

**Testimony
from the
National Association for Pupil Transportation
to the
Alabama Governor's Study Group on School Bus Seat Belts**

Good morning Dr. Morton and members of the Governor's Study Group on School Bus Seat Belts. My name is Michael Martin and I am Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer of the National Association for Pupil Transportation.

Thank you for inviting me to be here today.

We were all shocked on November 20, 2006 when a school bus plowed off an interstate overpass here in Huntsville and plunged head first into the pavement below from more than 30 feet in the air. We all were - and still are - grief-stricken by the fact that Nicole Ford, Tanesha Hill, Crystal McCrary, and Christine Collier died in this horrific crash and that several others were seriously injured.

Almost instantly after the accident, major media outlets began reporting that the school bus did not have seat belts. While this was understandable, in our view, it was also appalling because it encouraged people to deduce that seat belts would have saved lives in this crash. No one could have known for sure that day if seat belts would have prevented anyone from dying in that crash.

My remarks today, therefore, are not addressed to people whose opinions about seat belts on school buses can be easily influenced, especially by the media. They are intended for anyone and everyone who is genuinely interested in making and keeping children as safe as possible in a school bus.

Many of us believe to our core that children are always safer when they wear seat belts, whether it is in a car, a plane or a school bus. Although we embrace hard data when it is available, we do not necessarily need hard data to support our belief on this issue; we know it in our bones.

By the same token, true advocates are also willing to analyze data objectively and listen to the opinions of scientists, engineers and other experts, especially those who work for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

NHTSA is a branch of the United States Department of Transportation that is responsible for reducing deaths, injuries and economic losses resulting from motor vehicle crashes. NHTSA sets and enforces safety performance standards - called Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) - for motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment, including school buses.

According to their web site, NHTSA also "investigates safety defects in motor vehicles, sets and enforces fuel economy standards, helps states and local communities reduce the threat of drunk drivers, ***promotes the use of safety belts*** [emphasis added], child safety seats and air bags, investigates odometer fraud, establishes and enforces vehicle anti-theft regulations and provides consumer information on motor vehicle safety topics." NHTSA also conducts research on driver behavior and traffic safety, to develop the most efficient and effective means of bringing about safety improvements.

In short, NHTSA is the federal regulatory body that NAPT and the vast majority of its membership looks to for clear guidance and definitive recommendations on school bus safety issues in general and passenger crash protection in particular.

In April 2002, NHTSA completed an extensive evaluation of school bus passenger crash protection and sent a report on its work to Congress. Many people were expecting them to use this opportunity to settle the issue of whether or not lap/shoulder belts should be integrated into the passenger crash protection system of school bus. They did not.

Whether NHTSA was unable or unwilling to settle the matter is, at this point, irrelevant; the outcome is the same in either case - everyone who wanted a clear answer from NHTSA on this matter is currently frustrated and perplexed.

NAPT interprets the statements about lap/shoulder belts that NHTSA included in its report to Congress (which have been referenced by other presenters to this panel) to mean that the current system of passenger crash protection called compartmentalization, which has been required in all school buses since April 1, 1977, continues to be the best approach, providing excellent automatic protection in all but the most catastrophic circumstances where injuries and fatalities likely could not be avoided by any safety system.

As a result, we believe modifications to the current system of school bus passenger crash protection should only occur when we can be sure beyond a reasonable doubt that those modifications will improve the safety of each and every child in a school bus. In fact, our organization will only support changes to compartmentalization when we are sure that those changes will not compromise student safety in any way.

We fully understand the national resolve to increase belt use in traditional passenger vehicles, and the common opinion that, "if my car has seat belts so should my child's school bus." It is one of the reasons calls for seat belts in school buses make headlines after every serious crash. In these situations, we wish NHTSA would, at the very least, remind parents and the news media that school buses and the family car are very different vehicles from a crashworthiness perspective and, therefore, do not necessarily utilize the same safety strategies. But they don't so we do it, even when it's not the popular thing to do.

We have called upon NHTSA to reevaluate, on a priority basis, FMVSS 222, "School Bus Passenger Seating and Crash Protection," with the goal of establishing a safety system that will definitively enhance the current passenger crash protection for all children that ride a school bus. Moreover, we have also called upon NHTSA to make an active effort to educate the American public about the importance of safe school bus transportation as a logical way to reduce deaths, injuries and economic losses resulting from motor vehicle crashes.

NAPT is also prepared to ask Congress to provide, if necessary and in the most expeditious timeframe possible, a mandate and complete funding for NHTSA's work as well as any necessary changes substantiated by the research.

All of the actions I referenced here this morning are intended to help anyone and everyone who is genuinely interested in making and keeping children as safe as possible in a school bus. We believe NHTSA is obligated to ensure that students riding in a school bus are as safe as humanly possible and ensure that the public is better informed about school passenger crash protection. We hope you agree.

We believe it is vitally important to constantly reassess existing safety measures no matter how safe our children currently are on school buses. It has been thirty years since the initiation of compartmentalization and over that time there certainly have been advances in materials and information from crash investigations that would merit consideration of an upgrade.

Although there are differences of opinion among us, on the bottom line, we want the same thing: safer school bus transportation. NAPT believes we all can and should work together to ensure that students riding in a school bus are as safe as humanly possible and to ensure that the public is better informed about school bus safety issues generally. We invite you to join with us in this effort.