

Who Trains the Kids on School Bus Safety?



In March, an 11-year-old student named Annaliese Backner ran after her school bus in Colorado, resulting in a tragic outcome. She was run over and killed. As an industry, where did we fail Anna?

Are we doing enough to train students about school bus safety? Whose responsibility is it? The parents? School bus drivers? Transportation staff? Teachers? School administrators? Or is it all the above? I'm sure the school bus driver carries most of the water on this, but it's everyone's responsibility in my opinion.

How often is this training being reinforced to all the stakeholders? One time and never again?

Jeff Cassell, president and founder of The School Bus Safety Company, said it all comes back to training, driver behavior and best practices. Establish your norms for safety and hold your team accountable, he advised.

One fear I have about the massive school bus driver shortage is that it could impact the quality and time spent on training. An industry with a foundation of safety can't afford to drop its standards.

As a parent of a second grader, I walk my child to school each morning. She does not ride on a school bus, if you must know, as we live within her elementary school's walking radius. During that morning commute we cross the street daily, but recently my daughter went ahead without me. I had to stop her to explain the importance of waiting and looking to be sure that it was safe to proceed. It's a daily and weekly conversation we have, and it's a lesson that I need to reinforce with her, assuming she is paying attention to what I'm saying at all. That is because children—especially younger ones—see vehicles and traffic

differently, and can misjudge speed and sounds. The bottom line is the training on safe behaviors is an ongoing process, and it could one day save my daughter's life.

The school bus industry always preaches it is the safest mode used by children to get to and from school, but I challenge you to consider how to make your operations even safer. An ongoing effort to do just that is happening in Colorado, in responses to Anna's death. Advocates for a new safe student protection program that has been years in the making is SB22-085, also known as Anna's Law. If passed, the bill asks for \$13.5 million over three years. The initial \$5.5 million, approved in the state budget by the Senate last month, would go toward implementing technology on buses across the state. As of this writing, the House still needed to vote on the bill.

Would you agree that school bus safety in the danger zone is a persistent problem our industry hasn't been able to fully solve? I see a clear correlation between training and reducing student fatalities. Technology can help, but it's a combination of efforts that will help save lives.

Another industry bellwether that clearly shows how dangerous illegal passing is around the school bus comes from the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services. It announced last month that it is once again conducting its annual one day count of motorists who illegally pass stopped school buses. The most recent survey results date to before the pandemic in 2019, when over 107,000 of the nation's nearly 500,000 school bus drivers reported that 81,841 vehicles illegally passed their buses across 31 states. NASDPTS said those violations equated to 17 million violations occurring nationwide over a 180-day school year.

No matter what this year's survey shows, it's up to you to keep up with the latest training and products available at state and national conferences. I'm excited to see our industry come together this summer. Be sure to save the dates for STN EXPO in Indianapolis on June 3-7 and STN EXPO in Reno, Nevada on July 15-20. Also, the Transporting Students with Disabilities & Special Needs Conference in Frisco, Texas, Nov. 8-12. More details can be found at stnexpo.com.

I invite you to share Anna's story when engaging all the stakeholders in your network to focus on the importance of safety. It's easy to fall into the trap of doing it the way we always have but the outcome could be tragic if we don't change our behavior. Let's honor Anna's memory by doing everything in our power to be safer as an industry.

Visit stnonline.com/go/bw to watch "Children in Traffic" by AAA, which explains the cognitive differences between how children and adults perceive and understand traffic.

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It is everyone's Job to teach our students about school bus Safety lets work together and keep our children safe