



School Bus Loading and Unloading

The most dangerous part of the school bus ride is getting on and off the school bus. Published figures from the Kansas Department of Transportation and other sources indicate that pupil fatalities and injuries in the loading and unloading zone continue to occur. In 2005-06, there were 13 fatality accidents involving K-12 school children in or around the loading or unloading areas of a school bus or transit bus. Of the 13 fatalities, 7 occurred behind the bus and 6 were killed by a passing motorist. Pedestrian fatalities (while loading and unloading school buses) account for approximately three times as many school bus-related fatalities, when compared to school bus occupant fatalities. The loading and unloading area is called the “Danger Zone”.

The “Danger Zone” is the area on all sides of the bus where children are in the most danger of not being seen by the driver (ten feet in front of the bus where the driver may be too high to see a child, ten feet on either side of the bus where a child may be in the driver’s blind spot, and the area behind the school bus).

Mandated and voluntary product and design changes in school buses and related safety equipment may have improved loading and unloading zone safety over the past few years. For example, federal mandates require all new buses to be equipped with an 8-lamp warning system and stop signal arm. In 1994, new school buses were also required to meet new standards for mirrors that will increase visibility around the school bus. However, the number of loading zone incidents and resulting injuries and fatalities has not been significantly reduced. For this reason, the School Transportation Section of the National Safety Council feels driver and pupil training in proper loading and unloading procedures must be improved.

In order to stress the importance of proper driving training, especially in the area of loading and unloading procedures, it is recommended that each state adopt appropriate driver training instructions that include such procedures. The following ideas are recommendations to state transportation authorities for consideration when writing such procedures. It is recognized that each state has situations unique only to their locale and conditions. It is expected that special rules might be needed to address these situations.

The recommended procedures are:

1. Activate warning flasher system at least 100 feet prior to making a stop.
2. Approach the loading zone slowly and carefully. Direct students to wait in an orderly fashion safely back from the roadway.
3. Stop the vehicle 10 feet, or 15 feet if space is available, from students before loading (direct students to walk to the bus when the door is opened and the driver signals them to load).

4. Place the vehicle's transmission in neutral and set the parking brake before opening the door to load or unload.
5. Ensure that traffic is stopped in both directions before allowing the pupils to approach or exit the bus.
6. Unload the pupils that cross the street prior to those who do not cross.
7. Count students to know how many are loading on or unloading from the bus, where they are, and where they are going. If count is lost, do not move the bus. If necessary, shut off the bus, secure it, and check underneath before moving the bus.
8. Ensure that students cross far enough in front of the bus so that the driver can see them even if they drop something. Require students to maintain eye contact with the driver.
9. Instruct students to look to the driver for a signal and check for traffic before continuing across the roadway. All drivers in the fleet should utilize the same signal – confusion could lead to tragedy.
10. Establish a pre-arranged danger signal, such as the horn, in case a vehicle does not stop for the bus while children are loading or unloading. Make sure students know exactly what to do if they hear the danger signal; for instance, "Go back to the side of the road you started from". All drivers should utilize the same danger signal and instructions.
11. Load and unload at designated pick-up and drop-off points.
12. Back only at approved turn-around if backing is necessary near a bus stop. Prior to backing, ensure students are inside the bus. For instance, load children before backing up in the morning and unload children after backing up in the afternoon.
13. Do not unload children at corners immediately before making a right turn. Discharge children after making the turn.
14. Pick up and drop off pupils on their own side of the street if possible.
15. Instruct pupils never to cross behind the school bus.
16. Double-check all crossover and side mirrors for students and traffic before leaving the bus stop.
17. Do not put the bus in motion until all students outside are at a safe distance from the bus and all students inside are properly seated.

18. Before moving the bus after loading or unloading students, look and listen for any last second warnings from others nearby that a child might be near the bus. A parent, teacher, motorist, another bus driver, or students on the bus might see a child near or even under the bus. Turn off noisy equipment and silence passengers so warnings can be heard.
19. Instruct students in the proper procedure for loading and unloading within the first week of school and throughout the school year.
20. Be cautious when students are carrying loose papers or books which they might drop near the bus – encourage students to use a book bag.
21. Be aware of the dangers of clothing, book bag, backpack, and jacket strings/straps that could become entangled in the doorway of the school bus.
22. Upon completion of the route, walk through the bus to check for sleeping students, vandalism, and forgotten articles.
23. Report the license number of vehicles passing a stopped school bus with an operating stop signal arm and/or warning light system.
24. Examine stops regularly and report unsafe conditions to the supervisor.

The School Transportation Section also recommends that each state adopt stringent statutes to allow the bus driver to report to the proper law enforcement agencies the license numbers of vehicles passing a stopped school bus with an operating stop signal arm and/or warning light system.

The School Transportation Section also recommends the following administrative actions:

1. Pupil transportation directors and supervisors plan bus routes to eliminate the necessity of pupils walking across public highways whenever possible and practical.
2. Transportation policies be established at the local level which would minimize highway crossings to and from school buses by any pupil under 10 years of age unless accompanied by an adult crossing guard or by a parent or unless some other adequate provision for safety is made.
3. Local school administrators, in cooperation with safety supervisors and transportation supervisors, plan and implement bus passenger safety instruction in the school curriculum for all grade levels, especially for kindergarten through grade six. National School Bus Safety Week can be used for promotion of these activities and instruction.

4. School teachers, principals, and administrators, in their contacts with parents, emphasize the kind of safety instruction pupil passengers need and enlist parental support to achieve this end.
5. School administrators utilize the news media, civic organizations, PTA's, and community speaking engagements to emphasize the legal and moral responsibility of the motoring public for pupil safety. This emphasis should include proper driving rules, laws, and practices in the vicinity of pupils and school buses.

Reviewed in April 2008 by the School Transportation Section of the Transportation Safety Division.

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