

## PPT 6: Exiting through the emergency door...

(continued from page 7)

there is a tendency with the sit-and-slide method to overbalance a little when we push off. I routinely spot for all drivers and will be standing sideways in the opening after you open the door. If you find yourself losing your balance, feel free to grab my shoulder as you land to keep from falling down.”

Because the challenges mentioned above can cost drivers several seconds on this test, I caution each — especially if not testing on the bus they regularly drive — to be sure they know which type of seatbelt release they are working with. I have seen drivers trying to find and hit a side release when the belt has

a top release or vice versa. In many cases, it is difficult for drivers to see the buckle while they have it on.

The other caution I offer, again especially on an unfamiliar bus, is opening the door. There is a wide range of travel distances on emergency door handles to unlatch them. Some handles raise only a short distance, while others travel far enough to be almost vertical before the latch is released. I have seen drivers pushing on a door they thought was stuck (or frozen in winter) when it was still latched because they had not pulled the handle up enough.

This might be the most difficult of all seven standards if the driver has physical limitations. While the time limit seems tight, it has not been unrealistic for the majority of dri-

vers — including those with physical limitations — I’ve tested. And the urgency of the time limit is especially important in an emergency.

This test may also have a higher risk for injury than some of the others, so it’s important that SBDIs conduct it according to the book and be sure every detail is covered with every driver tested.

We will discuss Standard 7 in the next issue.

*Pete James invites questions, comments or suggestions on this and future PPT columns. Call him at (716) 789-4287 or send a note to him at Chautauqua Transportation Services Inc., P.O. Box 1100, Chautauqua, NY 14722.*

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Written and designed by Capital Region BOCES  
Communications Service.

### Editor: Andy Marino

Send any comments, suggestions or story ideas to:

### Safely Speaking

Capital Region BOCES Communications/Risk Management Services  
6 British American Blvd., Suite G, Latham, NY 12110  
Phone.: (518) 786-3278 Fax: (518) 786-3265 e-mail: amarino@gw.neric.org

**New York State Education Department**  
**Education Management Services**  
876 EBA  
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# safely speaking

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for School Bus Driver Instructors

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## Reading, riding and safety in Sandy Creek

### District's reading program, model school bus engage students

Unless you are from Central or Northern New York, you might not have heard of the Sandy Creek Central School District. But take a ride to the Oswego County district about 45 miles north of Syracuse and you'll find a couple of intriguing initiatives at its transportation department.

The first — the Accelerated Reader on Wheels program — blends the best of behavior management with academic achievement. Accelerated Reader is a comprehension program in which students read books independently within their grade and reading level then answer questions about them on a computer, said Laurie Ouderkirk, an Oswego County BOCES employee who organizes the program for Sandy Creek. Students are awarded points — redeemable for prizes — based on the number of correct answers.



From left, Sandy Creek bus aide Jolene Potter, Oswego BOCES employee Laurie Ouderkirk, Sandy Creek SBDI Deb Stevens and driver Marilyn Soluri help Potter's son, Shane, display one the books Sandy Creek drivers distribute to students as part of the Accelerated Reader on Wheels program.

Deb Stevens, an SBDI and master instructor candidate, got wind of the program and decided to put it on wheels.

**The Accelerated Reader on Wheels program blends the best of behavior management with academic achievement.**

Buses carry a bag full of books from the school library that drivers distribute to interested riders. Much like the teachers do in the classroom, drivers reward their student readers with prizes like

snacks or special privileges.

"It's just one more thing that the kids

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**Reading, riding and safety...**  
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can do that's a positive," she said. "There's so many rules on the bus that sometimes kids don't think they can do anything. This shows them that there is something they can do and get rewarded for."

Marilyn Soluri, among the drivers who employs the program aboard her bus, said it's been a hit with several of her riders. Every Friday Soluri rewards those who read faithfully with a treat.

"I have a boy who reads every night and is never in trouble," she said. "In fact, he tells me about the books and wants to be the 'librarian' on the bus. It's helped him a lot."

Jolene Potter, an aide, has seen similar results on her bus. At first, she said, the students wanted her to read to them, but then they began reading on their own.

"Some of the kids request higher levels than they should be able to read," she said.

At the end of the school year, participants are awarded certificates of commendation. Besides the physical reward of a prize, students get a substantial amount of intrinsic motivation to read outside of school.

"They get rewarded in a lot of different ways," she said. "By the other students, the bus driver, the teachers and then at home. (Parents of students who participate are notified of their involvement.)"

Stevens suggests that those starting similar programs aboard their buses be patient and persistent.

"You have to keep at it," she said. "Some weeks you're not going to

## Model bus/puppet program delights Sandy Creek's young riders

Construction at the Sandy Creek Central School District became something of a mixed blessing last fall. While the structure being added will enhance the district's curriculum, construction was encroaching the bus garage area so much that it would be unsafe to conduct crossing and loading drills there. That meant Deb Stevens and other members of the transportation department would have to come up with an alternative.

Department members decided that if they couldn't bring the kids to the bus, they'd bring the bus to the kids — by building one. Armed with donated material from Central New York Coach, a school and commercial bus distributor, the group put together a model bus, complete with lights, horn and fold-out stop sign.

They also painted, with help from a Sandy Creek student, their model that students from pre-kindergarten through second grade could practice boarding and exiting.

But just building a model school bus wasn't good enough for Stevens and the others. They wanted to find a way to make bus safety riveting for their young riders, so they came up with the idea of putting on a show. Using puppets borrowed from a woman who performs at a local church, the group organized a production featuring a driver and his riders. Stevens and others animate the puppets inside the bus in sync with a tape-recorded musical featuring the voices of several Sandy Creeks students.

have many interested kids, but if you don't give up then they're not going to give up either."

*For more information about the*



Grand Master Safe, left, teaches young students how to ride safely and obey the driver aboard Sandy Creek's model bus.

Among the riders is "Grand Master Safe," who delivers safety tips via rap music, such as:

*Play it safe  
and don't cause a fuss.*

*Have some respect  
For that yellow bus.*

Another rider parodies Paul Simon's "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" to illustrate crossing safety rules:

*She'll tell you when to cross,  
Ross.*

*Stay on the sidewalk when you  
can, Jan.*

The model bus and puppet show have been a big hit, Stevens said.

"The kids love it. They get right inside and blow the horn and test the lights," she said. "They're very curious." 

*Accelerated Reader on Wheels or the model bus/puppet programs, call Deb Stevens at (315) 387-5068 or e-mail her at [debs1@twcny.rr.com](mailto:debs1@twcny.rr.com).* 



# SAFETY VESTS still a hot topic

## Users advised to follow manufacturer's instructions until NHTSA issues clarification

By **Kathy Furneaux**

Using safety vests on school buses violates National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS 213). That announcement was made at the annual National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) conference last spring in Nashville, Tenn.



*Kathy  
Furneaux*

The controversy concerning the use of safety vests on school buses continues to churn in the school bus transportation industry. But to understand this controversy completely, several questions must be answered:

- ▲ What is FMVSS approval?
- ▲ How does a product get FMVSS approved?
- ▲ Is there a process for losing that approval?
- ▲ What is it about the safety vest that is in violation?
- ▲ How does the safety vest controversy impact my operation?
- ▲ What are the people at NHTSA saying about all this?
- ▲ What should I do as a

school bus operator who regularly uses the safety vest?

Each of these questions contains a little puzzle piece that can put together the bigger picture of this controversy. We may still shake our heads in disbelief that this is happening, but maybe we can understand the issues a little better.

**The controversy concerning the use of safety vests on school buses continues to churn in the school bus transportation industry.**

### What is FMVSS approval?

As transporters we are advised by experts in the industry to only use add-on products, such as car seats and safety vests, that are FMVSS approved. These standards were not written specifically for school buses in whole or part. Many of them apply to different areas of transportation.

There are two ways manufacturers can earn the right to state that their product meets the applicable FMVSS:

- ▲ Submitting their product to NHTSA testing, or
- ▲ Performing the tests themselves, known as "self-certifying."

Most of the products we use on

school buses have been self-certified. NHTSA will select a product at random or that has been brought to its attention through poor performance or customer complaint and test it. When a product does not perform well in a NHTSA test, a recall is issued and the manufacturers must design a fix for the problem and distribute it without cost to customers who own the product. This ownership is tracked through warranty registrations, making warranty card

completion and submission critical to maintaining safety of the product owned. If NHTSA determines that the product is unsafe to the point that it

may not be "fixed," then it will be decertified and removed from availability.

### How does the safety vest violate FMVSS 213?

FMVSS 213 governs the use of child safety restraint systems (CSRS). Among other things, this standard states that "child safety restraints may not be attached to the seat back." Clearly, there are safety vests that do just this by attaching to the seat back via a "cam-wrap" and are in violation of the standard. The restraint system must be directly attached to the seat frame of an FMVSS 222 school bus seat. (FMVSS 222 calls for reinforcing the school bus frame).

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## Safety Vests...

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### What is the impact on my operation?

Operators using safety vests that are attached to the school bus seat with a cam-wrap should consult their manufacturers for any changes in their instructions for use. Some of the possible impacts to operations could be reduction in capacities and possible financial stress of additional or replacement equipment. Two major manufacturers of safety vests are E-Z ON Products, (800) 323-6598, and Q'Straint, (800) 987-9987.

### What are the people at NHTSA saying?

When asked about the status of this controversy and the guidance the association has for people in the industry, Susan Kirinich, an official with NHTSA's Office of Safety Counter-measures, replied, "It hasn't been resolved yet, but I believe we are making progress toward a workable solution. The recommendation to use the vest with a tether only and leaving the seat behind empty was developed by NASDPTS, not NHTSA, to offer some general guidance. My advice is that, for any safety vest restraint, you should always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Right now, there is conflicting information, and the agency hopes to clarify the situation in the near future."

It is obvious that the industry input concerning the impact of NHTSA's upcoming decisions regarding the use of safety vests on school buses is being carefully considered.

## Driver's memorial fund helps aid Sept. 11 relief effort

NYC Skyline graphic

### Long Island resident established fund to honor wife

The husband of a bus driver who was killed in a collision with another vehicle has donated \$5,000 from her memorial fund to aid victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Driver Kathy Ruge, of Long Island, was transporting 38 Commack Union Free School District students to school in May 2001 when a heating company van hit her school bus head-on. The crash sent a plastic pipe filled with copper rods through the windshield of the bus, killing Ruge. All of the students survived.

After a tremendous outpouring of sympathy and support from the community, Ruge's husband, Doug, established the Kathy Ruge Memorial Trust to fund a charitable cause in her name.

Four months later, in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Ruge decided to donate \$5,000 from the fund to AmeriCares disaster relief effort. AmeriCares is a nonprofit disaster relief and humanitarian aid organization that provides immediate response to emergency medical needs.

"There can be no more vital and charitable cause than the relief of suffering for the victims and families of the Sept. 11 disaster," Ruge said. 

### If I am using safety vests, what should I do?

If you are using safety vests, you should heed NHTSA's advice and follow your manufacturer's directions closely. As with other safety restraints, the seat behind must not be occupied by an unrestrained student.

If you have budget dollars that must be spent on safety restraints, be sure to explore all possibilities

before making any decisions. If you have the luxury of waiting, then by all means wait for a determination from NHTSA regarding the safety vests controversy.

*Kathy Furneaux is Director of Operations for the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute in Syracuse. Call her at (800) 836-2210 or e-mail her at [kathy@ptsi.org](mailto:kathy@ptsi.org) for more information.* 

## Blazing a trail of training

### Since becoming Gananda Central School District's first transportation supervisor, Maureen Arnitz has made training a top priority

Looking around Maureen Arnitz's office at the Gananda Central School District transportation department a visitor will find many tributes to "Goofy." The western New York district's first transportation supervisor identifies with the Disney character in a way you might not have thought of.

"Goofy's the character that's always left out," she said. "I try to seek out people like that who you really can't find or see."

That has been one of the hallmarks of Arnitz's tenure since becoming Gananda's supervisor three years ago. She has connected with her drivers by seeking them out and being interested in their lives at the bus garage and outside it.

"We have a lot of laughter and work well as a team," she said. "I can't do this by myself."

#### Family of yellow bloods

To say school bus driving has been a tradition in the Arnitz family would be an understatement. Maureen's father Gus worked 40 years at the Clyde-Savannah Central School District, where his father worked for the previous four decades. Her mother Barb recently retired from driving and her brother Paul drives for the Red Creek Central School District.

Ironically, Maureen Arnitz decided she was going to break the family mold. Hoping to start a career working with children, she studied child psychology in college then worked at

a child abuse center. But six months of witnessing the horrors some children faced convinced Arnitz to find work that involved children in a more positive way. That was when her father stepped in and suggested she fill in as a one of Clyde-Savannah's drivers. From then on she was hooked.

"It's the family background," she said. "I get a lot out of it."

#### Open-door policy

After a number of years of full-time employment with Clyde-Savannah, Arnitz took the Red Creek transportation supervisor's post, where she worked two years before joining Gananda in 1999.

Both districts needed someone who was enthusiastic about training, she said.

"I looked for places that haven't had a lot of training. Gananda was looking for somebody who would give the drivers an identity. They never had that."

Gananda's drivers lacked an identity because there had never been a formal transportation supervisor (The district's business

official used to manage the department) and there was no meeting area or room designated for drivers. Indeed, because Arnitz's office was at the high school, she was two miles from the bus parking lot.

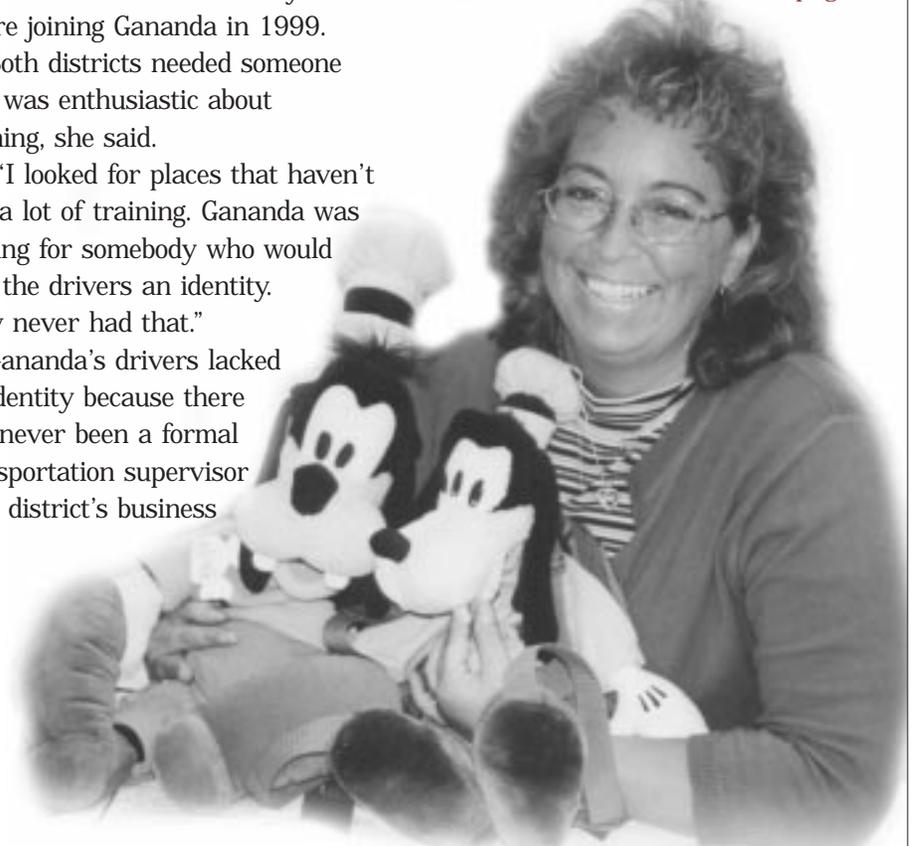
Although that office was two miles away, Arnitz decided the door would never be closed.

"Drivers must have a comfortable environment so I opened my office to them so they could come in and feel welcome," she said.

#### Safety, training focus

Besides building rapport with drivers, Arnitz faced a number of safety and training issues. For example, consistency was lacking on pre-trip inspections, handling rider discipline problems and communicating with parents. Among Arnitz's innovations was to host a monthly meeting in which drivers can complain about

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## Blazing a trail...

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anything to get those emotions of their chests. She also incorporates 15 minutes of venting time into the beginning of all training meetings so drivers can clear their minds for the task ahead.

Arnitz makes her presence known at all trainings.

"I've driven bus," she said. "I know how they feel and what their state of mind is. I've always told them that I'll learn something right along with them."

There are, of course, times when Arnitz may appear more like a supervisor than a comrade. For example, if she performs a spot check on a bus and determines that something is amiss, a driver will find a form on his or her seat explaining what must be done to correct the oversight. She is also a stickler about ensuring complete pretrip inspections.

Arnitz has addressed a number of other issues, including changing policy from house-to-house stops, which were dangerous because of traffic conditions. Gananda's drivers now discharge riders at cluster stops, which means more walking for students but improved safety.

Improving communication with students, and their parents, has been another of Arnitz's passions. She encourages parents to call if they have a concern or a commendation about a driver. Arnitz is also a frequent visitor to open houses and other school events parents might attend.

## A place of their own

Although Arnitz strived to improve training opportunities for

and build rapport with drivers, they still lacked a sense of identity because they could call no place at Gananda their own.

"They really felt like the district didn't want them at the schools, that they were always in the way," she said. "It was very depressing for them."

So when local government officials decided to rebuild the town hall

that had been destroyed by fire, Arnitz proposed that the school district partner with the town to create a room for bus drivers. The parties agreed and, last April, Gananda's drivers finally had a space of their own adjacent to the town hall.

"Now our drivers have a sense of ownership," Arnitz said. 

## From Bingo to Road-eo

### Supervisor enjoys many facets of transportation

Finding ways to make school transportation safety fun is one of many challenges Gananda Central School District Transportation Supervisor Maureen Arnitz excels at.

For example, when she found out that several of her drivers enjoyed playing Bingo outside of work, she developed a variation of the game as a way to spice up the two-hour refresher course they complete twice a year. Arnitz creates the questions, then Head Bus Driver Scott Remillard draws them randomly. Participants who think they know the correct answer (which may or may not appear on their card) mark it with a dabber.

Winners receive small prizes like school bus picture frames, T-shirts, bookends modeled after buses and bus-themed magnets. More importantly, learning such a fun way helps the drivers better retain the information, Arnitz said.

"It helps ensure a safe trip for our kids and gives our drivers some fun in the process," she said.

Bingo is just one of the activities Arnitz and her staff enjoy together. Outside of work, they like to travel to Brewerton and various other sites in the Finger Lakes area where they take part in bus racing.

"It's only 10 laps, but it's a blast to watch them bump into each other as they round the track," she said.

When not supervising or enjoying leisure time with her drivers, Arnitz keeps busy in other transportation-related activities. One is coordinating the Wayne County Operation Safe Stop program, which has been addressing the issue of motorists illegally passing stopped school buses.

Perhaps Arnitz's biggest commitment to the school transportation industry is her involvement with Road-eo.

She founded and chairs the New York Association for Pupil Transportation Special Needs Road-eo, in which participants must pass a written test then take part in activities like appropriately securing a wheelchair or car seat as part of the training exercise. Arnitz also conceived the National Special Needs Road-eo, which she chairs, with the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute.

"I love special needs," Arnitz said. "Special needs has always been my niche."

Arnitz also chairs the NYAPT Road-eo, which is more about competition than training.

"All of them are a lot of work, but also a lot of fun," she said. 

## Physical Performance Test Standard 6: Exiting through the emergency door



This is the sixth in a series Safely Speaking has asked Pete James to write on administering the Physical Performance Test for school bus drivers that is required by the New York State Education Department. James is a certified master instructor and member of the original school bus driver committee that helped develop the PPT. He worked 31 years for the Chautauqua Central School District.

I try to listen to what the drivers say when they are discussing this requirement, especially their apprehension of being able to pass the test. The majority of our state's school bus drivers are in good health and have good physical abilities as monitored through our medical/physical examination requirements.

On the other hand, there is the issue of the fear often generated by the mere mention of the word "test." And we all attach a certain stigma to the word "failure" even beyond that it could mean our job is on the line. The majority of drivers fear Standard 7, dragging the weight, the most. However, I have found that Standard 6 is most challenging in terms of time limit and physical ability. The time (20 seconds) is justifiably tight because we are testing the driver's ability to perform this function in what should be considered an emergency situation that should be handled as quickly as possible.

One challenge is testing the driver's ability to get out from behind the wheel quickly. I am sure most SBDIs have had experience testing

drivers whose size made it difficult to get out of the seatbelted driving position. Driver seats with limited adjustment and without tilt wheels can make getting up a challenge for many drivers. I hasten to add that I have conducted tests in which I anticipated a problem but was pleased when the driver exited in good time. And, of course, there are other reasons for struggling to get out of the seat such as joint, muscle, post-surgical or other physical conditions.

The next real challenge for several drivers has been getting down on the floor after opening the door for the sit-and-slide method of exiting. Again, size, joint problems (especially knees) and other agility-related limitations have made this part of Standard 6 a real challenge for some drivers. Since this standard follows the driving of the vehicle, my verbal instructions include, "When you get the bus parked and secured (i.e. parking brake set), please shut everything off, shut it down, but keep your seatbelt on." I have developed a standard verbal instruction for each of these tests in an effort to

be consistent. Quoth the SBDI: "This standard is designed to ensure that you the driver can get out of an alternative exit should someone crash into your service door or in some other way it becomes inoperable. Today, we are going to use the rear emergency door (i.e. identify the specific exit, which will vary depending on the type of vehicle being used)."

Remember that the exit used is required to be the rear-most floor-level exit (door). Refer to the video for the appropriate exit to use when testing on cars, suburbans, vans, etc. Tell drivers, "Remember, as demonstrated in the video, that we want you to use the sit-and-slide method. Please do not jump, thereby increasing your potential for injury. "The time on this one is 20 seconds, which is fairly tight as it simulates an emergency. The 20 seconds is from when I say 'Go' until your feet touch the ground, and includes getting out of the seatbelt, down the aisle and out the exit." I routinely place a pad or folded blanket on the bus floor at the exit for them to sit on, as bus floors tend to be wet and/or dirty.

I also routinely spot for all drivers by standing sideways in front of the open exit (facing the left side of the bus with my right shoulder toward the exit.) I am more stable in this position with my feet planted apart than I would be facing the driver or with my back to him. I tell the drivers, "Since our upper bodies are heavier than our lower bodies,

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