

Louisiana, Plagued by Recent Bus Crashes, Prepare for School Bus Safety Week

Within the last four weeks, school bus crashes have made local headlines from New Orleans to Shreveport:

- In Alexandria, a student seriously injured when was run over by a bus with non-functioning back-up lights.
- In Vidalia, 45 students were involved in a bus crash with a garbage truck that seriously wounded two students and the driver
- In Lafayette, six children were taken to the hospital after a car ran a stop sign and hit the side of their bus.
- In Monroe, two dozen students were injured when their bus collided with another vehicle.
- In Shreveport, two children were taken to the hospital after their bus run off the road and crashed into a ditch.
- In Dutchtown, 15 students were taken by ambulance after a chain-reaction crash.
- In West St. John, a student was narrowly able to avoid a crash by grabbing the wheel after his driver passed out.

With all that in mind, the state prepares for National School Bus Safety Week October 20-24. Let's hope that week is a bit safer than the past few.

In all technical definitions, school buses are some of the safest vehicles on the road, but safe doesn't mean risk-free. According to the National Highway Safety Administration, since 1996 1,536 people have died in school transportation-related crashes, and an average of 6 child passengers die each year. (DOT HS 810 813, School Transportation-Related Crashes).

Nearly forty years ago, engineers at UCLA performed a series of school bus crash tests which identified the main causes of injury during a collision.

In order to keep kids safer, the engineers proposed the idea of "compartmentalization," where the child occupants are seated between high-back, well-padded and well-anchored seats capable of absorbing crash forces with large aisle side panels to contain riders. A lap belt was recommended to provide substantial additional protection.

Ten years later, in response to a Congressional mandate, NHTSA adopted some of the suggestions in Federal Motor Vehicle Standard 222. However, seat belts were left out.

Because of the relative safety of school buses, costs to upgrade and other factors NHTSA does not feel that seatbelts are necessary. But how many deaths could have been prevented with seatbelts?

That was the questions after a 2006 bus crash took the lives of 4 Alabama high school students.