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Traffic Safety Experts Push for Under-Ride Guard Mandate on School Buses



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Traffic safety advocates are saying under-ride guards on school buses would save lives and should be mandatory.

Researchers at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute this week said in an [article](#) that this safety issue should be addressed. The comments were in response to an Oct. 9 incident in which a Brighton (N.Y.) High School student driving three friends plowed into the back of a school bus.

According to NHTSA, about 26,000 accidents involve school buses each year, but supporters said that number could be lower if a metal bar would be placed below the rear bumper to prevent a vehicle running into the back of the bus from becoming wedged beneath it.

NHTSA implemented the under-ride guard requirement on all trucks, trailers and semitrailers made on or after January 1998, according to a study published by the administration. But it showed through analysis of Fatality Analysis Reporting Systems findings that there was "not unequivocal evidence that the guards are effective and the FARS analysis shows that there remains room for improvement."

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The school bus industry in the past has addressed the issue of under-ride guards on school buses. The National Congress on School Transportation in 2005 passed a resolution asking NHTSA to study the number of crashes stemming from a school bus that was stopped or was slowing down and motorists traveling behind react too late and crash into the rear.

While NHTSA currently is investigating under-ride guards on single trucks and commercial buses, the administration said that investigation does not include school buses because of the additional concern of passenger safety within the school bus, said Bob Riley, executive director of NASDPTS.

Many in the industry recognize that under riding on school buses is a definite hazard, but there is the overhang issue of school buses and the concern that adding an under-ride guard or any other improvements to the body or chassis may injure student passengers more because it would change the crash impact transfer on the school bus.

Denny Coughlin, owner of the School Bus Training Company in Rosemount, Minn., said he's been working on this notion for the past 15 years, and addressed the issue when he chaired the chassis committee at the National Congress on School Transportation. He, too, recognizes these issues, but added that the industry could do something to prevent rear collisions by adding a secondary bumper with some flexibility moving up and down.

"A bumper can be made that when it hits from the rear, it locks in place, but can be flexible enough during dips," he added.

Max Christensen, state director of Iowa and current president of NASDPTS, said his state committee has discussed adding under-ride guards to Iowa's buses at the 2005 and 2010 NCST, but the idea was defeated both times.

"By installing the under ride guards, our group felt that the impact energy from the other vehicle would much more likely be transferred to the bus body/chassis itself than if the guards are not present. By doing so, that impact energy would more than likely reach the kids on our buses and could result in more injuries," he said.

Christensen added: "Though we certainly care about other motorists and want to try to prevent injuries and deaths with them if possible, our bottom line is protecting the kids on our buses."

Coughlin noted the industry has an obligation to protect motorists behind the school bus in addition to student passengers.

"It isn't all drunks who hit us. Many times it's moms who are taking their kids to school," he said. "If I could change one thing in this industry before I die, this would be it."

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Jeff Mohr • 5 months ago

Max is correct. Adding a fixed under-ride guard would transfer all the crash energy to the frame of the bus and eventually the kids. This is similar to a receiver hitch on the rear of a pickup truck or SUV. Receiver hitches actually increase your risk of whiplash by 22% because there is no give.

You are far better off letting the bullet vehicle under-ride the bus. This will dissipate the crash energy over a wider area and longer time frame.

There are energy absorbing under-ride guards and that would be the only way to go. Adding a "fixed" under-ride guard would be suicide for the kids.

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