

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PANEL ON TRANSPORT

Proposed Measures to Enhance the Safety of School Transport Vehicles

PURPOSE

This paper seeks Members' views on the Administration's proposed measures to enhance the safety of passengers on school transport vehicles.

BACKGROUND

2. At present, there are 5 560 registered school transport vehicles, of which 4 448 are school buses (vehicles with a seating capacity of more than 16) and 1 112 are school private light buses (which are commonly known as "nanny vans" with a seating capacity of 16 or less). Common layouts of the school transport vehicles are at the **Annex**.

Annex

3. Although the safety record of school transport vehicles has been generally satisfactory compared to other vehicle types¹, it is important that we explore measures to further enhance their safety, given that the passengers of school transport vehicles are mostly young children who may not be able to take good care of themselves, particularly in emergency situations.

4. We conducted a review on the possible measures to enhance the safety of school transport vehicles and reported the major findings of the review to this Panel in February 2002. Members supported the proposal to strengthen education and publicity on school transport safety and asked us to further examine the proposals relating to the use of safer seats and the compulsory provision of escorts.

5. The following paragraphs set out what has been done to strengthen education and publicity, and what we propose in regard to the use of safer seats and provision of escorts.

¹ Over the past five years, the average number of accidents involving school transport vehicles on school trips constitutes 1.3 % of the total number of accidents per year.

A. STRENGTHENING EDUCATION AND PUBLICITY

6. The Transport Department (TD) has been disseminating road safety messages to drivers of school transport vehicles through regular conferences with the trades, and has also stepped up education and publicity for school children. Leaflets, posters and stickers promoting safety guidelines on school transport vehicles have been distributed to kindergartens and primary schools. In addition, in 2003, TD distributed a teaching kit comprising a CD-ROM, story and game sheets to kindergarten and primary school children to educate them on the importance of safety on school transport vehicles. The education and promotional programmes are welcomed by parents and students. We will continue to step up publicity on the safety of school transport vehicles.

B. USE OF SAFER SEATS

7. Safer seats refer to strong, closely spaced seats with high, energy-absorbing seat backs, which would more effectively protect the passengers. These seats have been in use on school transport vehicles in the US and Canada for more than two decades. In Canada, the number of injuries sustained by school bus occupants has been reduced by about 26% since these safety seats were introduced in 1975.

Safety Requirements

8. TD commissioned a consultancy study on the development of local standards and testing method for safer seats in Hong Kong in late 2002 / early 2003. The study recommended that we include the following requirements² in our future specifications for seats when new school transport vehicles are registered –

- (a) inclusion of a strong seat with strong floor anchorage which will not fail during crash;
- (b) inclusion of an energy absorbing seat back or barrier in front of each passenger;
- (c) provision of only front-facing seats; and

² This is based on the International Standard – United Nation Economic Commission for Europe (UN ECE) Regulation No. 80.

- (d) provision of fire-resistant seating upholstery.

9. If the new specifications with the aforesaid features are adopted, seat suppliers for new school transport vehicles will have to produce a certificate, either issued by the manufacturer or a recognised testing agent, to prove that the design of the seat model comply with the specifications.

Consultation with the Trade

10. We consulted the school bus trade and the nanny van trade on the proposal in February 2004. The two trades agreed with the need to enhance the safety of school children on school transport vehicles. Their major concerns were the seating capacity of the vehicles, the impact on the existing fleet and the additional costs involved.

Seating Capacity

11. On the trades' concern about seating capacity, we wish to point out that our current proposal will not lead to any reduction in the seating capacity of school transport vehicles. The "Three-for-Two" counting rule³, which is currently allowed under the Road Traffic (Traffic Control) Regulations (Cap. 374 sub. leg. G) would remain unchanged.

Impact on the Existing Fleet

12. On the trades' concern about the impact on the existing fleet, in line with our established practice for new safety equipment, the proposed requirements and new specifications will only apply to newly registered school transport vehicles. Retrofitting of the existing fleet will not be required.

Cost Implications

13. The estimated costs of a 12-seater and a 16-seater nanny van are \$160 000 and \$360 000 respectively. The costs of a 30-seater and a 56-seater school bus are \$460 000 and \$1 000 000 respectively. The new safer seat requirements would incur an additional cost of about 6-8% of the vehicle cost, i.e. about \$11 000 to \$25 000 for nanny vans and about \$32 000 to

³ Under the existing legislation, three children aged three years or above but each not exceeding a height of 1.3 m can be counted as two passengers.

\$70 000 for school buses. For a new nanny van with a life span of 8 years, the additional cost per year would be \$1 400 to \$3 200, while that for a new large bus with a life span of 10 years would be \$3 200 to \$7 000. The additional amount to be borne by each student would range from \$6 to \$17 per month⁴. TD will continue to explore with vehicle and seat manufacturers the possibility of reducing the costs.

C. COMPULSORY PROVISION OF ESCORTS

14. Escorts can help monitor the behaviour of school children when a school vehicle is in motion. They also provide assistance to the children whenever such is necessary, such as during boarding and alighting. Since February 1997, we have put in place a mandatory requirement for the provision of escorts on school buses with a seating capacity of 16 or more that serve kindergartens and primary schools. This requirement is currently not applicable to nanny vans with a seating capacity of 16 or less. However, we are aware that some 90% of the nanny vans carrying kindergarten students and 25% of those carrying primary school students have already provided escort service voluntarily.

Survey on Parents/Guardians

15. TD conducted a survey in September 2002 to gauge the views of parents/guardians on the compulsory provision of escorts on nanny vans. Questionnaires were sent to 6 303 parents/guardians and the response rate was 64%. 97% of the parents/guardians of kindergarten students and 89% of those of primary school students supported compulsory provision of escorts. Over 50% of these parents/guardians expressed willingness to pay for the service.

16. Taking into account the safety benefits and the findings of the above survey, we propose to extend compulsory provision of escorts to nanny vans that carry kindergarten students. In line with the existing arrangement, we propose to stipulate this new requirement in the Passenger Service Licence issued by TD to nanny van operators. Non-compliance with the licence conditions will result in the cancellation of licence.

⁴ The calculations are based on the assumption that school transport vehicles serve a school trip every day. The estimated costs will be lower for school transport vehicles serving more school trips per day.

Cost Implications

17. The average monthly salary of an escort is around \$2 000. Under the “Three-for-Two” counting rule, a small nanny van may on average carry 20 children. We estimate that the additional operating cost arising from the proposal should be about \$100 per student per month.

Consultation with the Trade

18. TD consulted the nanny van trade in February 2004. The trade supported the proposed compulsory provision of escorts on nanny vans carrying kindergarten students only. They also expressed the view that the requirements should not be too stringent as some escorts are school teachers, domestic helpers, parents etc. TD will take the trade’s suggestion into consideration when it draws up the licence conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS


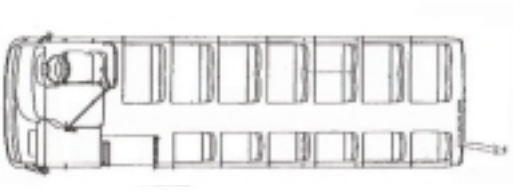


19. We recommend pursuing the following measures to further enhance the service and safety of school transport vehicles –

- (a) to continue to launch education and publicity programmes on the importance of safety on school transport vehicles;
- (b) to require newly registered school transport vehicles to be equipped with safer seats according to TD’s specifications; and
- (c) to make provision of escorts compulsory for school public light buses with 16 seats or less that serve kindergartens.

WAY FORWARD

20. Members are invited to comment on the proposed measures to enhance the safety of school transport vehicles set out in paragraph 19 above.

Common Layouts of School Transport Vehicles

	
<p>12-seater Nanny Van</p>	<p>16-seater Nanny Van</p>
	
<p>25-seater (2+2 seating) Bus</p>	<p>20-seater</p>
 <p>45 seating plan</p>	
<p>56-seater (2+3 seating) Bus</p>	<p>45-seater</p>
 <p>49 seating plan</p>	
<p>61-seater (2+3 seating) Bus</p>	<p>49-seater</p>