



Addressing Security Risks in School Transportation

PETE BAXTER, CHARLES GAUTHIER, AND JOHN GREEN

Baxter is with the Division of School Traffic Safety and Emergency Planning, Indiana Department of Education, Indianapolis. Gauthier is Executive Director, National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, The Plains, Virginia. Green is Supervisor, Office of School Transportation, California Department of Education, Sacramento.

NOTE: Point of View presents opinions of contributing authors on transportation issues. The views expressed are not necessarily those of TRB or TR News. Readers are encouraged to comment in a letter to the editor on the issues and opinions presented.

School bus transportation comprises a significant portion of highway travel—more than 4 billion vehicle-miles per year—and the vehicles carry large numbers of children every school day. Many security professionals have recognized that school buses are a “soft target”—that is, easy to attack. Terrorist acts aimed at children have occurred in other parts of the world and have included attacks on school buses.

In the United States, communities must take action to ensure the highest levels of security for school bus transportation. Like so many other aspects of life after the attacks of September 11, 2001, school bus transportation poses new challenges to maintaining security.

The realities of the security risks and threats in school bus transportation therefore must be examined, along with information about the various approaches that school bus transportation professionals can take to identify and minimize risks and threats. A key step in this process would be to study school bus structural features that may affect the response of law enforcement officers to a potential terrorist situation. A forum also should be established for extended discussion on the importance of ensuring the security of children on school buses and for the sharing of best-practice approaches.

Security Warnings

School buses constitute the largest highway public transportation system in the United States, providing 10 billion passenger trips per year. Each school day, approximately 500,000 school buses transport 25 million students to and from school and carry millions more to athletic events, extracurricular activities, and field trips.

Terrorist activities in other parts of the world have not spared schoolchildren. In Beslan, Russia, more than 150 children were among the 331 people killed after a two-day hostage situation in a school. Are



schoolchildren in the United States at risk?

In July 2004, the media reported that the U.S. military in Iraq had found terrorist hideouts that contained information about several U.S. schools. In September 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation notified school districts in six states that unidentified individuals had obtained photographs and diagrams of local school buildings, as well as copies of emergency preparedness plans. In an October 2004 letter, the U.S. Department of Education alerted school districts across the nation about possible terrorist targeting of school facilities, including school buses.

During the past year, thefts of school bus equipment and vandalism of school buses have increased in the United States. Hundreds of thefts of two-way radios from school buses in two states have led to a major law enforcement investigation. The concern is that unauthorized individuals may be able to monitor communications between dispatchers and school buses or may be able to provide school bus drivers with false information or directions. The stolen radios also could be used for communication among criminals or terrorists.

Large-scale vandalism of safety features on school buses, such as brakes and tires, also has increased in

frequency in the past year. These may not be terrorist activities but demonstrate the vulnerability of school buses—for example, to the planting of explosive devices.

To call attention to this vulnerability, a school bus driver in one state filed several false bomb threats against buses. Although the driver was arrested and convicted of a misdemeanor, the point was made about the lack of school bus security measures.

Initiating Responses

We must recognize and accept the need for new awareness in response to the terrorist activities and threats of the past few years. We also need a thorough understanding of the potential impact of terrorism and other acts of violence that may target pupil transportation. Finally, we must develop programs and plans to avoid or minimize the effects of possible acts of terrorism.

The protection of our children starts with ensuring that the most routine tasks and functions are safe and secure. We must educate and train students, parents, teachers, administrators, and especially drivers in the techniques and methods of preparedness.

Determining an appropriate level of action, however, is difficult. Overreaction may elicit undue fears from the public about riding school buses. The credibility of the pupil transportation industry with our partners in prevention—such as local law enforcement and emergency responders—requires investment in knowledge, training, and professionalism.

How do we become more aware and prepared? We should establish our security initiatives on the fundamentals of personal safety:

- ◆ **Vigilance.** Denying the likelihood of terrorist acts and citing the lack of precedents can make our industry an easy prey. A false sense of security, as well as apathy and ignorance, are allies of those who perpetrate violence and harm.

- ◆ **Audits.** Assess the level of security. Most school transportation operations have safety committees—security should be added to their activities.

- ◆ **Education.** Learn the threats to the operation and be proactive in prevention. Take training classes, attend lectures, and read published material from experts on security, such as the Transportation Security Administration.

- ◆ **Policies and procedures.** Develop policies and procedures for drivers, dispatchers, mechanics, first-line supervisors, and administrators for the management of security incidents. The administration, school board, or board of directors should review, endorse, and adopt these policies and procedures officially. The policies should be published, so that all parties are aware of them and have access to them.

- ◆ **Training.** All personnel should receive training in the adopted policies and procedures and should know their specific roles and responsibilities. Written policies and procedures will not succeed unless personnel are trained to use them. Practice sessions should be scheduled to determine if the training has been successful and to identify any shortcomings.

- ◆ **Supervision.** Supervisors must set the example for compliance with the policies and procedures and must make sure that employees follow suit. Supervisors must foster an environment that promotes awareness, preparedness, and due diligence by adhering to security policies and procedures daily.

Other Preparations

The structural characteristics of school buses should be an early topic of study. Local law enforcement personnel, terrorist response task forces, emergency rescue teams, and related groups must be knowledgeable about how school buses are built—the construction and materials differ from those of transit buses and motorcoaches.

All of the appropriate organizations ideally should have an opportunity to practice a security scenario involving a school bus. Another essential step would be to create a digital photo library for each type and manufacture of school bus, to provide a variety of information, such as engine location and type; fuel type, fuel tank location, and capacity; battery location; and entrance door and emergency exit locations—including the operation of each feature.

Forum for Discussion

An old saying states that smart people learn from their own mistakes, but wise people learn from the mistakes of others. In the past century, the school bus transportation industry was both smart and wise in terms of safety, not only responding to mistakes, but also cooperating and complying with every regulatory action at the federal and state levels. The results are noteworthy and admirable—school buses are the safest type of motor vehicle on the nation's highways.

Society and the school bus transportation industry now must take whatever actions are necessary to ensure that the safest form of highway travel also becomes the most secure. The statistical likelihood of being involved in a terrorist attack may be miniscule—nevertheless, taking actions for prevention is prudent and necessary.

By identifying the terrorist threat at its extreme and taking reasonable and appropriate actions, we may decrease the risk of a terrorist act, as well as the likelihood of less serious but more common acts of crime directed at school transportation. It is the least we can do for our passengers!