

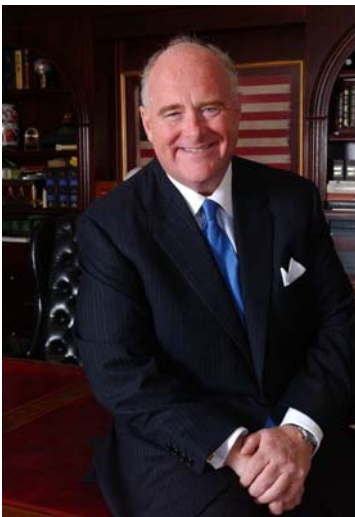
Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

## No seat belts on buses fails kids

By DON KEENAN  
Published on: 01/30/06

Several children were injured when one school bus rear-ended another in Paulding County last week. The collision put a 7-year-old boy in a coma. Just days later, three children on a Lake Butler, Fla., school bus were seriously injured in a deadly accident involving a tractor-trailer.

There has been an average of one school bus collision each day for the past 60 days, according to news reports. This rash of dangerous collisions demands revisiting our government's failure to require seat belts on school buses.



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The school bus industry boasts that, among all motorized vehicles, school buses have the lowest record of injuries and fatalities. The statistics clearly support the industry's claim. After commissioning a number of studies on this issue over the last 12 years, the federal government backs the school bus industry's position that seat belts are not necessary to protect children on school buses.

Let's examine why children are not seriously injured in most collisions involving a school bus. The school bus sits significantly higher than the majority of vehicles on the road and is among the heaviest. Thus, if a smaller vehicle collides with a school bus, even at a high speed, the children can walk away uninjured.

But what happens when a school bus is the smaller of the two vehicles in a collision? Two grieving families in Arlington, Va., late last year discovered the basic rule of physics: a school bus is no match for a big truck. Lilibeth Gomez and Harrison Orosco, both third-graders, died when a tractor-trailer collided with their school bus. Another child was killed last year when a cement truck broadsided the child's school bus. Without question, the severity of the injuries to the Paulding County boy and the three children in Lake Butler were because their buses were struck by, respectively, another school bus and a tractor-trailer.

While there is some debate about the specifics of each of these deaths, common sense tells us that seat belts would have made a difference. If the children who were killed had been belted, they might have been seriously injured, but they would probably still be alive

today.

For several years, the National Coalition for School Bus Safety ( [www.ncsbs.org](http://www.ncsbs.org) ), a grass-roots organization based in Virginia, has advocated the legislative mandate of seat belts in school buses. The founder of that organization has one painful thing in common with the two families in Virginia: His son died when a tractor-trailer struck his school bus.

Since the 1980s, numerous child safety groups have criticized the federal government for failing to mandate school bus seat belts. In response, the government launched a number of public relations campaigns defending its position. When safety groups contended that leaving children unbelted in a school bus was, at a minimum, making it difficult for parents to get their children into the habit of wearing seat belts in cars, the government commissioned a full-blown study and concluded that the groups' "carry over" argument was not valid.

Is the government's concern that making kids safe by wearing seat belts will cost a lot of money? Most estimates put the figure at \$1,500 to \$2,000 per school bus. Let us harken back to the raging debate in the 1960s, when many considered consumer advocate Ralph Nader extreme for demanding mandatory seat belts in all cars.

Even though car manufacturers argued the severe economic cost of the practice, fortunately safety and common sense prevailed and all of us now enjoy the safety of seat belts not only in the front seat, but in the back seat as well. Today, arguing against seat belts in passenger cars would be viewed as reckless.

Federal law does require vans and smaller buses that commonly transport school-age children to have seat belts because of their size. Also, the same federal agencies that concluded school buses without seat belts are safe require bus seat belts for preschool children.

Even without a federal law, 300 municipalities and a few states, such as New York, New Jersey and Florida, require new school buses to be equipped with seat belts. Unfortunately, the Florida law does not apply to buses manufactured before 2001. The bus involved in last week's collision was manufactured before 2001, and thus had no seat belts. As a gauge of public sentiment on mandatory seat belts, consider the multimillion-dollar civil verdict a Waco, Texas, jury awarded last November to the survivors and families of those who died in a 2003 crash. The jury decided that the manufacturer of the passenger bus involved in the crash (which was the same size and design as a school bus) was responsible for the serious injuries and deaths because the bus lacked seat belts.

Ultimately, the debate will be centered on the typical "cost benefit" rationale. Do we add seat belts to all school buses so that we can save lives and prevent injuries in the event that a larger vehicle strikes one school bus? In this debate, we must consider how the Paulding County and Lake Butler, Fla., parents would answer the question.

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