



The police were on the scene before dawn on a cold January morning in New York, responding to a frantic call from a motorist who said two bodies were in the northbound lane of the four-lane highway. To get to their bus stop, two girls had had to cross a highway with no crosswalk or pedestrian signal and had been struck by a car.

In Michigan, a first-grader darted between two cars that were parked illegally to cross the street in front of the school. To his mother's horror, he was struck and killed by an SUV. The principal knew the illegal parking created an unsafe condition and had contacted the police to ticket drivers waiting for their children after school.

Injuries to students and tragedies such as these are becoming more common. According to the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey, school bus service accounts for approximately 25 percent of trips and 28 percent of student-miles traveled during normal school travel hours. Passenger vehicles represent 60 percent of trips and 66 percent of student miles traveled.

Numerous elements make up the total picture of student transportation. Any one factor, when modified, can change another in terms of student safety. How and where you assign bus stops are factors that, with careful scrutiny, can reduce accidents.

What causes these accidents?

According to the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute, bus stop safety is a growing concern in many school districts. This increasing concern may be attributed to several factors, including the following:

- School bus accident statistics indicate that children are most at risk not when riding on the bus, but at the bus stop.
- The bus stop is the most safety-critical link in the school transportation chain.
- Parents and school officials worry about the vulnerability of children to abductions, sexual predators, other types of criminal activities, peer bullying, and harassment at bus stops.
- Many communities are faced with more traffic congestion and increasing numbers of impatient, aggressive drivers.
- Budget constraints have led to increased time pressures and potentially increased safety problems on bus routes.

Too often, the assignment of bus stops is based on a student's residence and the closest distance to an existing stop that has not had a safety evaluation. Disregard for the fact that students must cross busy streets or that blind spots exist for other motorists is often overlooked in the pursuit of the "cheapest way out."

Determining the safest location for a bus stop is seldom



The Right Stop

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How to reduce student accidents and injuries

a black-and-white decision. No ready-made formula exists for quickly deciding exactly where to locate a bus stop or for determining when a stop change is warranted. However, by following a few procedures, districts can help to protect students from injury and the school system from the possibility of litigation.

The best way to ensure a high degree of bus stop safety is to treat each stop as unique. Directly observe the various options before deciding where to place a stop, and subject each stop assessment to a system of objective safety standards. No stop should be chosen if it does not meet those standards.

Criteria for selecting bus stops

The Pupil Transportation Safety Institute has four key elements for selecting and maintaining bus stops. They are:

■ **Written criteria:** This needs to be realistic and enforceable. All student transportation personnel should be involved in developing the criteria, which should answer the question of how a bus stop will be assigned and how it can be changed.

■ **Receiving and assessing stop change requests:** This should be handled in a consistent manner. When a bus stop is in dispute, the individual with the final authority to change the stop must observe the students at the stop, look at the condition of the location, and make a decision.

Hazards need to be assessed and options must be considered. Firsthand observation is the best way to achieve this goal.

■ **Evaluating the safety of all stops:** Yearly evaluations of bus routes and bus stops are a must, but the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute says few school districts or bus companies do them in a systematic fashion. Districts must develop an efficient, objective, and credible system for evaluating bus stops. For example, bus drivers should complete a route safety evaluation form after the initial practice run before the beginning of the school year.

■ **Staff roles:** Identify who is responsible for gathering and confirming initial student data, and assign a person to actually observe the physical environment at each newly proposed or changed stop. Also, you should assign a person to periodically observe and evaluate existing stops and monitor drivers to ensure routes and stops are not changed without authorization.

All of these are sound, logical steps that every district should take to avoid tragedies. They will help make your school bus stops safe places for students and can protect your district from costly litigation. ■

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