

Position Paper



**National Association
of State Directors
of Pupil Transportation Services**

America's Professional School Bus Drivers: Their Importance to Student Safety and Educational Success

Background

School buses are the safest vehicles on the road. About half of the nation's public school students depend on school buses to get to and from school safely, and many more also ride in them during educational and extracurricular field and activity trips. The unparalleled safety record of school buses¹ is attributed to several factors. School buses must be built to Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards for construction and performance that are specifically designed to prevent crashes and protect passengers when a crash occurs. School buses must also meet state and local specifications and standards for installed equipment, required maintenance, and periodic mechanical and safety inspections. School buses are designed with flashing lights and stop signal arms to control traffic and alert motorists that they are stopped to pick up or drop off students. State laws prescribe when motorists must stop upon encountering a stopped school bus and specify penalties for illegal passing violations. Students are trained in safety procedures to follow while they are at bus stops, while they are entering or exiting school buses, and while riding.

Every link in this safety chain is critical, but the most important by far is the professional school bus driver. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recently studied the critical reasons why crashes of light motor vehicles occurred and determined that various kinds of errors by the drivers of the vehicles were the primary cause in 94 percent of crashes, versus six percent due to mechanical failure or other causes.² School bus drivers must meet significantly more, and more stringent, requirements for licensure, qualifications, and training than drivers of light vehicles. NASDPTS is not aware of a similar, comprehensive study of crash causation pertaining

¹ For school bus safety statistics and information, visit <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety> and www.schoolbusfacts.com.

² See <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812115>.

to larger vehicles such as school buses. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the performance of school bus drivers in preventing crashes is the most important factor in protecting their student passengers and themselves. School bus equipment and mechanical condition are critical to student safety as well, but it can be assumed reasonably that mechanical failures are the primary cause of only a small percentage of school bus crashes.

The performance of school bus drivers and their attention to safety remain the most important and critical factors in protecting student riders from harm. As a result, students riding in school buses are very safe. There is one vulnerability, however, over which school bus drivers sometimes have limited control. Student pedestrians who are approaching or leaving the school bus and are in the loading and unloading zone are sometimes tragically run over by other motorists who have not stopped for the bus. Historically, this is the portion of the trip to and from school when students transported by school buses are most likely to be killed. School bus drivers, as well as the students themselves, can and do significantly mitigate this hazard by being alert and following safety protocols, but, tragically, that is sometimes not enough when motorists fail to stop.³

The purpose of this Position Paper is to emphasize the primary and important role that America's estimated one-half million professional school bus drivers play in maintaining the health, well-being, and safety of students. Without them and the heroic job they do, day in and day out, students would be far more vulnerable to injuries and fatalities, and many would not have equitable access to the same range and choice of educational programs.

This paper provides an overview of the requirements for licensure, training, and qualifications that school bus drivers must meet, and it contains recommendations and best practices for driver qualifications and performance in areas where uniform national regulations may not exist. For more detail on the specific requirements of individual states and local school districts, NASDPTS recommends contacting the appropriate state agency. Contact information for each state's director of student transportation or the individual serving in a similar leadership role can be found at www.nasdpts.org.

³The Kansas Department of Education's annual Loading and Unloading Survey records fatalities each year in the loading and unloading zone. Current and historical data is at <http://www.ksde.org/Agency/Fiscal-and-Administrative-Services/School-Finance/School-Bus-Safety/Loading-and-Unloading-Surveys>. A full discussion of the topic of school bus loading and unloading safety is outside the scope of this Position Paper, but interested parties are encouraged to review the Kansas surveys and other information available from [NASDPTS](http://www.nasdpts.org), NHTSA, and other sources.

Discussion

Over the years, many actions have been taken to improve school bus driver selection and training. Since the early 1920's when training manuals for school bus drivers were developed, private and public entities have continued their efforts to develop and improve school bus driver training. Then, in the 1970's, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued standards (which later became guidelines) for school bus driver training.⁴

In 1992, the Federal Highway Administration within the United States Department of Transportation implemented a requirement that all school bus drivers possess a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). Subsequently, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration was formed and assigned responsibility for the CDL program. To attain this license, school bus drivers must pass knowledge (written) and skills (driving and hands-on) tests.

Under the Omnibus Transportation Employees Testing Act of 1991, commercial vehicle drivers, including school bus drivers, also became subject to drug and alcohol testing, including random testing. Such actions at the federal level have been important and beneficial in terms of improving school bus safety, but there are equally important activities that occur at the state and/or local levels.

In 1939, education and transportation professionals convened the first National Conference (now "Congress") on School Transportation (NCST). The NCST, held most recently in 2015 for the sixteenth time, provides a forum for delegates from nearly all states to deliberate and adopt standards, specifications and procedures in all aspects of student transportation. The resulting document, now known as the National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures,⁵ is advisory and represents the national consensus among student transportation professionals regarding a broad range of topics, including recommendations for what school bus drivers should know and do.

The following overview is a topic-by-topic discussion of requirements, NASDPTS' recommendations, and best practices for licensure, training, and qualifications of school bus drivers. These items are critical to school bus drivers' performance in transporting students safely:

- **Commercial Driver's License (CDL)** - All drivers operating a school bus designed to transport 16 or more persons, including the driver, must hold a CDL of the proper class for the size of school bus that they intend to drive. Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations (FMCSRs) require states to issue CDLs to certain commercial motor vehicle drivers only after the driver passes knowledge (written) and skills (driving and hands-on) tests administered by the state and related to the type of vehicle the driver expects to operate. School bus operators must also have Passenger (P) and School Bus (S) endorsements on the CDL. These endorsements require additional testing and demonstration of proficiency

⁴ See Highway Safety Program Guideline No. 17—Pupil Transportation Safety at <https://one.nhtsa.gov/nhtsa/whatsup/tea21/tea21programs/pages/PupilTransportation.htm>.

⁵ The National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures and other information on the NCST are available at www.ncstonline.org.

relating to some of the specific tasks involved in driving a school bus, such as railroad crossing procedures, student loading and unloading, and use of emergency exits. States are authorized to implement more stringent requirements. For more information, see <https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/commercial-drivers-license/drivers>. Under a new FMCSA [rule](#) mandated by Congress, by February 7, 2020 states will be required to implement a program for entry level driver training of commercial drivers who are seeking their initial CDL, including school bus drivers.

- **Pre-service Training⁶** - States commonly require that all school bus driver applicants receive preservice training before they are certified to drive school buses transporting students. While specific requirements vary throughout the nation based on local conditions and needs, states that have not already done so should adopt a basic curriculum to define the core competencies required of school bus drivers, as well as the required qualifications and competencies of instructors.
- **In-service Training** - States should require at least annual in-service training for all drivers related to their school bus driving responsibilities. While training topics may vary based on local needs, states should at least specify the amount of training that must be provided.
- **Criminal Background Checks** - A check of federal and state databases for criminal background should be conducted on all applicants for a school bus driving position. State regulations should specify what types and level of criminal history will result in disqualifying the applicant from consideration as a school bus driver. Existing state requirements for periodic criminal background checks of teachers and other personnel of the school system and contracted service providers should include school bus drivers. In lieu of scheduled checks, states should consider establishing requirements that law enforcement agencies expeditiously report in “real time” any instances of criminal violations by school and contracted personnel who have contact with children.
- **Drug and Alcohol Testing** - All commercial vehicle drivers, including school bus drivers, are subject to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations (FMCSRs) adopted to implement the requirements of the Omnibus Transportation Employees Testing Act of 1991 (OTETA) for drug and alcohol testing. The [requirements](#) specify, in part, that any CDL driver is subject to the following types of testing: pre-employment; post-accident (for qualifying serious crashes); random; reasonable suspicion; and, return to duty (if allowed by the state or employer) and follow-up testing. Many jurisdictions terminate anyone testing positive under the OTETA thresholds for drug use or alcohol impairment. FMCSRs require that the former employers of any applicant with a prior history of CDL employment be contacted to provide the new employer that history. The FMCSA is in the process of implementing a recent rule to establish the national Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse. When it is implemented, employers will be required to check new driver applicants against the data in the clearinghouse and will no longer be required to seek the information directly from previous employers.
- **Medical Fitness** - Each school bus driver applicant and driver should be required to pass a state-prescribed physical examination meeting FMCSA [guidelines](#) and hold a valid

⁶ Recommendations for the entire range of duties and performance expected of school bus drivers and for the specific curriculum content for pre-service and in-service training are outside the scope of this Position Paper. The topics in which school bus drivers should receive training are extensive. Many of the training topics are outlined in the FMCSA’s final [rule](#) on Entry Level Driver Training, and additional content critical to safety and security should be specified by states and local school districts.

Medical Examiner Certificate. The state-prescribed schedule and requirements for medical examinations may be more stringent than those required for federally regulated drivers. Some school bus drivers, such as those who are for-hire and cross state lines, are already subject to the federal regulations for medical fitness, regardless of state laws.

- **Driving History Record** - Federal CDL requirements specify certain disqualifying driving violations that state driver licensing agencies must enforce by suspending or revoking the driver's CDL. States, school districts, private schools, charter schools, and contractors should implement additional requirements to monitor on an ongoing or periodic basis any driving violations by school bus drivers. Driving record checks should be performed at least annually, consistent with the requirements of Title 49, Part 391.25 of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations applicable to other regulated motor carriers. The requirements should define and enforce the levels and types of driving violations by school bus drivers that are considered disqualifying in their personal vehicles and in a school bus or other commercial vehicle. The requirements should provide a means of obtaining applicable records of violations that may have occurred in another state. They should also define which infractions are not disqualifying, but that may require retraining or some consequence less severe than disqualification.
- **Pre- and Post-trip Inspections** - State and local requirements should specify procedures for required pre-trip safety inspections of school buses and equipment by school bus drivers. They should also specify that drivers must check throughout the entire school bus interior following every trip to ensure that no unattended students are left on board.

Conclusions

School bus driving is an incredibly challenging, yet rewarding, job. The term "school bus driver" itself is insufficient to describe the profession and its duties. Successfully operating the bus requires a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that go well beyond just "driving" and maneuvering the school bus. An effective driver is good at the basic tasks of safely maneuvering a 40 foot vehicle, of course, but must also be able to: manage students in a firm, consistent, yet friendly manner; recognize, intervene, and report signs of sexual harassment, bullying, or abuse; communicate effectively with parents, co-workers, and administrators; perform pre- and post-trip inspections of the school bus; learn and effectively operate new and ever-improving equipment and technologies on the bus; deal with confidential student information in a legally compliant and responsible manner; avoid distractions; deal with road and weather hazards; deal with student medical issues; adapt to changes in routes and stops; be knowledgeable of individual students' needs, especially those of students with disabilities, while ensuring confidentiality; know federal, state, and local laws; and on and on.

NASDPTS has been monitoring recent disturbing news reports about a few school bus drivers who were driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, driving erratically resulting in a crash, driving with known, unreported medical conditions, engaging in distracted driving, running red lights, or committing sexual crimes. In cases where multiple fatalities have resulted, pending National Transportation Safety Board investigations will likely contain important findings and targeted safety recommendations. These incidents are tragic in their own right, but also do disproportionate damage to the public perception of school bus drivers, the vast majority of whom behave properly and perform their jobs admirably.

Our hope is that safety partners at all levels, including federal and state agencies, school districts, private schools, charter schools, and contractors, see these incidents as red flags that warrant a top-to-bottom review of laws, regulations, practices, and procedures for school bus driver hiring, monitoring, and retention. Policies are only effective when they are consistently followed and enforced. In the unfortunate event that any alleged or proven illegal action by a school bus driver occurs, it must be investigated thoroughly, and legally authorized consequences must be imposed.

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services will continue to support efforts at federal, state, and local levels to improve the knowledge and skills of school bus drivers. We have been and will be actively involved in any federal initiatives or rulemaking activities that impact school bus drivers.

NASDPTS notes that there is a shortage of school bus drivers in many parts of the country, which is unfortunately typical when unemployment is low and there are many competing job opportunities. Many school bus drivers are part-time, rather than full-time employees, which also limits job benefits (for example, insurance and retirement). We encourage school districts, private schools, charter schools, and contractors to seek innovative, effective ideas for recruiting, training, and retaining qualified school bus driver applicants. Such efforts should include compensating professional school bus drivers at a level that is commensurate with the complex job they perform.

This Position Paper cannot possibly encompass all the knowledge, skills, and abilities that the nation's school bus drivers must possess or the behaviors they must exhibit day in and day out. NASDPTS encourages states, school districts, private schools, charter schools, contractors, and others to use this paper as a starting point. Review it and use it as a checklist to help ensure that regulations, practices, and procedures are adequate to prevent even one school bus driver or the students in their care from "falling through the cracks." This goal may never be fully attainable, but we should all strive for it.

Finally, NASDPTS commends professional school bus drivers and all those who support them for the outstanding jobs they do every school day in providing safe transportation to the nation's school children.

This paper is intended as a guide, not a legal document. Readers are encouraged to review the listed links and resources and consult others for complete information on this topic. NASDPTS encourages questions and comments.

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