



National School Transportation Association

113 South West Street, 4th Floor • Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-3200 • (703) 684-3212 FAX • www.yellowbuses.org

Statement of the
NATIONAL SCHOOL
TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION

for the record of the

U. S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways, Transit, and
Pipelines

Hearing on Public Transportation Security

March 29, 2006

The National School Transportation Association is the membership organization for school bus companies that provide pupil transportation. Our members are private businesses engaged primarily in transporting public school students to and from school and school-related activities for the tens of thousands of school districts across the country that choose not to operate their own school buses. In addition, our member companies provide specialized transportation for students with disabilities, community transportation, charter service, emergency transportation in times of need, and other transportation services. NSTA members range from small family businesses serving one district to large corporations operating thousands of buses across many states, all committed to the safe, efficient and economical transportation of America's children.

**Statement of the
NATIONAL SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION
for the record of the
U. S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways, Transit, and Pipelines
Hearing on Public Transportation Security
March 29, 2006**

The National School Transportation Association (NSTA) appreciates the opportunity to enter our remarks into the record of the subcommittee's hearing on public transportation security. We commend the Committee for their interest in expanding funding for security beyond the airlines and Amtrak, but are concerned that the largest mass transportation fleet in the country has been overlooked.

Each weekday more than 450,000 yellow school buses travel the nation's roads. Our fleet is 2.5 times the size of all other forms of mass transportation—transit, intercity buses, commercial airlines and rail—combined. During the school year we make more than 50 million passenger trips daily carrying the country's most vulnerable passengers—our children. Our exposure is far greater than public transportation's at 32 million trips daily, yet the school bus industry has received little attention and no funding at all from the Federal government.

School Buses and Terrorism

School buses have been targets of terrorists not only in countries such as Israel, Thailand, Yemen, and African countries, but also in Canada and the United States. So far, the attacks in this country have been domestic, but they illustrate the concerns of the industry—and indeed of the country.

- The most notorious case occurred 30 years ago when a gang of armed men hijacked a school bus in California, taking 26 children hostage. The men forced the children and their driver into a buried van and kept them underground for 16 hours, demanding \$5 million ransom.
- In 1995, a man claiming to have a bomb hijacked a school bus with eleven special needs children in Miami. Police killed the hijacker, who turned out to be unarmed.
- In 1996, a 15-year-old boy commandeered a school bus in Salt Lake City and killed the driver. He later killed himself after crashing into a home.

- In January 2002, a school bus driver in Pennsylvania abandoned his regular route and took thirteen children on an unauthorized trip to Washington DC. The driver, armed with a rifle, eluded attempts to find the bus for six hours. Despite a massive search by police, the bus wasn't found until the hijacker turned himself in.
- Just this past January, an armed man hijacked a school bus in Los Angeles County, California, forcing the driver at gunpoint to drive 200 miles before the driver outwitted him and escaped.

The Committee knows that buses are a common target of terrorists worldwide. Buses carrying children are particularly popular targets, for there is little that human beings fear more than a threat to their children. Despite the potential for devastating results if terrorists were systematically to target school buses in this country, the Federal government has not included school transportation in its efforts to provide a secure public transportation system.

School Buses and Security

Like public transit, school buses operate in an open environment. Routes are routinely published at the beginning of the school year and rarely change during the year. School buses make the same stops at the same time every day, making it very easy for anyone to intercept a bus. School bus stops are unprotected, and usually unattended by an adult.

School buses, by state law, cannot be locked when students are on board; therefore they are vulnerable to penetration by outsiders. School bus drivers have no shield, compartment, or other protection; since they, unlike public transit or intercity bus drivers, are responsible for their passengers, they cannot be isolated from them.

School bus operations vary greatly in their sophistication and their facilities, but the majority operate from unprotected bus yards, where prior to 9/11, the biggest concern was vandalism. The number of bus fleets that are grounded during the year by vandals indicates how vulnerable the industry is to terrorists.

In many communities across the country, school buses are the only form of mass transportation available for evacuation of large populations. Security of the school transportation system is important not only to protect the students who ride buses daily, but also to ensure that we are ready and able to respond to critical incidents elsewhere in our communities. Many fleets participate in emergency planning with local government for everything from police responses to nuclear plant evacuation planning. School buses from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut played an important role in both evacuating people from the impact area in Manhattan on 9/11 and transporting critical workers into the area during the search and recovery period. This is part of a long tradition of service in times of disaster, whether natural or manmade.

Officials in New Orleans have been criticized for not incorporating the school bus fleet into their emergency plans prior to and during Hurricane Katrina. Buses that could have been used to transport residents to safety were instead trapped under water. We all are aware of the consequences in that instance of the failure to recognize the importance of the local school bus fleet.

In the fall of 2002, NSTA conducted a survey to gauge how the industry had responded to the events of 9/11/2001. The results showed that the primary response of our members, private companies who provide school transportation under contract to public school districts, was to increase training for drivers in security awareness. Ninety percent reported two-way radio communications in their fleets, and about half have video cameras in some buses. But nearly all said there was no funding available for capital investments such as fencing and lighting for bus yards or sophisticated tracking equipment for buses.

In the past four years, NSTA has worked with the Transportation Security Administration in trying to determine the security needs of the school bus industry. In 2003, we published "The top 25 Security Action Items for School Bus Operations" as a guide for our members and others in the industry to improve their operations. We collaborated with TSA on a brochure for school bus drivers, and we have posted an alert status response plan on our website. In addition, many of our members attended security forums at their own expense, and most are involved in their local emergency response planning activities.

Recently, the American Trucking Associations and the three national school bus associations collaborated to develop "School Bus Watch," a training program derived from "Highway Watch." In addition, we have been working with Consolidated Safety Services, Inc. on a security awareness and training program funded by TSA, which is currently in the testing stage. While these programs provide welcome training to school transportation personnel, our industry still lags behind all other modes in asset protection. A few school districts scattered across the country have introduced GPS systems into their school buses, and some are upgrading communications. But as yet there is no consistent, coordinated effort to ensure the security of the nation's school transportation system.

School Buses and Funding

School transportation is funded almost entirely by state and local government. The Federal government provides no funding source for routine home-to-school transportation or school activity transportation. (In fiscal year 2003, the first federal funds became available for school buses when the Environmental Protection Agency provided \$5 million for grants to reduce diesel emissions as part of their Clean School Bus USA program.)

As state governments are decreasing expenditures, a larger burden falls on municipalities to support school transportation. Some school districts have turned to parents to pay part

of the cost of busing their children, and some have wrestled with the possibility of discontinuing school bus transportation entirely—knowing that such a move would not only present a hardship for many families and increase traffic and pollution around schools, but more importantly, would put students at much greater risk as they find less safe ways to get to school.

In this economic climate, finding the means to make significant security improvements to school transportation systems is difficult if not impossible.

Congress acknowledged the importance of school transportation in the U.S.A. Patriot Act, by specifically including school buses in the definition of mass transportation. But even though all other forms of mass transportation—airlines, rail, transit and intercity buses—have received some Federal funding for security improvements, school transportation has received none.

This industry specializes in training. Driver training in particular is one of the highest priorities of every school bus operator, public or private. This emphasis on training is one of the reasons we continue to be the safest form of ground transportation. Our response to the need for greater security reflects that priority: we do what we know best. We develop training programs, we include security awareness and response in our regular safety classes, we work with law enforcement personnel to find effective ways to present the information. And we do it within current budgets, using the carriers' own funds.

But if we are to make significant improvements in school transportation security, we must go beyond training to capitol investments in facilities and equipment. Some of the priorities of the industry are:

- Professional security-vulnerability assessments
- Fencing, lockable gates, and lighting to secure bus facilities
- Video monitoring systems for buses, bus yards, and bus stops
- Communications equipment for small and rural school bus systems
- Vehicle locator systems
- FBI background checks for employees

In addition, TSA has invited the school bus industry to participate in ISAC (Information Sharing and Analysis Center), believing that it would benefit the industry and TSA. We cannot finance an expense of that size on our own; like APTA, we would need a Federal grant to establish an ISAC presence.

These are needs that neither school bus operators nor local boards of education can fund alone. If we are to provide security for the 25 million children transported on school buses daily, we must have help from the Federal government. As Mr. Luner testified before the Committee in 2004, “Without consistent application of reasonable and prudent security measures across modes, we risk creating weak links that may drive terrorism from one mode to another.” The airline industry has received \$18 billion for security enhancements; Amtrak has received \$5.7 billion; the transit industry has received \$250 million; and the intercity bus industry has received \$50 million. The school

transportation industry—providing over 10 billion passenger trips a year—has received nothing. We urge the Committee to ensure that the largest public transportation system in the country, the one that transports our children, is at least as secure as other ground transportation modes.

We look forward to working with the Committee in its continued efforts to provide all Americans with a safe, secure transportation environment.

Submitted March 29, 2006

Robin L. Leeds

Robin L. Leeds

Industry Specialist

National School Transportation Association

800-560-1654

robinleeds@comcast.net