



The Honourable Scott Emerson MP
Minister for Transport and Main Roads

Our ref: PP1898-12

Your ref: Petitions

22 JUN 2012

Mr Neil Laurie
The Clerk of the Parliament
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Mr Laurie

I refer to a petition number 1898-12 lodged with the Legislative Assembly by Mr Peter Wellington MP, Member for Nicklon on 30 May 2012 about school bus safety.

School transport safety and the use of seat belts on school buses is an important issue that has been investigated a number of times. Findings consistently indicate that travel by bus is statistically the safest way to access school regardless of whether seat belts are installed or not. Bus travel is not the same as travel in a car as buses are very heavy vehicles usually travelling at slower speeds. Timetabled urban bus services do not require seat belts to be fitted in buses, even if most passengers are children. This is the same in all Australian jurisdictions.

The safety record of the industry is extremely high with no significant crashes or mortality rate attributable to the absence of seat belts in school buses. To maintain this excellent safety record, the government has implemented a range of programs over time. The focus of these programs is overall bus safety relative to overall risk, not just the issue of seat belts. I have been advised that the most significant element in school bus safety is having a rollover compliant school bus fleet. Rollover compliance is a standard that allows the bus to maintain its structural integrity in the event of a rollover crash. In such circumstances, seat belts would be of little value if a bus is not rollover compliant.

Consistent with this approach, the School Bus Upgrade Scheme (SchoolBUS) was implemented from 2002. It funds the progressive replacement of all non-rollover compliant buses providing school services under contract with the Department of Transport and Main Roads. The program was expanded in 2009 to fund the replacement of all government contracted school buses as they reach maximum age through to 2029. To date over 1000 buses have been introduced into the fleet to meet that standard.

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Based on practical mechanical limitations, very few crashes and available funding, it is not feasible to install seat belts on every school bus in the state at this time. As noted above, the government has implemented a risk based approach for school buses. Seat belts and other specialised safety features are mandated and fully funded for school buses that travel on specified gazetted steep roads. These roads are known as very steep or long steep downgrade roads. On all other roads throughout the state, the installation of seat belts is at the operator's discretion. Where operators choose to fit them on school buses that travel these roads, SchoolBUS provides contributory funding for contracted school bus operators to fit lap-sash seat belts which comply with *Australian Design Rule 59/00*. The balance is available from a Commonwealth Government scheme.

In terms of other related issues, I am informed that a trial conducted by the department after the release of the 2001 Queensland Schools Transport Safety Task Force report established that even when seat belts are installed, the actual usage ratio is very low, negating any potential benefits. The Task Force also found that for very young children, use of adult designed seat belts may give a false sense of security to parents and the community as young children can slip under the seat belts in a crash. Also, children up to a certain age need booster seats if travelling in cars with car seat belts. However, booster seats are not available on buses.

Standing passengers are not allowed on specified gazetted steep roads. Also, the *Transport Operations (Passenger Transport) Standard 2010* mandates that school buses that carry standing passengers must not be overloaded, should be specially designed and constructed to carry standing passengers and that no passenger stands for more than 20km. The department is not aware of any significant incidences of standees over longer distances.

The department is committed to ensuring the highest safety standards are met when school children are travelling to and from school. I will continue to monitor this issue to ensure evidence-based best practice continues to underpin school transport safety in Queensland.

Yours sincerely



Scott Emerson MP
Minister for Transport and Main Roads