Keeping Students Safe from Motorists who Pass School Buses

Every one of the 50 states has a law making it illegal to pass a school bus with its red lights flashing and stop arm extended that is stopped to load or unload students. Yet, the latest National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services survey of illegal school bus passings estimates that each school year more than 17 million vehicles across the country pass a stopped school bus with its warning lights on and stop arm extended, loading or unloading students. Unfortunately, the risk to school children is great, and the consequences of this illegal behavior can be deadly.

On Tuesday, October 30, 2018, at about 7:12 a.m., three children died, and one child sustained serious injuries, when they were struck by a pickup truck while crossing a high-speed roadway with a posted speed limit of 55 mph to board their school bus in Rochester, Indiana. The school bus driver had stopped the bus at the designated school bus stop and switched on its red lights, which extended the stop arm. The school bus driver indicated that he saw a vehicle approaching from the opposite direction and expected that vehicle to stop as it got closer to his bus. He signaled to the waiting children, and the parent waiting with them, that it was safe to cross the roadway. Catastrophically, the pickup truck driver did not begin to brake until she saw the students in the roadway and ultimately struck four students at a recorded speed of 41 mph.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) determined that the probable cause of this crash was the passing driver’s failure to stop for the school bus despite its clearly visible warning lights and stop arm. Additionally, the NTSB identified the school district as contributing to the crash because of its inadequate safety assessment of school bus routes, which led to a prevalence of bus stops that required students to cross a high-speed roadway to board a school bus, and its failure to establish clear policies regarding surrounding traffic for school bus drivers.

This crash was not an isolated event. In late October 2018, two other crashes occurred involving vehicles illegally passing school buses that were stopped to pick up students. In Hartsfield, Georgia, a school bus driver stopped the bus at a designated location on a 55 mph roadway. The bus’s warning lights were on and its stop arm was extended. Two students began to cross the roadway to board the stopped bus, which was on the opposite side of the road from them. At the same time, an approaching car did not stop for the school bus and struck both of the students, killing one and seriously injuring the other. In Baldwyn, Mississippi, a student was crossing a 55 mph roadway to board the school bus, which was stopped with its warning lights on and stop arm extended, when an approaching vehicle failed to stop, again striking and killing the student.

While the school bus industry is fortunate that it has seen a decrease in student fatalities during loading and unloading activities, the potential for such crashes is high, and the consequences are deadly.

What can be done to prevent vehicles from passing a school bus that is stopped to load or unload students? The NTSB recommends the following:

* Eliminate routes that require students to cross a roadway, especially high-speed roadways. Higher speeds give drivers less time to react to unexpected events, make for longer vehicle stopping distances, and tend to result in more severe injuries if a crash occurs. Review your routes and make changes to allow students to stay on their side of the roadway so they won’t have to cross the road to board the bus or get to their home.
* Evaluate school bus routes and stops from a safety perspective. What are the potential dangers to the students? Is this a high-speed roadway? Is there a lot of passing traffic? Is there a safe place for children to wait for the bus? Will students be visible to other motorists? This kind of route and stop scrutiny should take place at least once per year. And because things change in life, including bus routes, assess any problem areas that comes to light throughout the year. Can something be done to eliminate the hazard?
* Ensure that personnel who are involved in developing school bus routes know how to identify hazards. School transportation directors may go out on the roadway to review routes, but school bus drivers are out there regularly and should have some training in what risks to look for. Is there an increase in traffic? Does the bus driver notice vehicles passing him illegally when he is stopped to load students in a particular location? Has new construction created a dangerous situation for the students?
* Work with local police departments to educate motorists on the dangers of passing a school bus that is stopped to load or unload students or conduct high visibility enforcement campaigns aimed at stopping vehicles from illegally passing a school bus. Police departments are knowledgeable about dangers along the roadway and can help identify hazards on bus routes or at stops.
* Train school bus drivers and students. Are your school bus drivers and students trained in proper crossing procedures? Do both the bus drivers and the students know what to do if a car approaches and doesn’t look like it is going to stop? Are crossing signals and danger signals used consistently by all school bus drivers in the district? Do the students know what the signals mean?

Technology is also an option for preventing collisions. Some districts are looking at the use of stop arm cameras on school buses both to increase enforcement against those who illegally pass a school bus and to deter them from ever passing a school bus. Supplemental lighting, extended stop arms, and audible warnings connected to cameras are also technologies that are being developed, used, and evaluated. The NTSB recommended that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study these systems to provide the guidance to states and districts on which systems are most effective at preventing illegal school bus passings. In the meantime, minimize risks on your school bus routes.

Additional information about the vehicle collision with student pedestrians crossing a high-speed roadway to board a school bus that occurred in Rochester, Indiana, including the full crash report, can be found on the NTSB website at [www.NTSB.gov](http://www.NTSB.gov), highway accident report NTSB/HAR-20/02.