SCHOOL BUSES

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has urged state and local school authorities to provide physical protection to propane tank systems that are retrofitted onto school buses.

The NTSB has completed its investigation into the collision between a truck-tractor semitrailer and a school bus near Mountainburg, Arkansas. Three students on the bus were killed on May 31, 2001, when the truck exited Interstate 540, failed to stop at the bottom of the ramp, and hit the side of the bus. Two other children received serious injuries, and four had minor injuries. The drivers of both vehicles sustained minor injuries.

The 65-passenger, 1990 Blue Bird Corporation school bus had a retrofitted propane fuel system. Although the tank was not breached during the collision, the point of impact was just inches from the tank. The fuel system had been installed in accordance with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standard 58, "Standard for the Storage and Handling of Liquefied Petroleum Gases."

However, that standard does not adequately protect propane fuel systems during a crash. Unlike gasoline and compressed natural gas systems, which are fitted onto school buses by the manufacturer, propane and other retrofitted fuel systems are not required to meet National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) crash test standards specified in Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSSs) 301 and 303.

These standards require that gasoline and compressed natural gas fuel systems mounted on a vehicle withstand a barrier crash test. NHTSA cannot regulate propane fuel systems testing because propane systems are aftermarket installations and therefore not subject to NHTSA safety standards.

The NTSB has recommended that the NFPA amend its standard 58 to require that (1) propane fuel systems installed in school buses be protected, and (2) propane fuel systems meet the equivalent to FMVSS 301 crash protection standards. However, the Board believes school districts can install such protection without waiting for action by others.

The Board's report on the Mountainburg, Arkansas, accident is available on its web site - www.nts.gov.