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School Bus Safety: Keeping America's Children Safe

By Shiza Saad, NDAAL Summer 2025 Intern

The new academic year is just around the corner, and it is imperative that all drivers on the road be reminded of the importance of putting safety first for the millions of children going to school every day. School buses are the most common mode of transportation for these children and play an impactful role in their lives. Fortunately, statistics show that school buses are actually one of the safest vehicles on the road. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), less than 1% of all traffic fatalities involve children on school transportation vehicles. In addition to their many safety features, school buses have been designed so that their passengers experience less impact in case a crash does happen.¹ The highest risk level these children encounter is when they are about to enter or leave a school bus, because other

¹ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "School Bus Safety." NHTSA. Accessed July 1, 2025. www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety.

drivers on the road may not stop so that they may safely cross the road. Luckily, it is illegal in every state to pass a school bus when its stop-arm is extended, and its red lights are flashing. The safety of schoolchildren depends not only on the bus driver, but also the drivers of the other surrounding vehicles. Thus, it is essential to distribute information relating to school bus safety and general road safety as the school year approaches.

Safety Recommendations for School Buses

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) conducted investigations into school bus safety by focusing on individual crashes in which children died or were injured. One of the biggest issues when discussing school bus safety is the inclusion of seat belts in designing school buses. It is important to note that school buses without seat belts are still considered very safe, due to a technology known as compartmentalization. School bus seats are built with a steel inner structure that absorbs energy efficiently, alongside their high, padded backs and secure attachment to the bus floor. This passive occupant protection system protects children in the event of a crash by minimizing impact. However, the NTSB suggests that new school buses include lap or shoulder belts, because in some of the crashes they investigated, the additional protection of seatbelts could have reduced injuries or saved lives. As such, the NTSB has made official recommendations regarding seat belts on school buses to the states of California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, along with many relevant traffic safety organizations.²

It is illegal in every state to pass a school bus when its stop-arm is extended, and its red lights are flashing.

Some states have already made progress putting seatbelts on school buses. In May 2025, Illinois passed a bill requiring all school buses made after 2031 to have seat belts that go over the lap and shoulder of passengers. The bill does not ensure that any authority will make sure that the seat belts are being worn; buses are just required to have them. There will be an estimated increase of \$7,000 to \$18,000 to the price of school buses.³ In Massachusetts, a bill that would require all school buses to have seat belts, along with mandatory use while the bus is in motion, is currently under consideration.⁴ There are nine states, including Iowa, that have laws mandating seat belts on school buses. However, many of these laws depend on school districts' budgets, such as in Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. The states of California, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, and New York all have laws that require new school buses made or bought after a certain date to be equipped with seat belts.⁵

Furthermore, the NTSB made official recommendations to upgrade the laws regarding drivers passing stopped school buses. Though the act is illegal in all states, the board has advised that legislation be enacted to enable stop-arm cameras to capture images and allow citations to be issued for illegal school bus passings using the information obtained by the cameras.⁶ In May 2025, Colorado passed a bill allowing school districts to install artificial intelligence-powered cameras on school buses. For school districts that opt in, these cameras will identify drivers and their vehicles' license plates when they pass a school bus illegally. Violators can be fined up to \$300, with the fines automatically going back to the school districts.⁷

² National Transportation Safety Board. "School Bus Safety." NTSB, 2024. Accessed July 1, 2025. www.nts.gov/Advocacy/SafetyIssues/Pages/School-Bus-Safety.aspx.

³ Hancock, Peter. "Lawmakers Pass Bills on AI Community College Instruction, Food Handling, School Bus Seat Belts." *Capitol News Illinois*, May 21, 2025. capitolnewsillinois.com/news/lawmakers-pass-bills-on-ai-community-college-instruction-food-handling-school-bus-seat-belts/.

⁴ DaSilva, Melanie. "Bill in Massachusetts Would Require Seat Belts on School ..." WPRI, December 5, 2023. www.wpri.com/new-england/massachusetts/bill-in-massachusetts-would-require-seat-belts-on-school-buses.

⁵ Heath, Keri. "Are Seat Belts Required on School Buses? Here Are the Nine States with Laws in the Books." *Austin American-Statesman*, November 14, 2024. www.statesman.com/story/news/education/2024/11/14/texas-law-seat-belts-school-buses-us-safety-requirements/75866984007/.

⁶ National Transportation Safety Board. "School Bus Safety."

⁷ Chambers, Tanner. "Colorado Cracks down with AI as School Bus Cameras Aim to Keep Kids Safe." K99, May 27, 2025. k99.com/colorado-artificial-intelligence-school-bus/.

The NTSB also made several suggestions to utilize new, advanced vehicle technology to increase safety, including collision avoidance systems, automatic emergency braking technologies, automatic crash notification systems, and high-quality onboard video systems that provide visibility of the driver, each occupant seating location, and low-light recording capability. Lastly, the board also advocated for increased fire safety on school buses, mainly recommending that all buses be equipped with fire suppression systems that at a minimum address engine fires.⁸

The Dangers of Impaired Driving by School Bus Drivers

School bus drivers are some of the most trusted individuals in any community. Every day, parents of about 25 million students across the nation trust the drivers of nearly 500,000 buses⁹ to safely take their children to and from school and school-related activities. When that trust is violated, the consequences can be dire. An investigation conducted by *Stateline* found that since 2015, more than 1,620 schoolchildren across 38 states have been put in harm's way due to bus drivers arrested or cited for allegedly driving under the influence.¹⁰

Despite the incredible danger presented by such situations, they are mostly untracked by government officials. *Stateline* reviewed police records, court filings, and news media reports to find that in the last five years, there have been at least 118 school bus drivers caught by police for driving while impaired. Of these cases, more than a third involved a bus crash which injured a total of almost three dozen students. Most of the cases occurred due to abuse of alcohol, but a third of the drivers had taken drugs. Officials have stated this is connected to the unfortunate growth of overuse of opioids and other prescription medication in the nation.¹¹

Alongside these cases, other school bus drivers have been found to be impaired because of random drug and alcohol screenings. Since 2015, around 260 drivers across five states have either failed or refused to take the tests. It is apparent that no officials at the state or federal level track cases of impaired school bus drivers. The lack of data collection is concerning; *Stateline* contacted 268 agencies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, such as education departments, state police, transportation departments, and court systems, to discover that only about 11% had any data regarding the issue. Clearly, a change needs to be made, as this data would be of great interest for all parents and the general public.¹²

There are laws pertaining to drivers operating a school bus. States require school bus drivers to have a commercial driver's license (CDL) with special endorsements to transport students. Generally, in order to obtain a CDL, applicants must meet medical requirements, complete Entry-Level Driver Training, and pass skills and knowledge tests.¹³ While federal laws set minimum standards to obtain and maintain a CDL, the set of laws that govern the operation of school buses vary depending on the purpose and the entity performing transport.¹⁴ Most states enact stricter laws governing the operation of school buses than those for other commercial motor vehicle (CMV) operation. CMV drivers may not consume alcohol within four hours of going on duty nor have a detectable amount of alcohol when operating a CMV. While the blood alcohol threshold for driving under

Most states enact stricter laws governing the operation of school buses than those for other commercial motor vehicle (CMV) operation.

⁸ National Transportation Safety Board. "School Bus Safety."

⁹ Bergal, Jenni. "Drunken School Bus Drivers Put Kids' Lives at Risk." *Stateline*, January 22, 2020. Accessed July 1, 2025. stateline.org/2020/01/22/drunken-school-bus-drivers-put-kids-lives-at-risk/.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Barr, Mariah. "Dot Compliance Review: FMCSA Requirements for School Buses & Bus Drivers." Foley, July 17, 2024. www.foleyservices.com/articles/dot-compliance-review-fmcsa-requirements-for-school-bus-drivers.

¹⁴ Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. "Information for School Bus Operators." www.fmcsa.dot.gov/sites/fmcsa.dot.gov/files/2020-09/School%20Bus%20Brochure_508.pdf.

the influence for other CMV drivers is .04, some states have enacted a lower threshold for school bus drivers. The presence of minors on board can also increase the criminal charges for driving under the influence, with penalties ranging from fines to prison time.¹⁵

To adequately enforce these laws, it is necessary that agencies take the initiative to collect data regarding impaired school bus drivers. States should also ensure that drivers are being routinely screened for use of alcohol and drugs. Without proper regulation, millions of children could be put in danger.

School Bus Crashes

According to the National Safety Council, 128 people were killed in 2023 due to school bus-related crashes, which is 23% higher than the 104 deaths in 2022. From 2014 to 2023, 71% of deaths in such crashes were people in vehicles other than the school bus, 16% were pedestrians, 6% were school bus passengers, 4% were school bus drivers, and 3% were pedal cyclists. Of those injured, 34% were school bus passengers, 9% were school bus drivers, and 52% were occupants of other vehicles.¹⁶

In Dayton, Tennessee on a November morning in 2018, school bus driver Michael Ledbetter was told by his supervisor to pull over after students onboard phoned their parents as Ledbetter was swerving across lanes and driving through red lights. Police gave him field sobriety tests which he failed, and it was later found through a blood test that he had a .127 blood alcohol level. That is more than three times the legal limit of .04 for commercial drivers. Ledbetter pleaded guilty to driving under the influence while accompanied by minors and reckless endangerment. He was sentenced to 30 days in jail and 18 months of probation.¹⁷

Ledbetter is not alone in his poor decisions. A New Mexico driver consumed several tall cans of Coors Light the morning before crashing his bus, which had 25 children on board, into a tree after almost careening off a bridge. A driver in Wisconsin had taken large amounts of anti-anxiety and pain pills when he veered off the road and crashed into a cornfield with four students on board.¹⁸

There are many other causes for school bus crashes besides impaired driving, with distracted driving being one of the most common. A school bus crashed into a house in North Philadelphia, injuring four elementary school students. Witnesses repeatedly claimed that the driver was using his cell phone prior to the crash.¹⁹ School bus drivers can also be distracted by children on the bus, especially by younger children. Besides these cases, there are also other crashes caused by rarer issues, such as a 2015 crash in Santa Ana, California which happened due to the driver passing out behind the wheel. Gerald Ruppel had a medical condition from district officials that caused him to experience dizziness, seizures, and blackouts. All children on the bus were injured, with four sustaining major injuries. Ruppel was charged with one felony count each of child abuse and endangerment.²⁰

While the blood alcohol threshold for DUI for other CMV drivers is .04, some states have enacted a lower threshold for school bus drivers.

¹⁵ Barr, Mariah. "Dot Compliance Review: FMCSA Requirements for School Buses & Bus Drivers." Foley, July 17, 2024. www.foleyservices.com/articles/dot-compliance-review-fmcsa-requirements-for-school-bus-drivers.

¹⁶ National Safety Council. "School Bus Crashes—Injury Facts." NSC, 2023. Accessed July 1, 2025. injuryfacts.nsc.org/motor-vehicle/road-users/school-bus/.

¹⁷ Bergal, "Drunken Drivers Put Kids' Lives at Risk."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kofsky, Joel. "Distracted Driving Possible Cause of School Bus Crash." Philly Injury Lawyer, August 10, 2020. Accessed July 1, 2025. www.phillyinjurylawyer.com/distracted-driving-possible-cause-school-bus-crash/.

²⁰ ABC7.com Staff. "School Bus Driver Charged in Anaheim Hills Crash." ABC7 Los Angeles, January 10, 2015. Accessed July 1, 2025. abc7.com/oc-bus-crash-anaheim-hills-passed-out-driver/469347/.

Looking Forward

For the new school year, it is important for school districts to emphasize the crucial role that school bus drivers play in the community and to remind them of the great responsibility they bear. Relevant organizations should take steps to advocate for improvements to school bus safety features, and government agencies should be avid in their collection of data related to school bus crashes, especially in the cases of impaired driving. School buses transport millions of students every single day—their significance should not be underestimated.

About the Author

Shiza Saad is from Hershey, PA, and is a rising sophomore at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. She is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service in International Politics, as well as a minor in Chinese. At Georgetown, Shiza is involved in the university's chapter of the ACLU as a Community Engagement Deputy Director, where she creates partnerships between the chapter and other student-led or local organizations for advocacy opportunities. She is also a blog writer for the Georgetown University Undergraduate Law Review, recently publishing her piece, "A History of the Fourteenth Amendment at the Supreme Court and the Future of Birthright Citizenship in the United States." Shiza is heavily involved with the Georgetown University Student Advocacy Office (SAO), where she helps Georgetown students facing allegations of misconduct or Honor Council violations navigate the disciplinary process. She is interested in using research-based advocacy to create a more equitable and just world for all communities and exploring the intersection between law, economics, and language. Outside of school, Shiza enjoys finding new spots in D.C., baking, and watching movies.

