

Our File/N/Réf.
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DATE 26 September 2000

TO/DEST. Co-ordinator, Community Services Committee

FROM/EXP. Acting Commissioner, Social Services Department

SUBJECT/OBJECT **TRANSPORTING PRESCHOOL CHILDREN ON SCHOOL BUSES**

DEPARTMENTAL RECOMMENDATION

That the Community Services Committee approve the following:

- a) **That the Child Care Directorate resume the practice of transporting preschool children on field trips using regular school buses and OC Transpo.**
- b) **That the Child Care Directorate refrain from transporting Toddlers on field trips involving school buses and OC Transpo.**
- c) **That the Child Care Directorate review current safety routines on field trips and establish standards of practice for all Regional child care centres including guidelines for adult volunteers.**
- d) **That child/adult ratios be increased to 1:4 during field trips by using students, volunteers, parents or supply teachers to be available in cases of emergency.**
- e) **That when research in progress at Transport Canada is complete, the Child Care Directorate review policies and routines to conform with the recommendations at that time.**
- f) **That Purchase of Service child care centres be encouraged to review their policies and procedures regarding safety practices on field trips to ensure the safety of the children enrolled.**

PURPOSE

In response to a request by a parent whose child is enrolled in a Regional child care centre to review the issue of transporting preschool children on school buses that are not equipped with seat belts, Community Services Committee directed staff to suspend all field trips and conduct a review.

Field trips were subsequently suspended and a memo to purchase of service child care agencies was sent out explaining the Region's position and recommending that they also review their policies and procedures with regard to transporting children outside of the child care centre. The purpose of this report is to provide information to Community Services Committee regarding this issue and to make recommendations for future practices.

BACKGROUND

The Child Care Directorate operates 17 child care centres, 12 of which serve toddler (18 months to 2.5 years of age) and preschool (2.5 - 5 years of age) children. The remaining 5 programs provide care for kindergarten and school age children. All centres include field trips as part of their program and routinely transport children on a school bus by hiring local school bus companies to provide service or by using OC Transpo. While Toddlers occasionally go on field trips, this activity is primarily organized for the benefit of the Preschool child. On average, Toddler and Preschool programs take 3 to 4 field trips per year and most travel 15 to 40 kilometers to local museums, apple orchards and farms. Regional child care programs have been transporting children in this manner since 1973 and have never had a child injured in a school bus while on a field trip.

USE OF SCHOOL BUSES BY THE CHILD CARE COMMUNITY

Purchase of service child care agencies in Ottawa-Carleton also take preschool children on field trips by using local school bus companies or OC Transpo for transportation. In addition to this, 6 Headstart programs also provide transportation to and from their centre on a daily basis, some of which use vans or lease small school buses for this purpose. This transportation component is vital to the families and children enrolled because without it, children would not attend these programs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FIELD TRIPS

The Day Nurseries Act does not require programs to take children on field trips in order to be licensed. However, field trips are recognized as an extremely valuable part of an early childhood curriculum offering children a learning experience in the community in a controlled situation. An organized field trip often supports or expands on a project or theme being discussed in the program and provides an opportunity to expose children to new experiences. A trip to the apple orchard, for example, would enhance learning how apples grow and are picked, how they taste, and how they get to the store. The heightened interest of children during field trips provides an opportunity to expand language skills, practice listening skills and develop an awareness of the

community in which they live. In many cases, children enrolled in Regional child care programs would not otherwise have an opportunity to enjoy and learn from the many resources available in Ottawa-Carleton.

CURRENT LEGISLATION

Current legislation in the *Motor Vehicle Safety Act* (Canada) requires that children between 9 and 18 kilograms, or a Toddler, be restrained in an approved car seat when transported in a vehicle owned, leased or regularly used by their parents. When toddlers are transported by someone other than their parents, they must merely be secured using the pelvic strap of the normal seat belt. Children over 18 kilograms but less than 23 kilograms are required to be secured by a pelvic strap of the normal seat belt. This legislation does not apply to children while on a school bus or when using public transportation.

BUS SAFETY FEATURES

Legislation regarding the safe transportation of children in school buses is reflected primarily in standards set for the manufacturing of these vehicles. School buses have been specifically designed and equipped to transport children and have unique safety considerations related to their design and operation. There are more structural integrity standards applicable to school buses than to other buses or other vehicles. Transport Canada currently applies 37 federal safety standards to the design and construction of school buses manufactured in or imported into Canada. These standards define specifications for safety features such as roof and joint strength, fuel system integrity, emergency exits, seat strength and padding, tires, and bus window retention. Transport Canada and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in the United States have both endorsed the concept of “compartmentalization” as the best way to provide crash protection to passengers. This requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection so that children are protected without the need to wear a seat belt. The seats are spaced and the seat backs sized to resist occupants being thrown around in an impact. A barrier is provided in the front of the first row of seats. The seat backs and barrier are designed with a balance of energy absorption and strength. The effectiveness of compartmentalization has been confirmed in studies conducted by the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board and the National Academy of Science in 1989. The compartmentalization design was intended for school age children.

To date, seat belts have not been required for installation in school buses although the issue has been widely debated. Information from the analysis of all types of school bus collisions led Transport Canada to conclude that seat belts would not have prevented the injuries that have occurred and may actually have an adverse effect on the safety of children on school buses. For example, school bus crash tests revealed that lap-belted occupants would be more likely to sustain serious head and neck injuries than would unbelted occupants in frontal collisions. To accommodate belts, school bus seats would need to be redesigned for a different collision dynamic. Transport Canada also concluded that combination lap and shoulder belts could pose problems because they cannot be adjusted to safely restrain smaller children.

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would increase the risk of abdominal injury if the smaller child slipped down to the point that restraining straps were resting on their stomachs.

Testing carried out to date, however, has not considered all ages, sizes and physical developments of children riding in school buses, the smaller and younger of whom would be recommended to use a child restraint system in cars. Transport Canada is in the process of conducting testing for the young child, but results and recommendations from this study will not be available for 18 months. It is important to note that Transport Canada has recorded no incident of a smaller child being injured on a school bus in Canada.

Passenger protection and safety features on transit buses such as those used by OC Transpo are subject to similar regulations as school buses. Collision data indicates that seat belts would be of potential benefit in only a very few cases and would require management by bus drivers and reliable use by passengers to be effective. As with school buses, installation of seat belts would require a redesign of the basic structure of transit buses.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Laidlaw Transit recently purchased a new type of school bus where the seats are designed to accommodate lap belts and/or tether anchors for the installation of car seats. Transport Canada has indicated that if used, these seat belts and anchors would need to be installed by the manufacturer to ensure that all standards are met. Seat belts and car seats are only effective if properly installed and worn correctly. Statistics show that there is an 80% failure rate in the correct installation of car seats. Child Care centres choosing this option would have to rely on staff to properly secure car seats and lap belts on each bus trip. While this seems like a reasonable option, the potential for error is high given the number of car seats required, and the issue of whether or not children are at risk for different types of injuries created by the seat belt remains.

Another alternative given some consideration was using vans to transport children to and from activities. The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recently warned that the use of passenger vans instead of traditional school buses are putting children at increased risk and is currently taking steps to prohibit the use of vans for school transportation. Vans are not subject to the same safety requirements as school buses and would be difficult to modify to meet those standards. In practical terms, most child care centres are transporting between 30 and 50 children by bus on field trips and would require 4 to 8 vans to accommodate children and staff for each outing. If children weighed under 18 kilograms and required car seats, ensuring proper installation would need to be addressed.

OPTIONS FOR REGIONAL CHILD CARE CENTRES

Given the information available on the issue of requiring seat belts for the transportation of preschool children there are two options to be considered. The first option to consider is to continue the suspension of field trips in preschool programs until research results regarding the

effects of using seat belts on school buses for smaller children is available. This would hinder the ability of staff to provide an enhanced educational program but would protect the safety of children until firmer guidelines are developed by Transport Canada.

The second option is to resume the practice of transporting children on field trips using school buses and OC Transpo but introduce enhanced safety awareness and exclude Toddlers. Established safety routines should be re-examined and standards of practices established for all Regional Child Care Centres including guidelines for adult volunteers. Supervision required while on field trips should be enhanced by increasing the child/adult ratios from 1: 8 to 1: 4 through the use of parents, volunteers, students and supply staff. This would make available more adults to assist children to stay safely seated on the bus, and to assist in cases of emergency. It is recommended that Toddlers be excluded from field trips because of the limited value of out of centre excursions to the developmental stage of this age group.

The existing research regarding the use of seat belts in school buses does not provide clear direction on this issue. The effectiveness of seat belts in cars in preventing serious injury and death is widely recognized. This is not the case with seat belts on school buses and there is every indication that children seat belted into a school bus could actually be at risk of greater injury from the seat belt due to current bus design. Considering the research then, municipal child care centres have been transporting children as safely as possible. For this reason and because field trips do enhance the care and learning experiences of preschool children, the second option is recommended. Adopting this recommendation will allow centres to continue to offer a valuable component of the program to children, and considers the safety record on field trips to date not only in Ottawa-Carleton, but across Canada.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Parents in municipal preschool programs were recently surveyed to find out what they thought about having their child participate in field trips taken on buses without seat belts. Of the 117 parents who responded, 109 said they would like to see field trips resumed in their child's program, provided that clear written safety guidelines were put in place for staff and volunteers and that the ratio of staff to children was increased. 92 of the 117 respondents also indicated that they would be interested in volunteering on field trips.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implication of resuming field trips in preschool programs is the increased cost of hiring extra staff to participate in the field trip where parent volunteers are not available to meet the 1 to 4 ratio. This cost can be absorbed in the operating budget of each municipal preschool program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Many community child care agencies chose to suspend their field trips when this decision was made for municipal child care centres. Resuming field trips on school buses for municipal programs will likely be reflected in the broader child care community. Since parental support of this action in municipal centres was contingent on establishing clear, written safety guidelines for parents and staff, it is recommended that community child care agencies do the same before proceeding.

*Approved by
Garry Armstrong*