

Fostering communication, networking, professionalism & advocacy in road safety

*Patron: Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia*

**SCHOOL BUSES**

**ACRS Policy Position**

ACRS notes that bus travel is the safest form of road transport, at least 14 times safer than travel by private car, and that the record for school bus travel in particular is very good. ACRS also notes that almost all the deaths of school children in any year are outside the bus and associated with collisions with the bus from which they have alighted or other vehicles passing or driving towards the bus.

ACRS supports all reasonable measures to improve the safety of bus travel by school pupils, including educational and engineering measures to make travel within the bus, and boarding, alighting and movement around the bus stop area safer.

Where possible the most up to date equipment should be used and comply with Australian Design Rule (ADR) 59/00 "Omnibus Rollover Strength", ADR 66/00 "Seat Strength, Seat Anchorage Strength And Padding In Omnibuses" and ADR 68/00 "Occupant Protection in Buses". School buses, including buses used for school excursions, need to be maintained adequately and for transporting small children should have seat belts installed that can be adjusted for height variation via the belt or via bolster seats. Adequate supervision to ensure that belts are worn properly should also be provided. Progressive measures to eliminate three-for-two seating, where it is presently permitted, should be encouraged.

Currently Australia leads the world in regards to bus safety. Nevertheless, monitoring of overseas best practice should continue, with a view to developing and adopting measures that have the potential to further bus safety that best suit the Australian environment.

ACRS will continue to support initiatives and to press for resources to be made available for:

* Improved infrastructure around school bus stops to reduce conflicts between alighting passengers and passing or approaching vehicles, reduced speed limits outside schools and adequate signs warning of the school zone
* Improved warning signage and flashing lights on buses to warn passing and approaching vehicles that school children are alighting and speed should be reduced to a maximum of 40 km/h
* Improve the safety of pick up and set down points at roadsides on rural and semi rural school bus routes
* Buses equipped with seat belts to be used on high speed routes (i.e. rural or semi-rural routes where the speed limit is 80 km/h or above) and for school excursions both urban and rural
* Sufficient buses to be able to eliminate three-for-two seating and standees on routes where the road speed limit is 80 km/h or above
* Replacement of old outdated buses without seat belts used for excursions and rural and semi-rural travel with modern buses that have seat belts and comply with ADR 59, 66 and 68
* Either adjustable seat belts or adult seat belts with seat bolsters for transporting small children

ACRS also recommends that schools and organisations that hire buses for school excursions require buses equipped with seat belts and if required seat bolsters for transporting small school children.

**Objective**

To ensure that the transport of students to and from school is undertaken at the lowest practicable level of risk, recognising the community view that risk to children is desirably reduced to zero.

**Discussion**

School buses perform a difficult task. School bus travel is either a concentrated, twice daily activity that in Australia mostly uses route buses rather than dedicated equipment, or an excursion transporting students to a particular school activity.

Bus travel in general is the safest form of road travel. The safety record of school bus travel is particularly good. The number of casualties to children in a school bus in any year is negligible. In the years 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1997 and 1998, of 23 fatal crashes involving school buses, five involved a school bus occupant fatality. Almost all deaths of school children occur when a child has alighted from the bus. They are either struck by another vehicle as they cross the road from in front of or behind a bus, or are struck by the bus itself because the driver cannot see the child in front of the bus as it drives away. Therefore, cost effective measures to alert motorists that a school bus has stopped and that children are alighting from it and to enhance visual systems so that the bus driver can check that it is safe to drive away, should be encouraged.

Parents need to be educated about safety issues associated with school bus travel, and particularly about picking their children up on the same side of the road as the bus, to eliminate the danger from the child having to cross the road.

Infrastructure around bus stops should be improved to reduce conflicts between alighting passengers and passing traffic, to allow safe movement around the bus stop area, and to allow parents room adjacent to the stop to set down and pick up children. There needs to be adequate warning signs for the school bus zone, including advance warning signs.

Most collisions involving a school bus are between the bus and a passenger car, and the collision forces experienced by the bus and its occupants are far lower than for other road users involved. Thus in incidents that occur, bus occupant casualties are usually few and minor compared with other road users.

ACRS is aware of the very real concern of parents for the safety of school bus travel, and is sympathetic to calls to equip buses with seat belts and to eliminate three-for-two seating permitted in some States. Nevertheless, it is generally not cost effective, or for structural reasons particularly safe because of inadequate seat and belt fixtures and roof strength, to fit belts to old coaches already in use. Current Australian Design Rules require belts in certain classes of coach (ADR 66 and 68), and many medium sized coaches ('community' bus configurations rather than route buses) are already equipped with seat belts. These buses must also comply with ADR 59 which is concerned with bus rollover strength and hence provide adequate structural strength for a survivable space to be maintained for a seat belted person. Schools and parent organisations can apply commercial pressure by requiring that buses and coaches hired for school excursions be equipped with three point seat belts and where small children are involved, seat belts with bolsters.

Eliminating three-for two seating is principally a matter of cost, and could require a significant increase in the number of buses carrying smaller primary school pupils to allow all children to ride in a seat with a seat belt. There needs to be continued careful analysis and evaluation of school bus related fatalities and alternatives to identify the most cost effective ways of safe travel to and from school. Nevertheless, on school bus routes where the speed limit is 80km/h or above, the following actions should be taken as early as possible:

* Replace buses that do not conform with ADR 59, 66 and 68
* Provide sufficient buses to eliminate 'three for two' seating and standees, and immediately prohibit standees in buses travelling on routes of 80 km/h or over.

On rural and semi rural routes pick up and set down points need to be made as safe as possible.

ACRS does not support the introduction of school buses on the North American model, on the grounds that the cost outweighs any benefit that might be gained and that an investment of that order inhibits the progressive shift to new technology as it becomes available.