

December 17, 1999

The Honorable Don Siegelman Governor of Alabama State Capitol 600 Dexter Ave. Montgomery, AL 36130-2751

Dear Governor Siegelman:

We are writing to ask your help to ensure the safety of children traveling to and from school. In June of this year, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) conducted a noteworthy investigation on the use of buses that do not conform to federal safety standards for the transportation of children in school buses.

The NTSB study examined a series of school bus crashes occurring in 1998 and early 1999 in which a total of nine people were killed and thirty-six were injured. Most of the victims, including eight fatalities, were children. After a careful review of these incidents, the NTSB concluded the crash victims might have sustained fewer and less severe injuries had they been riding in buses that met federal safety standards for transporting children in school buses.

In general, school bus travel is one of the safest forms of transportation in the United States. Each year more than 23.5 million children travel more than 4.3 billion miles on school buses. Despite the significant number of students transported and miles traveled, an average of nine children die each year. Obviously, any loss of life is tragic and this record can and should be improved.

The Congress, U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and the NTSB have consistently sought the highest level of safety for the transportation of school age children. In 1974, Congress directed the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration (NHTSA) to establish school bus safety standards. These standards require higher levels of safety performance for school buses than other passenger vehicles, including rollover protection, body joint strength, emergency exits, and floor strength. These and other standards help to ensure the safety of children transported on school buses.

The Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act of 1999, recently approved by the Congress and signed by the President, includes provisions designed to ensure proper skills and training of the school bus driver. Specifically, the Secretary of DOT is directed to establish a special Commercial Driver's License endorsement for drivers of school buses and provide for consistent training and testing requirements among the states. At a minimum, the new bus driver standards will require a driving skills test in a school bus and address proper safety procedures for loading and unloading children, using emergency exits, and traversing highway rail grade crossings.

While Congress and the Administration will continue working to improve and promote school bus safety, it is a matter of state discretion to require the use of school buses that conform to federal standards. Unfortunately, some school districts, day care centers, Head Start facilities and others are hiring nonconforming buses and vans to transport school children. In the June study, the NTSB made three recommendations relevant to state governments:

require that all vehicles carrying more than ten passengers and transporting children to and from school and school related activities (including, but not limited to Head Start programs and day care centers) meet federal school bus structural safety standards;

revise State and local laws to eliminate any exclusions or exemptions pertaining to the use of age appropriate restraints in all seat belt-equipped vehicles carrying more than 10 passengers and transporting school children; and

adopt and encourage the implementation of NHTSA's Guideline for the Safe Transportation of Preschool Age Children in School Buses by all operators of school buses that transport preschool-age children to and from school or school-related events.

Requiring the transportation of all children on buses that meet federal safety standards is one of the most important recommendations in the study. Such a requirement would help ensure that children travel to and from school in vehicles offering the highest possible level of safety protection. Ensuring the use of appropriate restraints could also reduce injuries and fatalities. Finally, the use of the guideline developed by NHTSA would further enhance the safety and operation of all vehicles used to transport children.

We will continue to work at the federal level to promote safe vehicles and practices in the transportation of children on school buses. Recognizing the vital leadership role of Governors and state officials, we hope that you, together with your State legislature, will join us in this effort by promoting a strong program to ensure the safety of children traveling to and from school. We look forward to working with you to achieve improved travel safety for all Americans.

Sincerely,

John McCain Ernest F. Hollings Chairman Ranking Democrat Senate Commerce Committee Senate Commerce Committee

Jim Hall Chairman National Transportation Safety Board