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MEMORANDUM

To: Dick Morris  
From: Marc A. Schwartz  
Re: School Bus Safety  
Date: 10/26/95

The accident in Illinois this past week has renewed the issue of school bus safety. This memo is designed to highlight some of the criticisms and proposed reforms. The problems and suggestions are grouped into three categories:

- Equipment
- Personnel
- Train-Bus Safety

**Equipment**

Safety Belts

Most parents and safety officials find it ridiculous that many regular school buses lack passenger seat belts. Proponents of seat belts argue that they are an important life saving measure. The cost of installing seat belts, \$40 million nationally, amounts to one penny, per child, per day of school. "The government decided it's not worth the money... Seat belts do save lives but not enough lives to justify the \$40 million it would take to outfit all the country's school buses." Recently, New Jersey became the first state to require that all school buses have safety belts and that they be worn at all times. Just eight days after the NJ law went into effect, 20 children, all belted, survived a head on crash with a car en route to school. Safety experts maintain that at least half of those children would have died had they not been wearing seat-belts.

School Bus Design

The concept of school bus compartmentalization- strong, well padded seats with high backs and seat spacing to safely retain and cushion students during a crash- apparently makes buses the safest form of surface transportation, according to the NTSB. However such designs become ineffective for many of the common accidents involving school buses, most noticeably with rollovers. Improved designs, while helpful, would prove far more effective when used in conjunction with seat-belts and other technological improvements (see below).

Child Safety Outside the School Bus

*Bus Stops-* There are rarely signs indicating the presence of a school bus stop. Cars and trucks barrel through suburban and city roads, and while many school districts teach safety on the bus to younger children, they fail to educate them about the dangers of waiting at a bus stop and crossing in front of buses. Children need to be taught about how to behave at a bus stop and traffic patterns must be established that help to insure child safety. Such patterns include having slower speed limits along bus routes in the morning

and afternoon when children are being transported to school, road signs that clearly indicate drivers are approaching school bus stops, and placing bus stops in locations that would enhance child safety (i.e. streets with wide sidewalks; not placing stops on street-corners to prevent cars that are turning and jumping the curb from hitting waiting children).

*Children hit by buses-* Most students are injured by their own bus rather than by passing motorists. Some counties in New York have tried to combat this by experimenting with the concept of "danger zones." They train students to recognize that when exiting the bus, they are entering a situation which might prove harmful. Other communities are experimenting with technology to protect students. A radar system is being developed to help school bus drivers avoid hitting children. This radar system would scan the areas out of the bus drivers sight- to the right of the bus and below the windshield close to the bus. The sensing device could relay a signal to a panel that could be seen by the driver and would alert him to presence of pedestrians.

## **Personnel**

### Bus-Drivers

In Maine, all school bus drivers will soon be subjected to state-mandated drug testing. Pilots are subjected to drug testing, and many planes in the air carry fewer passengers than a packed school bus, therefore why not test the drivers who we entrust the safety of our children with on a daily basis?

### Training of Rescue Workers

Randolph Township recently conducted a mock rescue of an overturned school bus. Randolph Township firefighter/paramedic Joyce Bachman, who coordinated the event, said the department routinely tries to provide various forms of hands-on training... In staged accidents, fire and rescue teams enter the scene with limited information... The training is extremely valuable... "It's a lot harder to get through and took a lot longer than we thought it would." Such exercises have been deemed "valuable learning experiences... The mock accident is so realistic and so frightening, it really raises the drivers awareness of what would take place in a situation like this. I really believe it makes them better drivers... and make rescue workers far more prepared to handle such emergencies..."

### Training of Bus Drivers

Drivers of buses in most counties must have a commercial driver's license, which requires passing a skills test and a road test. Training also includes six hours in a classroom, six hours observing another driver and another six hours being observed by other drivers. Many communities have fairly lax laws regarding pulling drivers off the job. In Fort Lauderdale, a driver can be taken off a route only if they are found at fault in two preventable accidents. Stiffer penalties need to be introduced to punish bad drivers. [Many counties though, throughout the nation, are having trouble attracting qualified bus drivers.]

### Driver Health

Some communities across the country are reporting that drivers are fainting or having black outs behind the wheels of the bus. In some instances, drivers are having repeat episodes and are still permitted to drive. Counties need to establish strict physical criteria in much the same way that pilots have their physical criteria evaluated on a routine basis.

### Motorists

Statistics show that most accidents take place outside the bus. Motorists must be made alert of the danger associated with school busses and face stiff penalties for driving recklessly near a school bus or bus stop.

### **Train-Bus Safety**

#### Intersections

The intersection where the Illinois accident took place was designed poorly. Route 14 was built too close to the railroad, and if a train is coming through, a motorist has about 21 seconds between the time the lights flash red and the train comes barreling through. There are now reports that the lights and signals operated incorrectly, keeping the bus on the tracks when the gates and lights activated. There was no time to escape. However the intersection in question is only one of many where school buses cross badly designed intersections. Intersections must be redesigned and regular testing of lights and gates at train intersections must become a priority of local traffic enforcement personnel.

#### Train Safety

The nations locomotive engineers blasted the Federal Railroad Administration following the incident. "For ten years, the FRA has ignored testimony and dragged its feet on implementing NTSB conclusions that two way emergency brakes would prevent train accidents, hazmat spills, fatalities and injuries. A recent investigation of a train collision revealed that there "would have been no collision had two-way brakes been installed. Two-way brakes allow the engineer to apply emergency brakes from both the rear and front of a train. In 1989 the NTSB recommended "requiring the use of two-way brake device." Most trains still lack the brakes.

Exec -  
School Bus  
Safety

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

29-Nov-1995 10:06am

TO: Bruce N. Reed  
FROM: Michael T. Schmidt  
Domestic Policy Council  
CC: Paul J. Weinstein, Jr  
SUBJECT: RE: School Bus Safety

It sounds to me like NHTSA is working quietly behind the scenes with states to raise awareness on the training issue and to try and get them to raise training requirements. It may be appropriate for us to use the ol' bully pulpit approach here -- NHTSA could launch a public awareness campaign, or pull together a study and suggest (not require) a minimum level of training for states to adopt. Perhaps even enlist the states that are already ahead of the curve on this in the effort. From what NHTSA said to me, they consider this area the single most important to improving bus safety, and although they do not favor taking a harder regulatory line, I got the feeling they would not be at all adverse to doing something on this level of awareness building.

As for the WH, if we wanted to do something on this front, we could fold a message on school bus safety into our overall education message: Providing a good education for our children does not begin and end at the classroom door -- it also involves providing safe and drug-free schools, providing nutritious school lunches, and getting the children to school safe and sound. Or something like that. I agree with you -- not a huge visionary pillar to hang our hats on, but something to think about.

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

22-Nov-1995 10:46am

TO: Bruce N. Reed  
FROM: Michael T. Schmidt  
Domestic Policy Council  
CC: Paul J. Weinstein, Jr  
SUBJECT: School Bus Safety

I recently collected some information about school bus safety that I thought you might be interested in:

#### Federal Government Role

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) at the Department of Transportation currently sets a number of (but not all -- the States set a number as well) standards and regulations for school bus safety. The standard setting process goes through the regular administrative rulemaking process, so the government has fairly broad leeway in deciding what standards it wants to set in this area. The standards that the NHTSA has set generally fall into the areas of construction and performance. Some examples: Federal regulations mandate how many exits a bus must have and where, what type of windows, mirror systems, seats, and safety features (e.g. every school bus must have an extended arm stop sign on the front of the bus that stops oncoming traffic).

#### What Are the Major Safety Problems

Contrary to public opinion, the real problem is with kids getting killed outside the school bus, NOT inside. Some figures: Approximately 40 children die each year in bus-related accidents. More than 30 of those deaths occur outside the bus, with children either coming to or leaving the bus. Most of these 30 deaths are due to other cars hitting children leaving or coming to the bus. The rest are due to buses hitting children (the blind zones around school buses are enormous -- many times a child runs in front of a bus and is struck by the bus pulling away). So NHTSA focuses many of its safety regs on visibility issues (as mentioned above: mirror systems, extender arms, etc). Very few children actually die inside the bus -- as happened recently with the railroad crossing incident several weeks ago.

#### Hot Issues

Right now, there are two "hot" issues in the school bus safety world: Seat Belts and Driver Training.

The first, and by far the biggest in terms of public opinion, is the seat belt issue. As I alluded to above, most people believe that the majority of kids who are killed in bus-related accidents are somehow thrown from their seats in crashes. This is not true, but it has caused a steady outcry for NHTSA to mandate seat belts in all buses. To add to this drumbeat, the National Transportation Safety Board (a non-partisan advisory body that makes recommendations on many transportation safety issues, but has no legal authority or regulatory power) recently called on NHTSA to do an evaluation of seat belt systems that could go into busses and make public recommendations (not regulations) that states could use if they want to mandate seat belts in buses (if we are interested in doing something in this area, this may be the way to go). NHTSA has done a number of studies of the seat belt issue over the past decade, and feels VERY strongly that mandating the use of seat belts is extraordinarily costly and unnecessary -- it would cost a great deal and would add little to the safety of children on buses. The cost comes from three sources. First, it is not a matter of simply putting seat belts in the existing seats. To make a very long and complicated story short (I can fill you in if you want details here), over the past ten years school bus seat systems have evolved dramatically. They now have much more padding all around, and are closer together. Therefore, in a crash, the child is thrown into the padded seat in front of him, and this has proved to be effective in preventing injuries. If seat belts are installed, the seats would have to be moved apart for a number of reasons I won't go into here. So moving seats is a big cost. The second cost is the purchase and installation of seat belts. And, surprisingly, the largest cost is the constant maintenance and replacement of seatbelts (kids do the wackiest things with seatbelts -- gum in the mechanism, etc). Right now, only New York and New Jersey require seat belts in school buses.

The second hot issue is in driver training requirements. While it is not as hot a topic in terms of public opinion, it is the area where there is the most need for improvement and could potentially have the biggest impact on safety. Right now, the federal government sets a general standard requiring all bus drivers to receive a commercial driver license before being allowed to drive a bus. All other standards are left to the states, and NHTSA feels that it may not be worth trying to mandate more federal standards in this area -- there is no great public outcry for it and the states would resist. However, there may be a role for the bully pulpit here in trying to convince states to set higher standards in this area.

#### Conclusion

NHTSA's conclusion seemed to be that, while there is a good deal of emotional appeal in this area, and that this public emotion

tends to wax and wane every two or three years after a particularly grizzly bus accident, there is really not much more that the federal government should do in this area. But, if there is interest in doing more, as a practical matter we do have the regulatory authority to do more if we choose.

Hope this helps. Let me know what else I can do for you.