

NTSB: ‘Lack of oversight’ primary cause of recent school bus accidents

by Pete Japikse

senior transportation consultant

On May 22, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) met and presented its findings on two recent school bus crashes. The report, generated from this public meeting, will likely figure prominently in future discussions about the relative safety of school bus transportation. School administrators should review the findings and consider their impact on current operations.

The report, NTSB/SIR-18/02, can be found in its entirety at <https://go.usa.gov/xQmkC>. Following is an excerpt from the report’s executive summary:

“School bus travel is one of the safest forms of transportation in the United States. Every day, nearly 600,000 buses carry more than 25 million students to and from school and activities. Children are safer traveling in school buses than in any other vehicle.

“Although school buses are extremely safe, NTSB continues to investigate school bus crashes in which fatalities and injuries occur. Improved oversight of school bus drivers and enhancements to school bus design — such as installation of passenger lap/shoulder belts, electronic stability control and automatic emergency braking — could prevent or mitigate such crash outcomes.

“In November 2016, NTSB began the investigation of two multifatality crashes involving school buses. Each crash was initiated when the driver lost control of the school bus. In the Nov. 1 crash in Baltimore, the driver was epileptic and suffered a seizure. In the Nov. 21 crash in Chattanooga, Tenn., the driver was speeding while using a cellphone and ran off the road. In both cases, the school bus operators were private for-hire motor carriers performing contracted student transportation services. Although the specific safety issues differed, the crashes shared one common factor: poor driver oversight by both the school districts and the contracted carriers, which resulted in unsafe operation of the school buses.”

NTSB identified probable causes in each crash, including disqualifying medical conditions, a fraudulently obtained commercial driver’s license (CDL), excessive speed and cellphone use by the driver. It also found that the contractors and school districts failed to monitor the drivers appropriately, and they could have taken actions that may have prevented the drivers from causing a fatal school bus crash.

District administrators should take these findings seriously and closely examine their current practices when it comes to monitoring bus drivers. This examination should carefully consider driver qualifications and driver performance.

In Ohio, school bus drivers are required to pass annual school bus physicals; complete annual in-service training; maintain an active CDL, with school bus and passenger endorsements; maintain a satisfactory driving record; pass random drug and alcohol checks; maintain an active school bus driver’s training certificate; and exhibit moral behavior, as evidenced by a clean criminal records background check.

Each of these requirements has a state minimum standard. In many cases, school districts elect to adopt more stringent standards to maximize the care and safety of transported students. The compliance with all of these requirements is certified through the annual issuance of a superintendent’s certificate, as required in Ohio Revised Code 3327.10.

Reviewing each driver’s qualifications at the beginning of the year is critical, but it must be followed by ongoing oversight during the school year. Resources to help with this certification include Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles records available through the Ohio Department of Education’s (ODE) website, online driver certification reports (also available through ODE’s website) and the Rapback Program, which monitors criminal records of enrolled employees. Daily interaction between an administrator and drivers also ensures their ongoing suitability in meeting the needs of schoolchildren.

In addition to records checks, each driver should be evaluated for driving and route performance. A driver can meet all the certifications but not work well with students or exhibit safe driving behaviors. Ongoing, in-service training with all drivers on topics such as defensive driving styles and effective student management practices is essential and must be provided.

The NTSB report focused on a lack of driver oversight as the primary cause in these crashes. The board also issued recommendations to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the three national pupil transportation associations and state governments to consider enhancing the design features of school buses. NTSB acknowledged the current safety of school buses but also called for continued improvements to protect children in the event of catastrophic events, such as the two accidents it studied.

NTSB has long been a proponent for passenger safety restraints. Its report called for electronic stability control, automatic emergency braking and event data recorders. Event data recorders are already mandated in the commercial transportation industry and serve as a key tool in studying crashes and the events leading up to them. The other electronic devices NTSB mentions are technological advances already installed in many passenger cars but not yet adopted by the school bus manufacturing industry.

Following the NTSB report, OSBA checked with representatives of all three school bus manufacturers about the availability of crash avoidance technology. One manufacturer already has crash avoidance technology available, including stability control, lane departure, accident warning and avoidance, speed limit control and 360-degree vision. Another manufacturer said it will introduce crash avoidance technology very soon, and the third manufacturer reported nothing pending in this area.

The next step is ours. NTSB is a resource agency that recommends actions. Changes can only be mandated by NHTSA. Typically, change is slow to implement at a federal level; however, as the industry introduces these new technologies ahead of the mandates, it is certainly possible for us to include them in our vehicle specifications.

In our role of monitoring drivers, we have many tools already at our disposal. We must make good use of our resources and take all appropriate action so our schoolchildren remain as safe as possible when riding a school bus.