

Experts: Federal agency not leading on school bus safety

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HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (AP) — The federal government is failing the nearly 25 million children who ride U.S. school buses daily by taking years to determine whether requiring safety belts would save lives, an expert told a safety task force Tuesday.

At a hearing near the site where four students died when a school bus plunged from an overpass, student transportation expert Mike Martin said the industry has been left "confused and perplexed" by a lack of direction from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, or NHTSA.

Martin, executive director of the National Association for Pupil Transportation, said that the NHTSA, which makes safety recommendations and sets requirements, submitted a report to Congress on bus safety belts in 2002 but has yet to set any rules.

The agency might not decide whether to enact new regulations before 2015, said Roger Saul, an executive with the agency told the panel.

"That seems unreasonable to me," said Martin, testifying before a task force considering whether to recommend a safety belt law for Alabama's 8,500 school buses in the wake of the accident that killed four teens in Huntsville last year. The bus they were riding did not have seat belts for students; like most states, Alabama does not require them.

Five states — California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey and New York — have varying safety belt requirements for school buses.

State School Superintendent Joe Morton expressed frustration with the lack of direction from the federal government.

"We need some sort of definitive answer from them," said Morton, the chairman of the task force.

Saul, testifying before the panel Monday, said the issue was complicated and took time to review.

Charlie Gauthier, a former director of NHTSA's office of defects investigation, said the agency was distracted from addressing safety in school bus crashes because so few occur in comparison to other types of roadway accidents.

Federal statistics show more than 43,000 people died in wrecks in 2005, and another 2.7 million people were hurt. By comparison, NHTSA says fewer than nine children die in school bus wrecks annually, and about 8,000 are hurt.

"What I think we need to do now is move forward ... without having the definitive recommendation from NHTSA," Gauthier told the panel. Thirteen states are considering restraint laws for school buses, he said.

NHTSA recommends against lap belts because they can hurt children, Saul said, but a study showed one life might be saved annually nationwide in bus accidents by requiring lap belts with shoulder harnesses if every child wore them properly.

A pair of school bus drivers told the panel they worried that having belts on buses would cause more problems than they would solve.

"If we put those seat belts on I can just see one of (my students) hanging another one, fastening it around his neck," said Mary Jo Chandler, from rural DeKalb County.

Spurred by the deaths of the four high school students killed when a school bus plunged off an elevated highway ramp in November, the state of Alabama is considering whether to require safety restraints on school buses.

Appointed by Gov. Bob Riley to investigate the issue, the task force will make a recommendation by early March, Morton said.

The issue is complicated because buses outfitted with shoulder belts cost thousands more than buses without them, and the restraints decrease passenger capacity by about 25 percent, meaning more buses are needed to carry the same number of students.

An attorney for families of some of the youths involved in the Huntsville crash, Doug Fees, said shoulder belts could have saved the lives of the students who died. He called it "immoral" to compare the cost of restraints with the potential to save lives.

"Every child is important," he said.

Currently, federal rules require school bus manufacturers to make vehicles with high, deeply padded seat belts to reduce the chance of injury in bus crashes. The system is designed to make each seat a small safety compartment, said Mike James of the National Child Passenger Safety Board.

"It really is like eggs in an egg carton," said James.