



March 25, 2010

Lamar Graham, Executive Editor
Parade Magazine
PARADE Publications
711 3rd Avenue
New York, NY 10017-4014

Dear Mr. Graham:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the article published in Parade Magazine this past weekend, "Are School Buses Unsafe?" (March 21, 2010). The one statement in the article that most accurately describes school buses is they "are extremely safe compared to cars." Given Parade's status as a trusted source of information for parents, I am very concerned, however, that the rhetorical heading and the article itself may have the unintended consequence of compromising the safety of America's school students. The article may mislead parents into believing school buses are unsafe, when the exact opposite is true. All credible national studies of school bus safety have concluded that school buses, with or without seat belts, are a far safer way for children to get to and from school than any other means.

One problem was the article's generic use of the term "seat belt." There are significant differences in cost and potential benefits between a two-point lap belt and a three-point lap/shoulder belt, yet your readers did not know which system the writer was discussing. The article used the term "seat belt" interchangeably. Some of the states listed require lap belts and others require lap/shoulder belts, but the article did not specify which is which. The American Academy of Pediatrics supports lap/shoulder belts in new school buses. However, the \$1,500 cost of installing "seat belts" in a new school bus applies only to lap belts.

The article includes no comments or information from the federal agencies that have studied school bus safety or the national organizations that are most familiar with student transportation. The Transportation Research Board (TRB) of the National Academy of Sciences conducted an exhaustive study of the relative safety of students who ride in school buses compared to those who use various other modes of transportation. The results were convincing -- of the 50% of students in the US who ride in school buses each day, there were an average of 5 school bus passenger fatalities per year. Meanwhile for the other 50% of students who do not ride in school buses, there were an average of 800 fatalities per year. Those are staggering statistics parents should know and understand. We in the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) and over one-half million other student transportation professionals throughout the US work every day to reduce this number to zero and ensure children the safest possible ride.

School buses are much safer than other conveyances for a number of reasons. They are large vehicles; therefore, the crash forces exerted on passengers are almost always very low. They are equipped with a passive passenger protection system known as "compartmentalization," consisting of closely spaced, high-back, well-padded seats that absorb crash forces during impacts. Their drivers are highly trained and screened to ensure they are qualified. School buses are equipped with flashing lights and stop signal arms to control traffic whenever they are stopped to pick up or drop off students. Moreover,

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they are required to meet more Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards than any other motor vehicle, including several that apply only to school buses.

The thrust of the Parade article was school buses would be far safer with belts. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) concluded installing 3-point lap/shoulder belts in large school buses, like the ones required in cars, would save one to two lives per year nationally if every student wore them properly. Our Association agreed that even this incremental increase in safety was worthwhile. In 2008 we recommended to NHTSA that it require lap/shoulder belts in large school buses and ensure funding of the additional cost.

We do not believe money is or should be the driving force behind school bus safety decisions. The article implied otherwise. Every student who wants the higher safety provided by yellow school buses should have access to it. The last thing we want to see are students being displaced into smaller, far less safe vehicles due to budget constraints. Unfortunately, we are seeing more and more instances where students are being denied school bus transportation due to economic challenges. Clearly, among all the measures that could be taken, increasing the number of children transported in school buses and decreasing the number of children transported to and from school by other modes would have the most significant impact in reducing student fatalities and injuries.

As the largest system of public transportation in the US, school bus transportation receives almost no federal funding. Nevertheless, school buses bring important benefits in addition to safety. The American School Bus Council (www.AmericanSchoolBusCouncil.org) estimates a single school bus takes the place of 36 private cars that would otherwise be on the road transporting students each morning and afternoon. School buses reduce traffic congestion, especially around schools, and reduce consumption of fossil fuels and airborne emissions, because they transport more passengers per vehicle. Modern school buses are smokeless and meet stringent EPA emissions standards. Parents believe school buses are important, because they ensure children's continued access to school, and parents cite the convenience of school bus transportation as a major benefit that should be maintained.

Please consider publishing a follow-up article disclosing these facts. For additional information, please get in touch with the Executive Director of NASDPTS, Bob Riley, at execdir@nasdpts.org or (970) 871-1784. You also can find many school bus safety resources at www.nasdpts.org and other web sites. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charlie Hood".

Charlie Hood, President
NASDPTS