SEAT BELTS ON SCHOOL BUSES

The issue of seat belts on school buses is a very emotive one, and the bus operator is the meat in the sandwich between the Parents (who want seat belts) and the Government (who has limited resources). In general NSW school bus contracts are designed not to cater for seat belts, because of the perceived costs versus the benefits. However the community is increasingly expecting seat belts regardless of the costs.

School Bus Safety

The experts say that if the government were to allocate additional funds for school student safety, the highest risk areas are not on the bus (Bus travel is by far the safest mode of road transport). Students are at a greater risk in the family car and crossing roads near schools (refer independent report by Dr Saffron). However having said this, the industry does not oppose the introduction of seat belts. The suitability of seat belts for children under 12 (wearing adult seat belts) regarding spinal injuries is also emerging as a safety issue in itself. Enforcing booster seats will be problematic an a school bus.

Operators want to provide what the community expects, and increasingly this is calling for seat belts on school buses. But to do this government contracts and funding would need to be changed at considerable tax payer expense.

Federal Government Initiative

The former Liberal Federal Government encouraged operators to apply for a seat belt subsidy. This limited grant applied to the fitting of seat belts to new buses and retrofitting to older buses if feasible - in general retrofitting is not a feasible proposition as it can require a re-engineering of the bus.

In New South Wales not many operators are able to avail themselves of this subsidy, because of the nature of the contracts they have with the NSW Government. Bus operator contracts issued by the NSW Government do not specify seatbelts, and in fact regulations provide that payments to operators are based on buses being able to carry more students than the authorized adult seating capacity (three-for-two rule).

Capacity Issue

Where operators buy one of the larger school buses, and specify seatbelts, they may not be able to legally carry the number of students they are contracted to carry each
day. The larger school buses are purchased by selecting the chassis and then arranging to have the body built on top of the chassis.

The smaller school buses are imported already built and come with seatbelts. Operators purchase these small ready built school buses knowing their student load matches the government funding.

Some operators do specify seatbelts when ordering the body for the larger school bus, taking the risk on having sufficient capacity for student numbers (student numbers change from year to year). Such operators often use the vehicle in off-peak times for charter services to cover the additional cost of the seatbelts being built into the body construction, but not all operators can make up the shortfall this way and can take the risk of not being able to carry their contracted student numbers.

In rural and regional areas it is a difficult decision to leave a student at the bus stop because all the seats (with seat belts) are taken. This is where standing for a short distance is better than leaving the student at the bus stop.

**Enforcement Issue**

Enforcing the wearing of seat belts is also a significant issue on buses that have seat belts as students are aged from four years and may not be competent in fitting a seat belt correctly. Is it the driver’s duty of care to ensure that all seat belts are correctly fitted? If drivers were responsible for checking that seat belts are correctly fitted this would increase running times and significantly increase costs.

**NSW Government Risk Assessment**

The NSW Government is undertaking a risk assessment of school bus routes which unfortunately does not cover the student journey off the bus, with a view to considering what safety initiatives could be introduced for the higher risk bus routes. The safety initiatives could involve driver training, different speed limits, more guard rails, matching the smaller bus to narrow roads or require seat belts. The assessment of different routes is still in the pilot stage, and BusNSW is not sure how funds will be allocated to introduce safety initiatives on routes identified as being high risk.

**Government Contracts and Cost Impact**

New contracts and funding models have just been rolled out for rural and regional bus services, but still contain the same provisions regarding allowing three primary school students to be counted for 2 adults (when assessing student carrying capacities) and providing for standees in certain circumstances.
If the government did specify seatbelts in all new buses, it would require hundreds of millions of dollars, probably closer to billion dollars (refer to Saffron report), because there would be so many additional buses, bus depots, and drivers needed to undertake the same transport task.

**Conclusion**

Public debate will eventually see additional funding allocated to seat belts, but will redirect funds that could be better spent on safety initiatives outside the bus which are aimed to protect children from injury and death on roads. BusNSW supports additional funding for bus safety but believes it should be spent where it can do the most good.

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