

Dawn Coffin
16 Market Sq Apt 106
Houlton, Maine 04730-1752

25 January 2024
207-254-7078
dv53@yahoo.com

I have been in the pupil transportation industry since 1973, as a driver, a cleaner, an educator of drivers, students and the public, and as a school administrator, directing a fleet of buses and supervising the drivers as well as the many other tasks that go with the job. I was director of transportation, a board member of the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT) and have attended both state and national level conferences.

During my tenure with MAPT, we burned a school bus at our State conference at Sugarloaf and it was an eye opener for me.

The school bus is unquestionably the safest vehicle on our roads and in my fifty years in the industry these vehicles have gone through phenomenal changes. They are not bullet proof, but as near to that as humankind can make them, I think.

Every little while someone floats the idea of seat belts on school buses. The compartmentalization form of construction of our current school buses is a form of restraint in itself. As long as students are within their "compartment" they are as safe as in a seat belt in an automobile. The high back seats protect them from sudden stops as if they were belted in. That is why drivers want students to stay in their seats, out of the aisle, and not sitting on their belongings which makes them higher than that seat before them.

After watching the bus burn at Sugarloaf, my mind went an entirely different direction. I put every student and every driver, and as many teachers as I could through evacuation drills twice each academic year. The repetition is effective and I have seen it work during a crash in which one of my buses was rear-ended by a large construction truck. The students filed off the bus, leaving belongings in their seats, doing everything right and according to their biannual exercises. However, with extension ladders, helicopters, fire apparatus and firefighters on site, we all stood behind barriers to watch this burning of a real school bus, and from the ignition of the fire in the engine compartment, it was exactly **1.5 seconds** until the entire cab clear to the rear emergency door was filled with noxious black smoke. I thought of all our evacuation drills, even to putting drivers and students out the emergency windows located on each side of the buses, and I knew that not one person would survive that fire. Evacuation time is measured in minutes, not seconds, and certainly not ONE POINT FIVE SECONDS! The smoke that clouded the interior of that bus would put every person aboard out of commission, before they could get out of their seats, never mind the door!

So, how likely is a fire to occur in the first place? Back in the 1980's I was a driver on a rural route through Carroll, Maine. It was in the fall of the year. Near the end of my route, with just a teen boy and a younger girl still on the bus, I saw smoke coming out from under the hood of my old bus. Stopping the bus, I quickly instructed the boy to go out the rear door and take care of the girl, and to go 100 feet in the direction from which the wind was blowing, and away from the bus. I went out the front door to see what could be done. I was still spry in those days and I climbed up on the front bumper and slowly lifted the hood. The carburetor was blazing and the air filter was on fire, so I yanked out the air filter, and threw it hard as I could into the trees beside the road. Realizing my error, I jumped down and went and got it back and extinguished it

Dawn Coffin
16 Market Sq Apt 106
Houlton, Maine 04730-1752

25 January 2024
207-254-7078
dv53@yahoo.com

before I caused a forest fire too! I used my trusty fire extinguisher and quickly the fire was out. Fires do happen!

More recently, though, a much more serious situation came to me that alerted my senses like no other. During my time as Director of Transportation, a high school boy was caught spraying Axe on his jeans and setting it on fire. He was sitting in the rear most seat on that bus! Once the accelerant evaporated or burned off, the fire went out and student felt powerful and in control. However, my mind flashed instantly back to Sugarloaf and that thick black smoke billowing out of the safest vehicle on the road. I had to suspend his privilege of riding my buses and he spent an afternoon watching videos of buses burning.

My issue is that it is possible, even probable, for a fire to happen on a school bus and the seats are less than bullet proof too. So I asked Senator Trey Stewart to look into a bill to require fire retardant materials in school bus seating and he has graciously done so.

I am not the first person to consider this issue as I have discovered in my research into fire retardant seating materials. I have discovered that the chemicals used to treat fabrics for fire resistance are dangerous to fire fighters. The school bus industry is attempting to ride the middle of the road and have addressed this topic to a minimal degree and it seems they feel as if they have done their duty to students, parents, drivers and the public in general. However, the test that they approve is to conduct what is called a "fire block test" that advances the need for a fire to self-extinguish within 8 minutes of ignition for the materials to pass for use in the school bus. EIGHT MINUTES? I do not think that is an adequate measure to protect 60-80 children in a school bus if it is only ONE POINT FIVE (1 ½) SECONDS from ignition until the bus becomes unable to allow life to continue because it is filled with toxic smoke. In 1 ½ seconds, it is impossible to evacuate a bus. Remember the bus we witnessed burn at Sugarloaf. We in MAPT and all the drivers competing in skills that year at the annual conference saw that bus fill with black billows of smoke in 1 ½ seconds.

References

<https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/HAR1901.pdf> See appendix C: Fire Block Test, retrieved 01 January 2024

<https://nasdpts.org/resources/Documents/Paper-Flammability2011.pdf> , retrieved 01 January 2024