

# School Buses Safe Transportation Despite Deadly Huntsville Accident

By George Moore

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Five years have passed since a school bus carrying students plunged off Interstate 565 in Huntsville, Alabama, killing four and injuring dozens. A lot has changed in Huntsville and Alabama since Nov. 20, 2006. One thing has not changed: School buses are still touted as the safest mode of transportation available for students. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, school buses account for only about 1 percent of student fatalities each year. An average of 19 schoolchildren who ride the bus die in crashes, but more than two-thirds of those children are killed getting on or off the bus. "Students are killed by drivers, and often it is because they fail to yield to a stopped school bus," said Malissa Valdes, a Alabama State Department of Education spokeswoman. In Alabama, just one student has been killed while on a school bus since the four students died five years ago in Huntsville, Valdes said. The 15-year-old boy was killed Sept. 3 of this year in Choctaw County when his bus overturned after being struck by another vehicle. In the 2010-2011 school year, just 17 of the 455 school bus accidents reported across Alabama resulted in injury, Department of Education data show. Of the 64 injuries reported, 47 were students, three were bus drivers and 14 were occupants of other vehicles. One person in another vehicle was killed.

The most common factor in the crashes caused by bus drivers was driver inattention, according to data. Collisions caused by other drivers happened most when drivers hit stopped school buses or failed to yield to the bus's right of way.

The Huntsville crash prompted then-Gov. Bob Riley to create a task force to study whether seat belts in school buses would have saved lives and prevented injuries. The three-year study, conducted by the University of Alabama, put seat belts and cameras in 12 school buses in school districts across state, including Madison.

The study found that students used their seat belts less than 62 percent of the time and that the cost of installing seat belts would outweigh the benefits. The task force recommended using the money for safety measures outside of the bus, including public education about the dangers of passing a bus that is loading or unloading children.

That's not to say that school buses are not getting safer.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in 2008 mandated that lap/shoulder belts be installed on school buses weighing less than 10,000 pounds. Seat belts are optional on larger buses like the one that the students in Huntsville were on the day of the crash.

Derrell Lyles, a spokesman for the NHTSA, said that, beginning this fall, all new small school buses sold in the U.S. will have the mandated lap/shoulder belts. Since October

2009, large school buses have been built with higher seat backs to further protect passengers.

"The agency also continues to educate school bus drivers, students and other motorists about safe behavior that reduces the risk of being involved in a school bus-related crash," Lyles said.

The goal is to avoid another horrific crash like the one that killed four teenagers and wounded so many more.