

Motor Vehicle Accidents and Risk Reduction

There are a number of contributors to motor vehicle accidents. These include highway design and maintenance, vehicle design and maintenance, traffic flow and density, the weather, pedestrian activity, other driver's alertness and skill, or any combination of these. While it would be comforting, to a limited extent, to be able to place the blame for accidents on these causative elements, it quickly becomes obvious that we can exercise only a limited control, if any, over these factors.

We do, in fact, control the most important of these factors; driver alertness, attitude and skill. Drivers can and should be accountable for their adjustment to all of the factors over which we have so little control. This, of course, assumes they are properly selected, trained and supervised.

It should be explicitly understood that we are discussing not only the school bus driver, but all who drive any kind of school vehicle, as well as, those who drive their own vehicles for business purposes. Further, we do not limit accidents to those on the highway while the vehicle or bus is moving, but also include those that occur while the bus or vehicle is loading or unloading and on school grounds.

While it is important that persons selected have the required skills or ability for the other part of their jobs, putting a highly trained technician or professional behind the wheel of a school vehicle and assuring that they can drive skillfully and safely is a critical management decision.

It is strongly recommended that the motor vehicle record of all applicants who will drive as part of their job is reviewed before an offer of employment is made. People with a poor driving history are not only dangerous to themselves, but to others as well. Past driving history is one prediction of future driving behavior.

In addition, before an employment offer is made, the applicants should be asked to demonstrate his/her current driving ability with a short trip behind the wheel of a school vehicle with a trained observer. If the applicant cannot demonstrate adequate driving ability but has other technical or professional skills that are needed, then a driver training course should be required to bring that person up to a standard performance behind the wheel. This will be far less costly than a serious motor vehicle liability claim later.

Put another way, simply because the applicant may be a good teaching candidate or a good maintenance person or A.V. technician does not mean he or she is a safe driver.

The growing concern with highway safety has also produced research studies dealing with driver behavior. These findings and their implications are summarized below.

- **The overwhelming number of accidents is caused by mental lapses or poor judgment of drivers with clean records.** This means you must be persistent in a continuing campaign for improved skills and awareness of highway conditions for all employees who drive any school vehicle including those you consider to be your best drivers.
- **Most drivers are not adequately prepared to react appropriately in an emergency or stress situation.** For example, most drivers faced with the situation of avoiding an obstacle on the road ahead of them will lock the brakes and skid rather than attempt to maneuver around the obstacle when there is room to do so. A skidding vehicle is out of control.
- **Many accidents occur because the driver is unfamiliar with the road and cannot control the vehicle when a bad road condition is suddenly encountered.**
- **Many accidents occur when a driver is in a new and unfamiliar vehicle.** A large percentage of vehicle accidents occur within the first 150 miles of use. Do you give your employees orientation when they start to use a new or different vehicle which may have different control locations, instrument locations, or just a different feel?

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- **Distractions are a leading cause of accidents.** This is always the special problem of bus drivers but you should be concerned with distractions that you can control, such as cell phones or radios, both official and unofficial. If your buses are equipped with two-way radios, do not allow them to be used for anything but that for which they are intended. Personal radios especially the ear-plug type should be banned from all vehicles used for school purposes.
- **An employee's emotional state can result in aggressive or inattentive driving.** Making employees aware of these tendencies may help to reduce the risk. If you know of any driver, and again we mean all drivers, not just bus drivers, who are going through an especially difficult time emotionally, you should consider temporary reassignment or some way to keep him/her off the road until things settle down. This is a delicate matter which must be handled on a personal basis to avoid further upset and resentment.
- **Moving accidents occur frequently at intersections and while backing up.** Both are preventable and can be reduced through driver training and strictly enforced rules. Many school districts have designed routes and traffic flow to eliminate the need to back up. School bus drivers sometimes develop the attitude that they have the right of way or that it will be extended to them by other motorists. This assumption causes most intersection accidents. In addition, drivers may not have an appreciation of the size of the vehicle or school bus and the need to maintain adequate clearances while turning at intersections, especially at busy roads.
- **No one should back any school vehicle without physically checking the area immediately behind the vehicle.** Relying on others, especially students in the back of a bus for this information can be worse than useless. Bus routes, school pick up and discharge areas, and parking areas should be arranged with as few requirements for backing up as possible. Drivers should never be permitted to make personal business stops with school vehicles. Many collisions occur in shopping mall parking areas. This is a needless and sometimes embarrassing kind of loss.
- **Most other driving losses occur when the school vehicle speed exceeds that which is safe for the road conditions.** Bus routing should be done with the worst weather and traffic conditions in mind. A new bus route planned in August may take thirty minutes. In February, it might take additional five or ten minutes. Do not expect your drivers to meet difficult time schedules. They will probably try by going faster than they should.

There are two other important elements in controlling motor vehicle accidents. These are the continuing review of driver performance and frequent refresher training in safe vehicle operation.

Driving performance evaluation can be both formal and informal. In the formal mode, each driver is evaluated by a competent observer in the vehicle while operated by the driver being observed. Evaluation should be done at least annually and result in a written record showing driver strengths and weaknesses. A one-page checklist can help accomplish this task in an orderly fashion, and provide a permanent record of the performance and any comments by the observer and driver who should always see the record created. If this observation uncovers serious driving weaknesses then immediate retraining is indicated.

All drivers should receive some form of refresher training each year. Such training should be a requirement for maintaining employment status and may consist of both classroom activities and behind-the-wheel skill development. A driving skill rodeo is a very good way to accomplish this objective, and assistance can be obtained from police authorities or highway safety programs at colleges and universities in conducting such a contest.

In summary, the four essential elements of controlling motor vehicle accidents consist of driver selection, training, performance appraisal and retraining. Keeping detailed records of all driving incidents will also be an invaluable source of information about the effectiveness of your safety program.