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## CLIFFORD'S NOTES

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he National Transportation Safety Board in October called for new seat belt requirements in limousines following a crash in upstate New York that killed 20 people. A Ford

Excursion SUV that had been modified into a stretch limo blew through a T-intersection in a rural area and smashed into a wooded area.

In the wake of this tragedy, the NTSB recommended to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that lap and shoulder seat belts be required on all new vehicles modified to be limos.

The board wrote that the deaths in this limo crash "might have been mitigated by a combination of adequate seat integrity, well-designed passenger lap/shoulder belts and proper seat belt use."

Certainly, nearly everyone is in favor of regulations that make vehicles safer and minimize injury and death when crashes occur. That's why it is difficult to figure out why the NTSB and NHTSA have not promulgated stricter rules regarding seat belts on school buses throughout the country.

Every year some 480,000 school buses transport more than 25 million children to and from school, according to the American School Bus Council.

Only eight states – Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York and Texas – have laws requiring seat belts on school buses. In Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas, the requirements are contingent on funds being appropriated by state or local jurisdictions. The California law applies only to buses built after July 1, 2005.

Similar legislation has been introduced in at least 19 other states, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, but none of the bills require new school buses to be equipped with seat belts. School buses range in cost from \$80,000 to \$120,000 and adding seat belts would cost an estimated \$7,000 to \$10,000 more, a mere pittance if it saved even one child's life.

Section 402 of the State Highway Safety Program (23 U.S. Code Section 402) may be a source of funds that Congress could set aside to make this happen.

Those advocating against such a measure question whether children can unbuckle and evacuate a bus in certain emergencies, but in the cases that my office has handled, seat belts certainly would have saved lives. Studies have found a dramatic reduction in misbehavior on school buses with seat belt usage, thereby allowing for less driver distraction.

Also, what about the notion of safety drills or perhaps a volunteer school bus monitor or aide being present to ensure that all children are trained



## LET'S BUCKLE UP

Time to require seat belts in every school bus

By **BOB CLIFFORD**

on the use of seat belts and are buckled in before the bus takes off, similar to instructions on airplanes? The repetition for children every time they get on a school bus certainly would make them adept at some point in the use of seat belts and reinforce the use in all vehicles.

The NHTSA already requires lap or lap/shoulder belts on all small buses (with a gross weight of 10,000 pounds or less) that generally transport disabled children or preschoolers. In 2015, the head of the NHTSA, Mark Rosekind, said the agency's effort that "every child on every school bus should have a three-point seat belt."

Groups such as the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Preventative Medicine and the National PTA have recommended seat belts on every new bus as did the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit research group funded by auto insurance companies. Nothing has changed.

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., introduced federal legislation requiring seat belts on all newly manufactured school buses. The School Bus Safety Act of 2019 (SB 2278), introduced in the House by Rep. Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.), would require more safety measures such as stability control and automatic braking systems for buses.

The proposed legislation would implement safety recommendations from the NTSB. The act

would order the U.S. Department of Transportation to issue rules requiring all school buses to include a three-point safety belt, which includes a seat belt across the lap as well as a shoulder harness. Duckworth said that the legislation would help financially strapped school districts modify their school bus fleets "in a timely manner."

Illinois does not require school buses to have seat belts, although the Chicago Public Schools system requires them. Some school districts in Indiana, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wyoming have added seat belts to new buses.

In early 2017, former state Rep. Lou Lang, D-Skokie, proposed a bill (HB 3377) that would require seat belts on school buses, but it died in committee. From 2007 to 2016, the latest available figures show that 1,282 people died in school transportation-related crashes, according to the NHTSA. Of that total, 118 were on buses.

On Sept. 27, a bus in Moultrie County was struck by a Ford Escape SUV, killing a 5-year-old student on board. That's one death too many. Legislators need to get educated on the need for seat belts in school buses before we read headlines about the next tragedy. CL

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