



## LOADING AND UNLOADING SAFETY

*Best Practices for School Bus Drivers*

### A. STRICTLY ENFORCE SAFE CROSSING PROCEDURES

**SHERRI YBARRA**  
SUPERINTENDENT OF  
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

650 W. STATE STREET  
P.O. BOX 83720  
BOISE, IDAHO 83720-0027

OFFICE: 208-332-6800  
FAX: 208-334-2228  
SPEECH/HEARING  
IMPAIRED: 1-800-377-3529  
WWW.SDE.IDAHO.GOV

1. **Eye contact** between driver and student must be established before the student begins to cross. Teach children the concept “I See You, You See Me.”
2. With **transit-style (flat front) buses**, students should still be trained to walk out at least ten big steps - someday they may ride a conventional style bus again.
3. Use a consistent **Safe Crossing Signal** when it’s safe for the child to cross, pointing in the direction you want the child to walk. All bus drivers in your operation should use the same Safe Crossing hand signal, and all children should be trained about what it means.
4. Drivers and students must follow safe crossing procedures in the **morning**, too.
5. Teach children a consistent **Danger Signal** so they know what to do if a motorist fails to stop for your stopped bus. All drivers in the fleet should teach students the same signal. **SDE endorses the joined fingers open palm, single arm wave and eye contact with the driver for student crossing.** If the bus driver honks the horn while the child is crossing, it means “return to the side of the road you started from at once!”
6. When crossing, **students must stop and check for traffic** (looking carefully left, right, left, and listening carefully too) before entering the unprotected lane.
7. Enforce Safe Crossing procedures with **older students** too - don’t give up on older students! And, older students set an example to younger children on the bus.
8. **Don’t train discharging students to walk to a set location** before crossing, such as a tree or driveway - a substitute driver may not stop the bus in exactly the same spot, and the students could be confused.
9. On **routes with bus attendants**, children should still be taught to make eye contact with the driver and wait for the driver signal to proceed. The attendant’s role is to accompany the crossing child and make sure the correct crossing procedures are followed. The

attendant may not be there one day. Young children need to learn how to cross the street on their own.

## **B. COUNT AND RE-COUNT CHILDREN AT EVERY STOP, EVERY DAY**

1. If you've lost count of a child who's gotten off your bus, secure the bus, shut it off, take the key with you, get out, and check under and around the bus.
2. Never take a chance! Appoint a **student bus helper** to double-check your student count at each bus stop, from inside the bus. It's still the bus driver's responsibility, but an extra set of eyes can only help.

## **C. ASSUME THE WORST WITH APPROACHING MOTORISTS**

1. Continually **check for approaching traffic** during the entire loading/unloading process.
2. **Keep children inside the bus** until all visible traffic is stopped.  
Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 2
3. Be alert for vehicles (trucks, motorcycles, snowmobiles, bikes) **passing your bus on the right (passenger) side**, or on the shoulder. Train children to "check before they step" off the bus. Strictly enforce this safety procedure.
4. Whenever possible, **let traffic behind the bus pass** before you arrive at the next bus stop. Pull over only in a safe location, and come to a complete stop - don't "troll" along the edge of the road, it's dangerous and illegal. Be very careful when pulling onto a shoulder - watch out for drop-offs, soft shoulders, etc.
5. **Activate yellow school bus flashers** well in advance of the bus stop - two utility poles, or about 300', is recommended in residential areas, and further on higher speed roads, roads with limited visibility, during bad weather, or in heavy traffic conditions.
6. Even **emergency vehicles** (police, ambulance, fire) should stop for a school bus stopped with its red school bus flashers activated, but don't assume they will stop. If it's possible to do so safely, abort the loading or unloading process and let the emergency vehicle pass - it's for everyone's good. Funeral processions have been known to drive through school bus flashing lights too - be careful.

7. **Be careful motioning students to their seats** after they've boarded the bus - waiting motorists have mistakenly interpreted this as a signal to proceed past the bus.

#### D. RESIST DISTRACTION DURING LOADING OR UNLOADING

1. Do not **use the internal overhead mirror** inside the bus while loading or unloading children. Your attention must be focused outside the bus until you're safely away from the bus stop. The internal mirror can be the most dangerous piece of equipment on a bus.
2. Check on **student behavior** and address any problems well ahead of the bus stop. Dealing with onboard behavior problems that occur as children are getting on or off must wait until the bus is safely away from the loading zone.
3. **Silence your onboard students** as you load or unload. Flash dome lights on and off as a signal for silence during critical driving tasks such as loading and unloading.

#### E. STAY ALERT FOR SPECIAL DANGERS

1. **Kindergarten through third-grade children** are most vulnerable to a loading and unloading accident. Young children are short and harder to see near your bus. They are impulsive and inexperienced in traffic. Be extremely cautious when loading or discharging young children!
2. **Take-home** routes are the most dangerous. Children may be pent-up with energy after school - and bus drivers are tired.
3. **By-own-bus** accidents - children being run over by their own buses - are the most common type of student school bus fatality. Understand the danger and use extreme caution.
4. Beware **spring fever**. The most dangerous months for by-own-bus fatalities are December to May. Children, and bus drivers, may get sloppy about safety procedures after school has been in session for several months. "Pinch yourself!" - remember that an accident can occur in a split-second of inattention.
5. Children **should be on board whenever the bus backs up**. Minimize backing - all backing is dangerous, and especially backing near bus stops. Use a bus attendant or a reliable student as a

spotter, from the inside rear of your bus. Back only at approved turnarounds.

6. **At bus stops located near corners, children should be on the bus when the bus turns right.** The rear duals of a bus can “track” over the curb and run over a child on the corner. Pick up children **before** turns and drop them off **after** turns.

**Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers** Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 3

7. **School loading areas** can be congested and hazardous. Be extremely alert in school bus loops!
8. **Group stops** (at trailer parks, apartment complexes, etc.) can be very challenging - watch out! Train students to wait for the bus in an orderly manner, and insist that discharging children move immediately away from the bus to prearranged spot.
9. Stops with **mixed crossers and non-crossers** can be challenging. The potential for confusion is high. **Discharge crossers first** - then non-crossers. Children who must cross should be clearly indicated on the route sheet.
10. If several students are crossing, they should **cross as a group**. Don't let children straggle across one at a time - it's harder to keep tabs on them, and waiting motorists are more likely to lose patience.
11. Be aware of children carrying **loose papers**. Tell children to keep belongings in a backpack or book bag.
12. Watch out for children's clothing with **dangling straps, drawstrings, or mitten strings**. Bus handrails, doors, even fire-extinguishers mounted near the exit can **snag** loose clothing as children get off the bus. Watch out for children wearing bulky winter coats and hoods – they can't see traffic or other hazards.
13. Be alert for students trying to retrieve an item from the **external luggage compartment** on your bus at school or at a bus stop.
14. **Don't run early or late on your route** - children can become confused, creating a dangerous situation. If the bus is early in the morning, children might chase after it without watching for dangers. If the bus is late, children may become confused and try to board another bus, or get on at another stop. Dangerous situations can result.

15. When **facing another school bus** while loading or unloading children, make eye contact with the other bus driver. Be sure both of you are finished loading or unloading before proceeding.
16. In **heavy fog**, get off the road to a safe area and stop. Use 4-way hazard flashers (and roof mounted strobe lights if equipped). If you encounter dense fog approaching a bus stop and are worried that traffic behind you may not stop for your stopped bus, you might need to go past the stop. Train children ahead of time to wait well back from the roadway, especially in foggy conditions. Explain that they should go back inside or wait in a safe area until conditions have improved if their bus goes past the stop. Always alert base by radio, at once, if you can't make a stop for any reason.
17. Be alert for **pranks at bus stops the last week of school** (water fights, jumping out of bus exits, etc.) - don't let yourself become rattled, children have been run over in the chaos. Report any rumor about planned pranks to your supervisor ahead of time.

#### **F. CORRECTLY ADJUST MIRRORS ON EACH BUS DRIVEN EACH DAY**

1. **Checking mirror adjustment** is one of the most important parts of a **pre-check**. Never drive a bus whose mirrors are out of adjustment. It is against the law, and dangerous to children.
2. Are you sure your mirrors show you what they should according to state and federal regulations? Ask for assistance from a mechanic, trainer, or supervisor. **Front pedestrian (crossover) mirrors should show a seated bus driver the entire area in front of the bus hidden by the bus hood**, from the front bumper forward to where direct vision of the ground is possible.
3. **Check both pedestrian (crossover) and driving mirrors for children in or near the danger zones just before resuming forward motion**, and keep checking driving mirrors as you pull slowly forward to watch for children running up to the bus from any direction.  
Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 4
4. Pull away from the bus stop at **low (idle) speed** so you can stop quickly if a child suddenly appears near your bus.
5. **Mirrors can be deceptive** - force yourself to search mirrors slowly and carefully. Quick glances can easily miss a child. Search for children who have tripped and are lying on the ground, not just for

children standing up; search for children wearing dark or low-contrast clothing.

6. Mirrors create **blind spots**. Move in the bus seat to “look around” mirrors before moving forward. Don’t check mirrors only while leaning over to close the bus door. Your view into the mirrors is distorted. You could fail to see a child.

## **G. RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO RUSH**

1. Driver rushing has been a factor in many school bus accidents - including **by-own-bus fatalities**.
2. Remember: “**One bus stop at a time.**” Focus on what’s happening as you load and unload children at the stop you’re at. Keep other thoughts and concerns out of your mind at this “moment of truth.”
3. **Focus and concentration are the signs of a professional.** If you are worrying about personal problems or thinking about errands you need to do after work, you can’t load and unload children safely.
4. **Report unrealistic route times** to your supervisor. Don’t give in to unrealistic time pressures on your route. “Safety first, schedule second.”
5. **Never move the bus if children are within 15' on any side.** It’s very dangerous. Don’t allow students to walk back along the side of the bus.
6. **If you miss a stop by mistake, never back up** - go around the block, even if it’s a long one. Alert base by radio. Backing is dangerous - especially near a bus stop. You could easily back over a child.
7. **Substitute drivers** must avoid rushing too. If a sub starts a route late, he or she should finish it late. Trying to “make up time” while driving a school bus is a recipe for tragedy.
8. Rushing doesn’t just mean breaking the speed limit - **in a school bus you can rush at 20 mph.** Rushing means you’re not being alert to potential dangers around your vehicle.

## **H. UNDERSTAND ROUTE AND BUS STOP SAFETY**

1. **Never change the location of a bus stop (pick-up or drop-off)** without approval from your supervisor. Personal liability could result if a child was hurt and it was proven you had changed the location of the bus stop. Never alter your route without official approval!
2. If a child is waiting for your bus on the **wrong side of the road, or at an unapproved stop**, pick the child up that day as safely as you can, but alert base by radio and talk to your supervisor about the situation as soon as you return to base. Use good judgment and keep children's safety foremost when unexpected situations arise on your route.
3. You are the eyes and ears of the transportation department. **Report any unusual hazards**, such as dangerous cross-overs, to your supervisor.
4. When loading or unloading children, stop your bus **toward the right of the driving lane, positioned straight ahead and not at an angle - try not to leave more than 18" of driving lane on the right side** of your bus. This makes it harder for a vehicle to pass your bus on the right side.  
Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 5
5. Under normal circumstances, **don't pull onto a shoulder** when loading or unloading children - however, if a wide shoulder or a bike lane is present at a bus stop, you may need to stop your bus more to the right. Every bus stop is unique. Ask your supervisor for guidance.
6. In the morning, stop your bus **before pulling right next to students waiting for your bus**. Make students walk to your bus - it's safer. Pulling up next to children could result in a tragedy in slippery weather or if a child moves suddenly into the road. Train waiting children to wait until your bus is fully stopped, and until you signal them it's safe, before moving towards your bus.
7. **Bus stops on corners can be confusing to motorists** entering a road from an intersecting road. Work with your supervisor to place bus stops safely back from intersections whenever possible.
8. **Train yourself to search for unusual hazards as you approach each bus stop** - criminal activity, strangers, dogs, cars backing from driveways, construction equipment, snow banks, etc. You can't be too careful today.

## I. USE SAFETY EQUIPMENT PROFESSIONALLY

1. **Secure your bus at every bus stop**, whether one child or 10 children are assigned to that stop. **Set the parking or emergency brake** regardless of whether you're driving a bus with automatic or standard transmission, air or hydraulic brakes. To reduce the chance of the bus rolling back when you're preparing to leave the stop, to **leave the bus in Drive when setting the parking brake** in an automatic transmission-equipped bus is recommended. (Many school buses do not have a "Park" gear.) **Let your foot rest lightly on the service (foot) brake** while your bus is stopped to load or unload children. Brake lights help wake up approaching motorists.
2. **Never move your bus with its door open and the red school bus flashers activated.** It's illegal and confusing to motorists.
3. **When it's dark, use your dome lights** if you must cross children (for instance, early in the morning during the winter). The Safe Crossing signal may be more visible to children outside the bus. However, be careful that dome lights don't create glare that makes it even harder to see.
4. If your bus is equipped with an **external P.A.** system, use it to supplement the Safe Crossing hand signal when crossing students, but not to replace it. Equipment can always break down. A spare bus might not be equipped with a P.A. system. Children need to be constantly reminded about the Safe Crossing signal.
5. If your bus is equipped with a **crossing gate**, think of it mainly as a training tool for children. Don't rely on crossing gates to keep children away from the bus. No piece of safety equipment is foolproof. Children are unpredictable. Don't use a bus equipped with a crossing gate (or any other piece of safety equipment, required or optional) if it's not in working order.
6. Check frequently to make sure your **Master Switch is activated and your school bus flashers are working** during the route. Check your "pilot" light next to the Master Switch, or your stop arm, to make sure they're working. Double-check the Master Switch after crossing railroad tracks, to make sure you've reactivated it.
7. **The most important piece of safety equipment** on a bus is a professional, alert, caring school bus driver.

**Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers** Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 6

## J. EDUCATE CHILDREN



1. Children learn by repetition, repetition, repetition! **Remind kids about safe crossing procedures every time they get off your bus.** You don't need to give them a speech, but say something every day that will keep safety in the forefront of their minds as they exit the bus. Daily instruction and reminders of safety procedures save children's lives.
2. Stress to children that they should **never return if they drop something near or under the bus.** However, be prepared for the unexpected - children may do so anyway. Training is very important, but children will always be unpredictable.
3. Use **bus safety drills** to test students' mastery of loading and unloading procedures. Conduct drills in an isolated section of a parking lot so you can let students practice crossing procedures safely. Ask your supervisor for help.
4. **Crossing children must be crystal-clear about what driver signals mean.** A single moment of confusion could cost a child's life if a car is speeding toward your bus. Teach children to check carefully for traffic before crossing, and to return to the safe curb if you sound the horn ("Danger Signal").
5. Teach children they must **ignore grandparents, parents, or friends while crossing** in front of the bus. A distracted child could run across the road without waiting for the driver signal and be struck by a passing motorist - it's happened. If parents or grandparents don't understand the safety reason for this, ask your supervisor to give them a courtesy call.
6. Teach children **not to place too much faith in red school bus flashers.** Remind children that the road is a dangerous place, and that cars **will** drive by the bus!
7. Train students to **wait for the bus safely back from the road, in an orderly line.** Many school bus drivers have been very successful at teaching children to wait in an orderly fashion.
8. Teach children about **mail box dangers.** Don't let students stand at the mail box right next to the road as your bus pulls away from the stop. Don't let them run across the street behind your bus to pick up the mail. If their parents permit it, children can get the mail after the bus has left the area.

9. Place a **“How To Cross Safely” poster** in every your school bus. Point it out to students periodically. But safety posters don't help unless bus drivers use them as teaching tools on a regular basis.
10. **Coloring books, stickers, certificates, buttons, etc.** are great ways to reinforce safe crossing procedures with younger kids.
11. Work with the school to arrange a session where the young children you transport can view an age-appropriate and accurate safety video about safe crossing, such as **“Safe Crossing: an ‘Egg-Cellent’ Idea”** or **Pooh’s Great School Bus Adventure.”**
12. **Driver-in-the-Classroom bus safety programs** to reinforce loading and unloading safety make a big difference. If your school system doesn't have a “driver-in-the-classroom” program yet, talk to your supervisor about what it would take to get one going.

#### **K. ALWAYS EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED FROM CHILDREN**

1. **Err on the side of caution - trust your intuition.** Children's lives have been saved when bus drivers “just didn't feel right” and checked under their buses. Young children will do almost anything around a bus. Children have crawled under buses, crawled into wheel wells, climbed on bumpers, played with crossing gates, grabbed hold of mirrors, etc. In some of these incidents, an attentive bus driver discovered the child; in others, the child was run over by the bus and killed.  
Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 7
2. Watch out for **children running after a bus they missed** as it pulls away from the bus stop. If a child isn't at the bus stop in the morning, be especially careful as you pull away. The child may be late and could chase after the bus. Check the surrounding area carefully before you pull away.
3. Be alert for **parents following your bus in their own cars** to catch the bus at a later stop – or even at a traffic light! Children could run up to the bus door unexpectedly, just as you pull away.
4. Watch out for **students slipping off the bus while you are focused on crossers outside the bus.** Don't leave the door fully open - just “crack” it enough to keep the red school bus flashers activated. With air doors, place your right arm across the aisle to keep children from going out the door.

5. Watch out for a **student on the bus signaling to a motorist outside to precede past the school bus flashers** - it's actually happened!
6. Be alert for **unsupervised younger brothers and sisters near a bus stop**. Tragedies have occurred when preschool children have rushed to meet an older brother or sister getting off the bus. Report to your supervisor any unsupervised children playing at or near a bus stop.
7. **Snow banks** near bus stops can be dangerous. Check carefully for kids playing or climbing on snow banks, or hiding behind them. Never discharge a child directly into a snowbank or any other unsafe situation.
8. Be **alert for last-second warnings from others** just before moving your bus away from a bus stop - from other motorists, other bus drivers, parents or teachers outside the bus, or even children on board your bus. Someone might have seen a child under or near your bus. Take warnings seriously.
9. **Silence students and turn the am-fm radio down at each bus stop**, so you can hear warnings. It's also a good idea to open the driver window at bus stop, to hear better.
10. **If no one is home to receive a young child or a child with special needs**, radio base and ask for guidance before proceeding. Know your school or company policy about dropping young children off. Never force a child off the bus who seems frightened or confused. Ask base what you should do.

#### **L. USE MIDDLE LOADING WHENEVER POSSIBLE**

1. In the morning, **keep children out of the rear and front seats** until all other seats are filled. In the afternoon, empty the rear and front seats first. Train children to fill the middle seats first. Children in rear and front seats may be more vulnerable to injury in certain types of severe collisions.
2. **Middle loading saves lives**. It has been recommended by the National Transportation Safety Board for many years.
3. Middle loading is especially important on bus routes with **high speed truck traffic**.

4. **Teach children why** you don't want them in the back or front seats if the bus isn't full.

## M. LISTEN TO CHILDREN

1. **Don't force children off the bus if they tell you they should get off someplace else** – they may be pulling your leg, or they may be telling the truth. Always use your radio to check with base when unexpected situations arise on a route.  
Loading and Unloading Safety: Best practices for bus drivers Student Transportation Safety Institute • 2003 page 8
2. Train children to **remind the bus driver every day if they have to cross** the road after getting off the bus. Getting children involved like this helps them remember safety procedures. **Substitute drivers** really benefit from this tip!
3. **If children say there's a problem, take it seriously.** Maybe they're joking - maybe not. Tragedies have occurred when drivers ignored children's warnings.

## N. EDUCATE PARENTS AND TEACHERS

1. Explain the **importance of book bags or backpacks** to parents and teachers. Book bags and backpacks reduce the chance that a child will drop an item near the bus. Some drivers carry **plastic grocery bags** on the bus for kids who have forgotten their book bags.
2. Explain the **danger of dangling drawstrings, straps, or mitten strings** to parents. Parents should buy coats and sweatshirts with short drawstrings.
3. **Large, distracting, or fragile items** should not be carried on the bus. Parents should bring such items to school. Children's safety is more important than parents' convenience.
4. **Encourage parents to reinforce loading and unloading safety procedures at home.** For instance, parents of very young children can practice the crossing procedure in the driveway using the family car. Parent training is a huge help! Give parents copies of the "How to Cross Safely" poster.
5. **Seek parent and school assistance in reinforcing safe behavior on bus.** Parents can be powerful safety allies. Help parents understand how student behavior problems could distract the bus driver and result in a tragedy.

6. Regularly remind your school and the whole community about the importance of never passing a stopped school bus. Take part in an annual “**Operation Safe Stop**” campaign in your area - its goal is to remind the public to stop for school buses. Work with Parent-Teacher Associations, civic associations, law enforcement, and local media to develop ongoing educational campaigns. Place posters in local stores, churches, and offices. Write a letter to the editor about the importance of stopping for school buses. Ask local politicians and Traffic Safety Boards to help remind the public to stop for stopped school buses.

Student Transportation Safety Institute  
443 S. Warren St., Syracuse, NY 13202  
(800) 836-2210 • [www.ptsi.org](http://www.ptsi.org)