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Statement issued by the Presidents of NASDPTS, NAPT, NSTA Passenger Crash Protection in Large School Buses May 16, 2005

Generations of families have relied on the familiar yellow school bus to transport their children safely to and from school every day. The pupil transportation industry has taken the responsibility of providing safe, secure and efficient transportation to the nation's children very seriously. Since 1939, the industry has worked to establish a strong set of school bus specifications and operating procedures, with a strong focus on safety. Additionally, the industry has made a priority of ensuring that all school buses meet or exceed the stringent Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards that have been established for school buses over the past three decades.

More than 500,000 school buses are on the highway every day providing transportation to 25 million students. During the course of a school year, school buses travel more than 4 billion miles and provide 10 billion student trips. And most importantly, school buses have earned the enviable status of being the safest form of motor vehicle travel in the United States. While every fatality and injury is tragic, it is important to note that on average there are about six fatalities to school bus passengers, many of which are the result of catastrophic crashes.¹

For the past quarter of a century, there has been significant public debate over how to best provide crash protection to school bus passengers. In 1977, a new Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard took effect that required all new school buses to be equipped with seating systems that included strong, high-backed, well-padded, strongly anchored, evenly spaced seats – a passive protection system called “compartmentalization.” While the federal government considered a requirement for lap belts (an active protective system) in the 1977 standard, it decided against them. A passive crash protection system - one that did not depend on children's compliance to be effective - was determined most beneficial.

Evaluations of the real-world effectiveness of compartmentalization by every acknowledged motor vehicle safety organization has shown that compartmentalization has significantly reduced the number of fatalities and injuries to school bus passengers, and continues to provide excellent protection in most crashes. As new technologies develop, it is essential that the effectiveness of compartmentalization not be lessened or compromised since it has proven effective in protecting our children.

Many members of the pupil transportation industry are stakeholders as well – with children who depend on the very services provided. That role of stakeholder, and the very real awareness that this

¹NHTSA report to congress, May 2002, based upon data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System covering full-size buses between 1990-2000

industry is charged with safeguarding our future, drives those in the industry always to look for ways to provide the safest form of transportation for the nation's children.

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS), the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT) and the National School Transportation Association (NSTA) take pride in providing the safest form of transportation for the nation's children, including their own. Whenever there are devices or procedures which have the potential to make pupil transportation even safer, the pupil transportation industry is at the forefront of the debate. And if a safety device or procedure proves to be beneficial, the industry stands ready to provide its support to legislators and regulators.

In that light, the three national associations have been carefully monitoring the studies involving school bus passenger crash protection. There is an overwhelming amount of information with respect to passenger crash protection. Our concern is that individuals and groups studying these issues may not know what to focus on, or even be aware of which issues are critical. There are several consistent central issues which are articulated herein to make certain that they are considered carefully by all parties affected.

1. "Compartmentalization" is an excellent form of crash protection, particularly in frontal and rear crashes, and for that reason the compartmentalization features of school buses must be maintained.
2. While "compartmentalization" does not provide complete protection in some crash conditions, school buses are safer than any other form of transportation that children can use to get to and from school and school-related activities.
3. Lap belts are not a viable form of crash protection for children in large school buses, except when used in conjunction with approved child safety seats or safety harnesses/vests.
4. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and other safety organizations have studied new technologies with regard to their ability to enhance passenger crash protection on school buses. The use of lap/shoulder belts is the most often discussed and reviewed of those technologies.

In a May 2002 report to Congress, NHTSA indicated that the use of combination lap/shoulder belts could provide some benefit on both large and small school buses in a crash. In a quote from that report NHTSA stated that "the potential exists for reducing the average passenger fatalities in frontal crashes of school buses from two to one, assuming 100 percent use of lap/shoulder belt systems."²

However, that same report also stated that serious neck injury and perhaps abdominal injury could result when lap/shoulder belts are misused, since they then function like a lap belt.

5. The use of lap/shoulder belts in large school buses also leads to some potential issues that must be addressed before a state or school district decides to install lap/shoulder belts in new large school buses. Although each state or local school district will have their own unique consequences to consider, there are some notable issues that will be prevalent for many of

² For a complete review of all the facts of the study the reader should review the entire report: "School Bus Safety: Crashworthiness Research" April 2002, Research and Development, National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration.

them. The following list is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to list all the issues, but rather to identify some of the more prevalent ones.

- a. The installation of lap/shoulder belts in new large school buses results in a loss of the designed seating capacity of the bus. In some instances, that also reduces the in-use capacity of the school bus. Displacing children from school buses because of a lack of seating capacity has a negative impact on pupil transportation safety, since those students would be forced into significantly less-safe forms of transportation. Consequently, funding will be required to maintain the current school bus in-use seating capacity;
- b. Additional funding will be required to cover the incremental costs of purchasing new school buses equipped with lap/shoulder belts;
- c. Students must be trained, at least once per school year, on the proper use and benefits of lap/shoulder belts in school buses and all other motor vehicles;
- d. Any benefits of the installation of lap/shoulder belts will occur only if all school bus passengers are required to use lap/shoulder belts in school buses, unless a waiver is provided by a physician; and
- e. Drivers, attendants, school districts and school bus carriers must not be held responsible for any injury caused by the improper use or nonuse of lap/shoulder belts in school buses.

In its report to Congress in 2002, NHTSA cautioned that “[I]n a very good restraint system like compartmentalization in school buses, extreme caution must be taken when considering any changes to the safety equipment that have provided high protection and safety benefits to children for over 24 years. Any change in vehicle safety systems must be weighed against the benefits that could accrue and the negative benefits [effects] that could result from those changes.”

The National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences also released a report in 2002 on school travel and safety in which it reported that there are more than 800 children killed each year during normal school transportation hours while walking, riding a bike or riding in a passenger car with either an adult or teenage driver. In looking at potential negative effects from new technology, as mentioned by NHTSA, the school transportation industry is very concerned about the reduced seating capacity of school buses leading to the potential of moving students out of school buses and into one of the more risk-prone modes of travel as identified by the NRC.

The three national associations, along with all the members of the school transportation industry, support NHTSA’s research and will continue to work with all available and viable resources to provide the safest form of transportation for all of our Nation’s children as they participate in educational programs.

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