

School Buses and the Danger of Driver Distraction

Source: UE EduRisk by United Educators

Transportation accidents are among the worst tragedies that can befall a school, having ramifications not only for those injured but also their families, friends, and the school population. And while the human cost is significant, bus accidents have acute financial tolls as well. According to a United Educators (UE) study, these accidents amount to 16 percent of the total number of public school claims, costing more than \$7 million in losses. Two claims approached the \$1 million mark, demonstrating how easily costs can skyrocket.

Although school bus accidents may result from the negligence of other drivers, too often they involve driver inattentiveness. The subject of driver distraction has consumed the attention of lawmakers and regulators. The US Department of Transportation (DOT) website, www.distraction.gov, is designed to combat the issue of driving while distracted.

Public school administrators can help reduce the risk of accidents by better understanding the types of distractions drivers are likely to encounter and undertaking strategies to address distracted driving.

Sources of Driver Distraction

If managing students in the classroom is challenging, that same responsibility while controlling a bus is magnified. Student misbehavior on school buses can easily divert drivers' attention from the road. A search of the Internet for examples of students misbehaving on school buses quickly produces a long list of news stories describing fights and assaults.

Complicating the problem of student misbehavior is the fact that school bus drivers are not always properly trained to handle disciplinary issues. Drivers in Missouri participating in a statewide survey noted that student discipline was the most important subject in which they required additional training, ranking ahead of loading and unloading procedures and poor weather driving.

Distractions can also come from situations outside the vehicle. Stimuli outside the vehicle including electronic billboards, pedestrians, accidents, work zones and active construction projects can take the drivers' attention from the primary task of safely operating the vehicle.

Strategies for Dealing with Driver Distraction

Districts need to limit the risks of distractions by training drivers to stay alert and helping them maintain discipline. A comprehensive approach to tackling driver distraction includes adopting

policies that address the problem, providing information and training on distracted driving, adopting appropriate conduct codes for students, and considering technologies that can help limit the effects of driver distraction. Public school administrators should consider the following strategies to enhance school bus driver performance.

- **Develop driver training programs and policies that address distraction.**

All districts should adopt policies that prohibit bus drivers from eating, drinking, and using cell phones.

Train drivers not to reach for objects that have been dropped or that are moving about the vehicle. Develop a policy that buses must pull to the side of a road or another safe location before drivers can turn their attention to those items.

For distractions outside the bus, consider providing drivers with information about construction zones and other scheduled roadwork routinely reported by media sources. National studies suggest that simply calling a driver's attention to likely sources of distraction can help to limit their effect and keep drivers alert. Include information on the external sources of driver distraction in your annual bus driver training program.

- **Adopt a school bus safety code or code of conduct.**

Students' conduct on school buses can be a significant and dangerous driver distraction. Many schools rely on established discipline policies to govern student behavior, but those may prove inadequate because school bus drivers face different circumstances than classroom teachers. When a misbehaving student diverts a driver's attention from the road, lives are at risk. An approach specific to student behavior on school buses is needed to increase safety and curb driver distraction.

When students and drivers understand expectations for passenger conduct, the school bus driver can respond to student misbehavior with greater assurance and authority. Posting rules and adopting seating charts in each bus can remind students of the expectations for their behavior.

- **Provide students and parents with information about school bus safety and conduct policies.**

It is important to educate students and parents about school bus conduct policies each year. These policies can be posted to a school website as well as sent home with students in hard copy. Increase parental awareness by offering to speak to parent associations about the school bus code of conduct and allow time for parents to ask questions. Require parents to sign a form acknowledging that they have received and read

the school bus code of conduct. Doing so should reduce disputes over any punishment given to a student who has misbehaved on a bus.

- **Provide school bus drivers with additional training and resources for managing student behavior.**

Another way to help bus drivers manage student behavior is to have adult bus monitors or attendants ride alongside the students. Bus monitors are responsible for supervising students while loading, riding and unloading buses. Many districts employing school bus monitors require that they receive training in bus safety procedures, evacuation procedures and student behavior management. Bus monitors also ensure that special needs students are secured in their seats, attend to those students' needs and maintain overall discipline.

If it is not possible to hire bus monitors, consider starting a volunteer program with the assistance of your parent-teacher organization. Don't forget, that volunteer monitors will need to undergo a screening process and training, just as employees would.

If you would like more information on this topic, please contact Rich Cieler, LARMA Loss Control, rich.ciel@willistowerswatson.com.