

AN UNSEEN REALITY

By Brooke Neal

An 11-year-old in North Carolina received multiple breaks and fractures when a car ignored his school bus's flashing lights and stop arm, slamming into him.

In Florida, 2 students were airlifted and another transported by ambulance to a local hospital after they were struck trying to board their school bus. The bus was fully stopped with red light flashing and its stop arm out. All three children survived.

A 9-year-old was knocked unconscious and drug 80 feet through an intersection when a car tried to pass his stopped school bus in New Jersey. He was treated for various injuries, but survived.

In Washington, a teen was sideswiped by a driver as he blew right through his school bus's flashing lights and stop arm. Luckily, he had no serious injuries.

These are just a few examples of an "unseen reality" happening all across the country each and every day. And these were the ones who were lucky enough to survive. Despite the distinctive yellow color, flashing lights, reflectors, and stop signs of school buses, drivers continue to illegally pass them when they are stopped.

The National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation (NASDPTS) sponsors an annual Stop Arm Violation Day in which they encourage school bus drivers in all states to record and submit how many times their school bus is illegally passed by motorists. Each year the numbers are staggering. In 2014, school bus drivers in 29 states reported 75,966 violations in one day. In a 180-day school year, this amounts to over 13 million violations a year. 13,000,000 times our children's lives are put in danger.

When talking about the life of a child, there is just no room for error.

So why do so many people continue to pass school buses when the stop arm is out? While most are not being malicious, there are three main reasons why motorists pass stopped school buses. First of all, they are in a hurry. They may be late for work, a meeting, or even trying to drop their own children off in time for school. The second reason many pass school buses when they are not supposed to, is they simply aren't paying attention. Many are driving on autopilot, thinking about their day and everything they have to do. Others are distracted by their cell phone or something else going on in the vehicle. Lack of awareness is the last reason many fail to stop for school buses. The laws concerning when to stop for a school bus are different in each state and this can be con-

fusing for many, as they just don't realize they are supposed to stop.

There are limited ways to catch these drivers who are breaking the law. Many violations go unreported due to the fact that it is difficult for school bus drivers to gather the information needed to prosecute the motorists. Additionally, there just aren't enough police officers available to catch violators at every bus stop.





As a result, many counties are turning to the help of cameras in order to help catch those who are putting children's lives in danger. The cameras are mounted near the stop arm and are able to capture the motorist's license plate number. Citations are then able to be issued. The use of this technological advancement alleviates the pressure put on school bus drivers to control the students on their bus, make sure the students are loading/unloading safely, AND write down license plate numbers and driver descriptions. Having actual photo evidence of a driver illegally passing a school bus makes it much easier to prosecute violators and ultimately improves the safety of children.

However, there are some that oppose the use of cameras to catch violators. They feel that school districts are just using them to generate revenue and that they are invasive. Those opposed also argue that just like traffic cameras, they have imperfections causing those innocent grief in proving they did not violate the school bus passing laws.

Whatever your view on the use of cameras to catch those illegally passing school buses, one thing is sure--School bus drivers cannot control the actions of the drivers around them, but with the proper education and training, the safety of students can be improved. In an effort to spread awareness to drivers about the laws concerning passing school buses, School Training Solutions has created a document containing the laws in each state. This document is available on the School Training Solutions and NASDPTS websites. Educating school bus drivers to use the proper techniques that help communicate when it is safe for children to cross the road is also paramount to improving safety. Drivers can then in turn pass this training on to the students. If an accident does occur, school bus drivers must also know how to react and what to do. The proper training and knowledge can mean life or death in an emergency situation such as this, and the life of a child is just too important to lose.

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