

Why school buses don't need seat belts

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Why don't kids have to wear seat belts on school buses? If they have to wear seat belts in cars (smaller kids even need special booster seats), common sense suggests they should have to wear them on the school bus too. — Dan, Toronto.

The people on the bus go up and down in a crash — but they're still safer than in an ordinary car with seat belts, said Transport Canada.

"Transport Canada and the provinces do not require school buses to have seat belts," Roxane Marchand, senior media advisor with the agency, said in an email statement. "This is because compartmentalization — high-backed seats that are padded and closely spaced together — protects passengers in a crash."

There were 3,684 injuries and 11 deaths in crashes on school buses in Canada between 2003 to 2012, Transport Canada notes in their [National Collision Database](#).

In the same period, there were nearly 1.34 million injuries and 22,397 deaths in crashes on Canadian roads in all other vehicles.

"Transport Canada has not deemed seat belts to be mandatory, and basically their rationale is that the school bus safety record is so excellent," said David Carroll, Legislation and Safety Consultant to the Ontario School Bus Association (OSBA). "A child is 16 times safer riding to school in a school bus than riding to school in a family car."

School buses are safe

Buses get in fewer accidents than normal vehicles and when they do crash, there are fewer injuries, Carroll said.

"They're highly visible and we have more skilled and better trained drivers," Carroll said. "And you have a vehicle that sits higher than other traffic — when most vehicles hit a school bus, they collide below the floor line."

When a bus is hit from the front or the rear, kids are protected by the compartment — sort of like the way Christmas tree ornaments are protected in their boxes by those paper dividers.

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"It doesn't require students to do anything other than sit in the seat with their legs ahead of them and not in the aisle," he said. "There's not a lot of room between seats and that's to reduce acceleration in a collision."

But that only works as long as kids stay in the compartment — so it's a problem if the bus rolls over," Carroll said. "And it's doesn't necessarily protect from a side impact."

Kids are actually in more danger around a school bus than on it, Carroll said.

"Kids get hit by other cars walking to or from the bus," he said. "Or they enter the danger zone and get hit by the bus because the driver can't see them." In the U.S. from 2003 to 2012, there were 244 pedestrians killed in [school-transportation-related crashes](#) — 195 were hit by school buses and 48 were hit by other vehicles. In that same ten-year period, 60 passengers were killed on school buses.

Seat belts require stiffer seats

So if kids are safe on buses now, wouldn't seat belts make them even safer?

Not necessarily, Carroll said. If there are seat belts on a school bus, Transport

Canada recommends three-point belts — the harness and lap belt combination seen in most cars. But seats would have to be redesigned to have stiffer seat backs to support the shoulder belts.

"With firmer seat backs, you no longer have the same protection in that compartment," Carroll said. "So any kids who aren't wearing seat belts won't be as protected in a crash as they are now."

And, somebody would have to make sure kids are wearing their seat belts — and that the belts are adjusted to fit the child properly.

"It's possible to have a panel of lights that shows who's not wearing their belts, but that would contribute to driver distraction," Carroll said. "You could have an aide on each bus — but money for all this has to come from somewhere, so you might end up with fewer school buses on the roads and some kids left taking less safe ways to get to school."

No plans to change the rules — yet

Transport Canada decides what safety equipment is required on vehicles. In the case of seat belts, the provinces decide whether or not you have to wear them.

While [Transport Canada doesn't require seat belts](#) on any school bus, individual school districts are free to install belts in existing buses or to buy buses already equipped with seat belts, Carroll said.

"You're not breaking the law if you do install seat belts, but it raises issue with enforcement," Carroll said. "In some provinces, if students under 16 aren't wearing their seat belts, the driver can get the ticket."

Since 2007, Transport Canada has required that 10 per cent of seats on new school buses have to have a latch for [child seats](#) for smaller children.

"They're recommended for kids who are up to four and a half years old or 18

kg," Carroll said. "But there's no provincial requirement to use child seats that I'm aware of."

In the U.S., the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) has required three-point seat belts on newly built minibuses — the smaller school buses under 4,500 kg — since 2011. It doesn't mandate belts on bigger school buses.

Next year, NHTSA will be requiring seat belts on all newly built motor coaches, like the ones used by Greyhound, sold in the U.S. — Transport Canada says it's drafting regulations to follow suit.

Those new rules don't affect school buses — but that could eventually change.

This month, the new head of NHTSA, convened a group to [study whether seat belts should be mandatory on all school buses](#).

Even if school buses don't ever have seat belts, there are still ways to make them safer, Carroll said.

"I would hate the message to be 'We haven't had a death in Ontario since 2007 so we can't improve the system,'" he said. "We shouldn't have any fatalities at all — it's up to Transport Canada to continue to look at this and move forward with any innovation they see fit."

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