



Bus Passenger Safety Submission

**Requested By: House of Commons Standing Committee
On Transport, Infrastructure and Communities**

**Submitted By: Mr. Terry Hall, Chief Financial Officer/Assist. Director of Education (Corporate Services)
Newfoundland and Labrador English School District**

Scheduled Date: April 30, 2019

Dear Committee Members,

This letter is in response to the invitation from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities for the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (the “District”) to provide a written submission of what the District believes to be the key points/concerns in relation to school bus passenger safety.

First, on behalf of the District, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this conversation involving bus passenger safety, as stakeholder consultation is an essential component to any review process and student safety is certainly our number one priority.

The District is unique from a student transportation perspective in that it services over 65,000 students, 252 schools, over 1,000 daily bus runs, over 1,000 school buses, over 12,000 daily bus stops and over 7,000,000 annual loaded student transportation kilometres driven spanning the entire Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The District’s student transportation service thus ranges from the generally shorter bus routes servicing the smaller urban school catchments on roads with predominantly lower speed limits, to the typically larger rural school catchments that require long bus routes oftentimes on highways with higher speed limits. The District operates 10 depots to maintain its District-owned fleet of 340 school buses. Another factor that makes the District unique is that it uses a combination of both District-owned and contracted bus services, whereas the majority of school districts across Canada predominantly provide service with either one or the other.

The District has been fortunate in that, to its knowledge, there has not been a school bus collision in the province that has resulted in the serious injury or death of a student or school bus driver. It did, however, have a school bus involved in a head on collision in October of 2018. A school bus transporting students along a highway with a speed limit of 100 km/hr was in a high-speed head-on collision with an SUV that resulted in the death of the driver of the SUV. The driver and students on board the school bus were unharmed. While it was concluded that the driver of the SUV was at fault, this is an illustration of the level of protection a school bus offers in relation to a head-on collision. The following link references the October 2018 accident:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/veterans-makinsons-crash-1.4859063>

According to the Canadian Safety Council (website), a student is 16 times safer travelling in a school bus than in a family car per passenger/kilometre of travel, and the District believes that bus passenger transportation via school buses in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador is very safe under the current legislation, regulations and governing policies and procedures. The District is aware that a predecessor Board in the 2004-05 timeframe had a bus involved in a low speed side impact by a dump truck. This resulted in the bus rolling over but, to our knowledge, there was no serious injuries incurred by the students on board. More recently, in December of 2014, a contracted bus with three students remaining on board caught the soft shoulder of the road on a turn and rolled over ending up on its roof.

The driver and three students escaped with only minor scratches and bruising. While not a result of a collision, the bus did sustain significant damage because of the rollover but the passengers were not seriously hurt.

Admittedly, there has never been a side impact collision at high speed involving a school bus with District students on board. Therefore, the District can only rely on Transport Canada's assertion that school buses are the safest form of transportation in Canada (Government of Canada website).

There are a multitude of key issues/points relating to bus passenger safety in general, however, the key issues/points that the District feels are most relevant to this Committee and the survivability of crashes are as follows:

1. Maintaining Preventative Maintenance Standards

Preventative maintenance is an integral component to ensuring the safe operation of a school bus. The Province of Newfoundland and Labrador's *Highway Traffic Act* outlines the minimum standards such as inspection requirements, daily trip inspection requirements and various documentation retention requirements. This is an essential component to ensuring that a school bus is in a safe condition to operate on the road and to be able to respond appropriately if a driver finds himself or herself in a situation needing to make emergency manoeuvres or is involved in a collision/accident. It is imperative that operators provide service with integrity and, at a minimum, maintain these legislated standards for the sake of student safety. Some suggestions to enhance operator compliance with preventative maintenance standards are:

- Increased monitoring and enforcement of the standards; and
- stricter penalties for non-compliance with standards as a deterrent

2. Driver Training

It is imperative for a driver of a school bus to have been properly screened to be deemed suitable to be a bus driver, particularly a school bus driver, as well as properly trained - including initial and continuous training programs. Of course, it is incumbent on the owner/operator to ensure this is done, however there is no minimum standardization from a provincial or federal level.

From a Newfoundland and Labrador perspective, the requirement to obtain a license (Commercial Class 2) to legally drive a bus with over 24 passenger seating is the following:

1. Hold a Class 5 license for one (1) year (basic license)
2. Submission of a medical form
3. Pass a written commercial and sign test
4. Pass a road test

There are currently no minimum training qualifications required in order to obtain this license, nor are there any continuous training requirements in order to maintain this license. Establishing

federal/provincial standards would improve bus passenger safety. It is the District’s understanding that this is currently under review at the provincial level.

Despite the fact that there are no federal/provincial training standards, the District has taken it upon itself to implement a mandatory online driver training portal for both District-owned and contracted drivers from all over the province. Drivers are also required to complete new modules as they are added to the training portal.

3. Bus Standards

Corrosion

Newfoundland and Labrador has a climate that has significant and sudden temperature changes during the winter months, which result in a considerable amount of ice buildup requiring a significant amount of road salt on our roads. This leads to more rapid corrosion of vehicles compared to other less volatile climates. The use of road salt is very common across Canada, and this issue therefore is not unique to Newfoundland and Labrador.

This leads to significant bus maintenance and enhanced monitoring practices. However, a significant safety concern that has been identified and is warranted to be included in this submission is the risk of corrosion of crashworthiness components that are not noticeable by visual inspection. Deficiencies of this nature cannot be identified as the structural support is between the interior and exterior walls of the bus and thus not able to be inspected (example: crossbows rusted away, essentially eliminating the crush protection standards for the school bus).

School Bus Standards vs. Motor Coach Bus Standards

The District does not own nor operate motor coaches. However, as part of its research while developing a *Field Trip Protocol*, the District identified the following differences in bus standards between the D-250 Standard school buses (majority of Canada uses) and motor coach buses:

Safety Standard	D-250 School Bus	Coach Bus Standards
Crashworthiness Standards	Crush Protection Frontal Impact Protection Side Impact Protection Rollover Protection Compartmentalization	None identified through District research
Highway Enforcement Inspection Frequency	130% of entire provincial fleet annually (provincial standard)	A sample of each carrier’s fleet annually (provincial standard)
Bus Age Limit	Shall not exceed 12 model years in age (provincial policy)	No age limit that District found

Window Retention Stds	High Shatterproof	None identified through District research
Seating	High back, padded seats, close seating, additional absorption of impact through collapsing seats (compartmentalized) Seatbelts not currently required as per Transport Canada	Effective Sept. 2020, mandatory for seatbelts in all (federal standard)

As a result of identifying these differences, and relying on Transport Canada’s stance that a school bus is the safest mode of transportation in Canada, the District restricts the use of motor coach buses for District field trips/extracurricular travel unless it meets specific criteria. Consideration may be warranted to review/enhance motor coach standards. District protocol for the use of motor coaches can be found at the following link:

<https://www.nlesd.ca/schools/busing/doc/November2018FieldTripProtocol.pdf>

4. **Seatbelts on School Buses**

As the use of seatbelts in family cars/vehicles is mandatory, it is thus rational to feel that making seatbelts mandatory on school buses may improve safety. However, the District does not have a position on this, and relies on Transport Canada’s and this Committee’s determination in this regard.

Here is a general list of some implications if seatbelts on school buses became mandatory:

- Type of Belt
 - Research tells us that a lap belt is not safe, so a 3-point harness would be needed
- Enforcement of Correct Use of Seatbelt
 - Not safe, realistic or effective to place this responsibility on the school bus driver
 - Not safe or appropriate to place this responsibility on another student
 - Requirement of a bus attendant/monitor (to also assist with buckling/unbuckling of younger students as necessary)
- Bus Capacities
 - Current Newfoundland and Labrador capacities:
 - 70 students (K-6, K-12 configurations)
 - 63 students (7-12 configurations)
 - 3 seatbelts to a seat (70 total/bus) perhaps reduced to 2 seat belts to a seat (48/bus)
- Implementation
 - Retrofit versus Phasing in -> given the vast differences in models of school buses being utilized by operators in the province, operators would require model-specific guidelines from school bus manufacturers for the installation of seatbelts for each make and model of school bus. Arbitrarily installing seatbelts throughout the fleet may compromise crashworthiness protection.

It must be noted that resolving these issues would have financial implications for school districts, governments and bus operators. In some cases, the financial impacts could be material.

To conclude, we again thank the Committee for giving the District an opportunity to provide comment on this important issue. The safe transportation of our students, and students across the country, is extremely important. The District is open to any changes that will lead to a safer student transportation system, and looks forward to what conclusions are drawn, and what actions are taken to improve bus passenger safety.

We would be happy to participate further as required.

Regards,

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