

After 4 killed, panel considers seat belts for Ala. school buses

By Jay Reeves

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (AP) — Putting seat belts on school buses could cost millions but might do little to improve safety since few students would use them, experts told a task force Monday at a hearing near where four students died when a school bus plunged off an elevated highway.

Testimony from the hearing — called in response to the November tragedy — will help determine whether Gov. Bob Riley asks legislators to require seat belts on the more than 8,500 buses that transport some 375,000 students daily in Alabama.

Only five states — California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey and New York — have seat belt requirements for buses.

Transportation researcher Jeff Tsai said a study found that a new bus equipped with a three-point restraint system, including lap belts and shoulder harnesses, costs about \$10,000 more than one with only heavily padded, high seat backs — the standard protection system used now.

But as few as half of the elementary-age students riding on 13 buses equipped with seat belts used the restraints during a pilot study in North Carolina, he said, and no high schoolers would use them, said Tsai, a researcher at North Carolina State University.

An advocate for seat belts in buses, Martha Warren Bidez, said students will wear seat belts that are comfortable and suggested that Tsai's study was flawed.

"I don't think it was a fair test of the compliance of those kids," said Bidez, a professor of biomedical engineering at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

An official with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Roger Saul, said he would prefer his own children ride in a bus with the current design of high-backed, padded seats than in one equipped with lap and shoulder belts.

"I think the studies ... show that it's hard to get benefits above the current (system)," said Saul, director of the Office of Crashworthiness Standards with NHTSA.

Alabama school systems operate more than 8,500 school buses, and the experts recommended against refitting old buses with new seat belts. Replacing the state's fleet with new, seat belt-equipped buses could cost an extra \$85 million, based on Tsai's research.

The task force was formed by Riley to consider school bus safety after the Huntsville crash, which injured three dozen Lee High School students along with the four teen-age classmates who died. The panel will hear two days of testimony from national authorities on school bus design and safety.

"Our job is to gather as much information as possible and then make a recommendation to the governor on the topic of whether seat belts should be installed on Alabama buses," said State School Superintendent Joe Morton.

Several speakers showed videotapes or computer simulations of crash-test dummies being thrown around inside buses during tests. Belts can help prevent injury in frontal crashes, they said, but they can increase the risk of serious injury in side-impact accidents.

Alabama law requires school bus drivers to wear seat belts, but the law doesn't apply to students and buses typically lack such safety equipment.

Dr. Stephan Moran, a trauma surgeon at Huntsville Hospital, said students are far safer on school buses than in cars or walking to schools. Installing restraints on old buses not designed for seat belts would put children at greater risk than having no seat belts at all, he said.

"The day they design buses from the ground up for three-point restraints, that is a better option," said Moran. "Right now, though, that is not the case."

Industry specialist Robin Leeds said the only way to improve bus safety with seat belts is by requiring lap belts with shoulder harnesses and then training and monitoring students to make sure they are strapped in properly.

Ideally, she said, buses should have a second adult on board other than the driver to monitor belt usage.

"There's no reason to put them in buses if students are not going to use them. It's wasting money," said Leeds, representing the National School Transportation Association.

A bus carrying 40 students from Lee High School nose-dived off an elevated ramp from Interstate 565 on Nov. 20, slamming into the ground 30 feet below. A lawsuit filed over the crash claims the driver wasn't wearing his seat belt, contributing to the accident.

The National Transportation Safety Board has said school buses are designed to protect occupants without seat belts. While older buses typically had metal seat backs, new designs include padding and closer spacing to reduce the chance of injury.

NTSB member Deborah A.P. Hersman said about 16 children die annually entering or exiting U.S. school buses, and 10 children die inside buses on average each year. The agency is currently investigating five school bus crashes nationally, she said.

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