

There's More to the Issue Than Driver Age and Experience

Bus driver age and experience are the hottest topics when it comes to school bus safety issues these days, but there are other concerns the state should address as well, say a coalition of groups pressing for a series of changes in the North Carolina school bus system. M. Reid Overcash, a Raleigh advertising executive and president of the North Carolina School Bus Safety Committee, says his group was founded in 1981 when a group of concerned citizens became "outraged at the safety problems found in transporting school children from home to school and back."

The safety organization, which works with the North Carolina Parent Teacher Association, the Wake County Junior League, and the N.C. Pediatric Association, has lobbied the legislature for several years seeking improvements, but has come up short each time. Overcash describes the problems this way: "Through lack of funding and complacency by some, North Carolina's record of school bus safety has been below average. We have unqualified, under-trained, and underpaid drivers. We still have a large number of pre-1977 buses that do not meet federal safety standards. We have continued to have standees on overcrowded school buses. And the public has developed an apathetic attitude towards school bus safety in general by ignoring traffic laws when driving around school buses and by not demanding better, safer conditions."

In terms of priorities, the safety group ranks driver age and driving experience as the top problem. But running closely behind are these concerns:

- bus driver training programs;
- replacement of aging and unsafe buses; and
- promoting public awareness of the laws about school buses and understanding of appropriate driving when school buses are on the road.

Safety advocates are pushing for a longer training period for bus drivers—something that

state officials concede an all-adult force will require. Many adult drivers need to learn how to use a standard transmission, used in a number of school buses, while others have to unlearn bad habits acquired from years of driving. Still others must learn how to help handicapped children get on board and off.

The N.C. Department of Transportation's Division of Motor Vehicles currently trains school bus drivers in a four-day minimum program—two days of classroom instruction and two days on the road. The average driver gets a total of 30 hours of instruction. To Overcash, that's not nearly enough, especially in light of the fact that the state requires at least 160 hours of training for commercial truck driver training schools (attendance at such schools is not mandatory for a trucker's license, but those who attend such schools must receive at least 160 hours' training).

"I'm wondering how you can learn to drive a school bus, with the precious cargo it carries, in 30 hours, when we're requiring a lot more training to haul some fruit," says Overcash. What's more, the state does not pay its bus drivers during their training period—a practice that amounts to a disincentive for some potential applicants, he says.

Norfleet Gardner, director of transportation for the DPE, says these drivers should be paid for their training period, and says his department is seeking approval to use staff development funds to provide pre- and in-service classes in first aid, discipline, and transporting exceptional children. In the past, Gardner adds, "We were spoiled by having kids who were only too eager to leave class or study hall to do in-service [training]."

The aging of the state's school bus fleet is another problem, both Overcash and Gardner agree. While school buses do meet the minimum federal safety standards, Overcash says, a 10-year-old bus probably is too worn out to continue using for school children's transportation. The

—continued on page 30

tems may decide to get tough with their drivers, too, as public support grows for greater care in transporting children to school. In 1988, a major election year for both statewide candidates and members of the General Assembly, the big question remains whether politicians will support a better safety program for transporting school-age children—children whose parents may remember the legislature's actions in June when they go to the ballot box in November.

But in the meantime, state officials have one more nagging worry. The state is being forced to quit hiring 16- and 17-year-old drivers, and will spend at least \$18.8 million—and up to \$50 million in the next few years—just to hire 18-year-old drivers. But, they say, there's no hard evidence, based on anyone's statistics, that more 18-year-old drivers will mean any improvement in the state's record for school bus safety. As Nancy Team, a top aide to Gov. Jim Martin, puts it, "We're going to be spending \$18.8 million for older drivers, which sounds like a desirable goal, but the real question is whether,

five years from now, there will be any improvement." □◡□

FOOTNOTES

¹Age & Sex Distribution of Bus Drivers, 1986-87 School Year," printout of data from N.C. Department of Public Education, July 1, 1987.

²29 U.S.C., 201 et. seq. Violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act carry a penalty of up to \$10,000.

³Hazardous Occupations Order No. 2, U.S. Department of Labor, 29 CFR 570.52(b)(3)(i).

⁴National Transportation Safety Board Highway Accident Report, School Bus Rollover, State Route 88, Jefferson, N.C., March 13, 1985, Report No. NTSB/HAR-85/05; and National Transportation Safety Board Highway Accident Report, Multiple Vehicle Collision and Fire, U.S. 13, Snow Hill, N.C., May 31, 1985, Report No. NTSB/HAR-86-02. Available from the National Transportation Safety Board, Washington, D.C. 20594.

⁵Letter from Norfleet Gardner, Director of Transportation, N.C. Department of Public Education, to National Transportation Safety Board, April 6, 1985, p. 1-2.

⁶G.S. 115C-245(a), enacted as Chapter 276 of the 1987 Session Laws.

⁷Letter from James Barber, Controller, N.C. State Board of Education, to Dennis Whitfield, Acting U.S. Secretary of Labor, Nov. 24, 1987, Attachment 2.

More than Age and Experience

—continued from page 29

General Assembly has allocated large amounts of money to phase out the pre-1977 buses, beginning with \$32 million per year for the 1985-1987 biennium. That has eliminated about 1,200 buses that were more than 12 years old. And the 1987 General Assembly sweetened the pot to provide \$34 million for bus replacement in the 1987-1989 biennium. By the time the 1989 General Assembly convenes next January, the legislature will still need to appropriate funds to replace the last 900 pre-1977 buses.

"They are moving on it," says Overcash, "but they need to go ahead and wipe that thing out." Besides, he says, the state waits until a bus is about 12 years old to replace it with a new bus. "That's not often enough," says Overcash. "We used to replace them every 10 years, and we need to get back to that."

Overcash's group also would like the General Assembly to fund one or more experiments with passenger restraints to

determine if they would reduce bus injuries. In previous sessions of the N.C. General Assembly, legislation has been introduced to require seat belts on N.C. school buses, but the proposals have gone nowhere.¹ Overcash said his group wants the state to evaluate research on such restraints before backing legislative proposals to extend restraint devices statewide. The problem of standees—children who must stand on buses because the seats are filled—is difficult to quantify, says Overcash. Federal and state laws prohibit standees, but motorists can often spot school buses with students standing in the aisles. "The schools say they can't accurately predict how many students will be on a bus, because some students stay after school for ball practice or meetings, but I just don't buy that. They know how many students might ride a bus, and they should provide adequate bus space for them," he says.

FOOTNOTE

¹S489, 1985 General Assembly, incorporated a proposal by Rep. Bertha Holt (D-Alamance) to require seat belts on school buses. S 489 provided for a pilot project experiment to test seat belt use on buses.