

Seatbelts save lives. The statement is at the core of what is probably the most successful public service campaign of all times. Since the 1960s and 70s the statement's simplicity and clarity have convinced millions of Americans to buckle up, saving what studies estimate to be between 11,000 and 13,000 lives each year in highway automobile accidents. And yet this simple message and incredible record of success have also served to convince the public that seatbelts are endowed with an almost mystical ability to save lives and prevent injury in roles which they were never designed or intended to serve.

The simplicity of the message also masks the fact that, even when used correctly, seatbelts cause very serious injuries. Google "Seatbelt Syndrome" for articles and images if you need convincing. Warning: the more graphic of these images are not for the faint of heart. Laceration of the liver and spleen, intestinal damage, and serious hip and shoulder injuries are common. The truth is never as simple as a public service announcement. This brings us to the current debate about the use of seatbelts on large school buses.

Installing seatbelts on large school buses simply because they save lives in automobiles is like using a hammer to set a screw because it works so well driving a nail. Like the forces applied to setting a screw and driving a nail, the crash forces affecting the occupants of large school buses are different than those affecting the occupants of automobiles. A different tool, compartmentalization, just may be more effective in mitigating those forces and protecting the health of students.

The engineers at the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), in a 2011 study, concluded that adding seatbelts to large school buses may increase, not decrease the number of fatalities on those buses. The study also suggests that by using valuable resources to fund seatbelts, equipment or procedures that could more effectively protect the health and safety of students may go unfunded or underfunded.

NHTSA statistics also indicate that on average 18 student fatalities occur each year in school bus accidents in the United States. But of those students, 12 perish as pedestrians around the bus and not as passengers on the bus. While the debate may continue whether seatbelts influence the outcome of some of these tragedies, they clearly have no effect on the outcome of the majority. The public discourse on school bus safety may be more meaningful if it centered on the one component that dramatically affects the safety of students throughout the full gamut of potential risks both on and off the bus.

That component would be the driver. Although the final reports have not been released on the recent fatal school bus accidents in Baltimore and Tennessee, driver health, skill and behavior will no doubt be the primary factors in the occurrence and severity of both accidents. This would tend to indicate that we are focusing on the wrong issue. Replacing compartmentalization with seatbelts may pacify public sentiment, but it is doubtful as to whether it will have any positive effect on student safety.

If Federal and State legislatures, as well as local executives, councils and boards are serious about committing additional funds to improving the health and safety of students on school buses, the answer is clear. The resources would be better spent on the drivers. Strategic spending on the recruitment, screening, training, retention, and on-road supervision of drivers will certainly have a greater impact on the health and safety of the students we transport.