

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

SERVING THE TOWNS OF BERLIN, ROCKY HILL AND WETHERSFIELD

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August 15, 2005

Everyone Needs to Practice School Bus Safety

Beginning at the end of August, many school age children in Berlin, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield will board a school bus to begin a new year at school. The ritual will be repeated daily around the country as 450,000 yellow school buses transport 24 million students to and from school and school-related activities, according to the National School Transportation Association. Parents who will place their children on board a school bus for the first time should rest easy; the School Bus Information Council reports that school buses boast “a safety record that is unequalled in the transportation industry.”

Since children were first transported to school at the public’s expense in horse-drawn wagons at the end of the 19th century to the present day, protecting the lives of child passengers increasingly has become the focal point of public transportation efforts. National safety standards address the structural and joint strength of buses, pedestrian safety devices, passenger seating, driver requirements, and alcohol and drug testing. Each state has enacted additional measures concerning training mandates, loading and unloading laws, vehicle inspections, evacuation drills, and the definition of hazardous routes. Even though 8.8 **billion** student trips to and from school occur annually, 5 children were killed while riding in school buses in 2004 as compared to 800 children who were killed while riding in other motor vehicles or walking or riding bicycles to school. Connecticut joined 44 other states in reporting no deaths of children who were transported in school buses last year.

In addition to governmental interventions, optimal school bus safety includes safe practices inside AND outside the bus, and involves other motorists, parents, teachers, and the children themselves. While very few fatalities occurred inside the school bus in 2004, 26 children died in accidents while getting on or off a school bus or while waiting at the bus stop. Perhaps the most important point for adults and children to keep in mind is that the area around every bus is a danger zone. Three quarters of school bus-related accidents occur outside the bus – that is, the people who are killed while loading and unloading a school bus account for 3 times as many as those killed within the bus during an accident. Observing these safety tips can help to ensure the safe transportation of our school children:

Drivers: Be alert; when backing out of a driveway or garage, watch out for children. Pay attention to posted school zones. Be prepared to stop for children darting into the street. Slow down.
Be mindful of areas without sidewalks where children have to walk in the street. Watch for children playing or congregating at bus stops. Obey all laws pertaining to school buses; flashing yellow lights indicate the bus is about to stop and motorists should decelerate and prepare to stop. A red flashing light indicates the bus has stopped and the children are getting on or off, and motorists **MUST** stop and wait until the flashing lights are off, the extended arm stop sign is withdrawn, and the bus has begun to move again. Share the road with the yellow bus.

Children: Always walk on the sidewalk to the bus stop, never run. Try to get to the bus stop at least 10 minutes before the bus is due to arrive. Wait in a safe place away from the road, and avoid horseplay. When the bus approaches, stand at least 3 giant steps (6 feet) away. Stay in line until the bus stops completely and the door opens, then enter in an orderly fashion once the driver says it is okay. Use hand rails and be careful that drawstrings and straps on clothing and book bags do not get caught in the doors or handrails. If you have to cross the street, cross in front of the bus, maintaining eye contact with the driver. Once you are on the bus, keep all body parts inside the bus, keep all your belongings zipped up inside your backpack, and hold your backpack securely on your lap to keep the aisle clear. Remain in your seat during the entire ride. When leaving the bus, **always** walk in **front** of the bus, and NEVER bend over to pick anything up or go back to get something left behind. If possible, tell the bus driver if you drop something. Immediately take at least 5 giant steps away from the bus.

Parents: Make sure your children understand all the safety rules involved when riding a school bus, and encourage them to use them. Emphasize how important good behavior is so that the driver is not distracted. Instruct them to place all belongings in their backpacks, and try to have them dress in bright colors so they are more visible. Assure them that you will not be angry if they left a jacket on the bus or dropped some school work under the bus, and that you will help them resolve the problem.

If everyone concerned cooperates, the number of school bus-related accidents and fatalities can be reduced even further. Adults and children need to keep in mind that the most dangerous part of the trip is approaching and leaving the bus. The Central Connecticut Health District urges parents, students, and motorists to learn traffic safety rules and to practice them at all times. For further information about school bus safety, contact the School Bus Information Council at 888-367-7242 (www.schoolbusinfo.org), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at 202-366-95 (www.nhtsa.dot.gov), or the National Transportation Safety Board at 202-314-6100. The National Association for Pupil Transportation's website(www.napt.org) is also helpful. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available by contacting the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).