

WHY SCHOOL BUSES ARE NOT EQUIPPED WITH SEAT BELTS

As a safety conscious parent you have buckled your child into the proper child restraint seat through infancy and toddler stages and advanced to a certified booster seat when they grew to 18 kg or 40 lbs. Your child is now likely at that stage where they are reminding you to buckle up when getting into the family vehicle rather than vice versa. It is estimated that the use of proper child restraints reduces the risk of serious injury or death to children riding in a passenger vehicle by 75%.

So now as your child embarks on their journey to school and back home each day aboard the big yellow school bus you may be wondering, "why are my kids not required to be buckled up?" Your children may also be asking you why they don't have to buckle up while riding in a school bus.

Your school division, school bus driver, the Student Transportation Association of Saskatchewan and SGI believe it is important for you to understand why.

You may have read or heard of stories about accidents involving school buses where some children were injured and transported to hospital. This is a reality. Fortunately and by design the vast majority of the children injured are taken to a hospital to receive medical attention for minor injuries and are released.

School bus transportation is the safest mode of transportation in North America. In the past 20 years no children have died as the result of injuries sustained in an accident while they were riding in a school bus in Saskatchewan.

The following information is provided to help you understand how your children are protected while riding in a school bus and why it is not equipped with seat belts.

In the 1970's, both the Canadian government and United States Department of Transport studied protection of school children riding in school buses. They came to the conclusion that the best method was "passive protection."

From these conclusions Transport Canada made mandatory regulations specific to school bus design under the Canadian Motor Vehicle Safety Standards Act. All new school buses must be built with high back seats, padded seat backs, padded seat rails and stanchions, and specific seat distances between seat centres. As well, the seats must be designed so that they would have a specific rate of collapse with a given force.

The school bus design feature referred to as **compartmentalization** is a major contribution to preventing serious injuries and fatalities. Similar to any other motor vehicle crash, occupants ejected from a vehicle are more likely to suffer more severe injuries. A school bus is designed right down to the size of the window openings to prevent a child from being ejected, even in an accident where the school bus may roll over.

Further, in 1984, Transport Canada conducted crash tests using school buses, which showed that school bus **passengers who wore lap seat belts in conventional forward facing seats received more severe injuries than unbelted passengers did.** The seats in school buses are designed and padded to absorb the impact of a person's chest hitting the back of the seat in front of them. In frontal and rear impact crashes where the majority of serious injuries occur, tests show the heads of students wearing a lap seat belt would be the sole point of impact. This can cause serious neck and head injuries to the child wearing a seat belt. Further testing indicated that marginal improvements in bus occupant safety could be obtained by using rear facing seats with seat belts. Rear facing seats protect the children in frontal collisions and the seat belts provide protection in rollovers.

In 1987, Transport Canada equipped three new school buses with high-backed rear-facing seats and seat belts to determine if students would adapt to this seating arrangement and would wear their seat belts at all times. These vehicles were loaned to British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia for the 1987-88 school year. SGI coordinated the use of one of the buses in Saskatchewan during the 1988-89 school year.

Over 40% of Saskatchewan students riding in the experimental bus reported problems, mostly involving motion sickness. Furthermore, only 60% reported using their seat belt at all times. After considering the mixed passenger reactions to rear facing seats and seat belts, and the marginal improvement in overall safety, SGI concluded that these safety features should not be required by law.

These statistics are just part of the reason school buses are not equipped with seat belts. Physical problems such as belt spacing and number of belts per bench seat are difficult to address because differences in student size dictates the number of children that can be seated in a bench seat.

Many school bus safety features and enhanced manufacturing standards have been added to school buses over the past years. Roof escape hatches in the event of a roll over, strobe lamps to make the school bus more conspicuous to other motorists, swing arm gates that direct children away from the bus so that they can be viewed by the driver are just a few.

Parents and other road users are advised that accident statistics clearly show that the most dangerous part of the trip to and from school is when the child is outside the bus, i.e. loading and unloading. A parent should caution their children to follow school bus driver instructions for loading and unloading, watch for other traffic and stay clear of the bus after unloading. School bus drivers have limited visibility of students in close proximity to the bus.

In Saskatchewan school bus stop arms are used when picking up children in rural areas. *It is illegal to pass a school bus that is stopped with its red safety lamps and stop arm activated.

School bus drivers and school buses are subject to the most rigorous driver and vehicle safety standards in Canada, if not North America. SGI works closely and continuously with Saskatchewan School Boards, Student Transportation Association of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Safety Council, Canadian Standards Association, provincial police forces, provincial government departments and Transport Canada to identify opportunities for improving the safety of our children when travelling on school buses.

We hope this information has helped to explain why seat belts are not required in school buses.

As drivers please exercise caution whenever operating around a school bus.

Vehicle Standards and Inspection

SGI

* - No driver of a vehicle proceeding in the same direction on a highway as a school bus that has its safety lights in operation shall pass the school bus.

- No driver of a vehicle proceeding in the same direction on a highway as a school bus that is stopped and that has its safety lights and stop arm in operation shall:

(a) fail to stop at least five metres from the rear of the school bus; or (b) proceed until the operation of the safety lights and stop arm has been discontinued.

- If a school bus is stopped and has its safety lights and stop arm in operation, no driver of a vehicle that is approaching the school bus from the opposite direction on a highway, other than a divided highway, shall:

(a) fail to stop at least five metres from the front of the school bus; or (b) proceed until the operation of the safety lights and stop arm has been discontinued.

- Any person who contravenes these rules is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine of not more than \$1,000.