

# Both Sides of the Seat Belt Debate

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School buses are one of the safest vehicles on the road. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Association, between four and six school-age children die each year on school transportation vehicles; less than 1% of all traffic fatalities nationwide. Even so, one of the most debated topics in school bus safety is whether buses should be required to have seat belts on them. Both sides have provided valid arguments that are worth exploring.

In 1968 the federal government mandated that all new cars include seat belts at all seating positions. Today, all states except for New Hampshire, have laws that require occupants to wear a seat belt while traveling in a car. Smaller school buses weighing 10,000 pounds or less are required to have lap and/or shoulder belts under federal motor vehicle safety standards. Larger school buses, however, rely on compartmentalization to protect the passengers. Compartmentalization is a design concept that uses the high-backed seats and seats placed closely together in rows to protect students.

Advocates for compartmentalization use the following in their defense against needing seatbelts:

- Energy absorbing bus seats. All surfaces of school bus seats are padded with force absorbing material, largely regulated by the federal government. The material absorbs a set amount of forces that ideally prevents major injuries during an accident.
- Seat spacing. The unique spacing between the seats in a school bus are designed to contain passengers in the cushioned compartment with only a minimum amount of space between absorbing surfaces.
- Cost of adding seatbelts. It is estimated to cost anywhere from \$7,000 to \$11,000 per vehicle to outfit school buses with seatbelts.
- Seatbelt related injuries. In high impact collisions, seat belts can cause many injuries, including bruising internal organs. The likelihood of these injuries increases when the seatbelts are worn improperly.
- School buses with seatbelts have a lower seating capacity.

Advocates for the seatbelts installation on school buses use these arguments to debate the issue:

- The installation and proper use of seat belts has proven to save lives in all vehicles including school buses.
- Compartmentalization does not prove effective in the event of high-speed collisions or rollovers, where the high-back seats would offer less protection.
- Seatbelts can positively affect student behavior. Students who are properly belted in are less distracting to the school bus driver that can lead to fewer accidents.
- Seatbelts can also lower the amount of non-life threatening injuries by keeping passengers seated.
- In a severe bus crash, an unbelted passenger can be rendered unconscious, preventing them from evacuating at all.

Whether or not to equip your school's buses with seatbelts is a business decision. As discussed above, there are for and against. Each Member should weigh both sides and come to an informed decision on what is best for their students. For more information, please refer to the position statements from the below organizations.

[National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services](#) – Position Paper for Lap/Shoulder Belts in School Buses

[National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) - School Bus Safety

[American Academy of Pediatrics](#) – Testimony for an act requiring the installation of seat safety belts on school buses