



## Getting the Word Out on New Seat Belt Technology

By Ryan Gray

The school bus seat-belt debate has abated somewhat over the last several years, thanks in large part to new technology available on the market that purports to have solved the seat-capacity issue. That technology is reflected in NHTSA's updated rule on school bus occupant safety that goes into full effect later this month to give guidance to bus manufacturers and operators alike with regard to seat belts, or more aptly, lap-shoulder restraints.

While concerns continue on how seat belts may affect student emergency evacuations or the ability of drivers to see students with the higher seatbacks now regulated at 24-inches high, one of the loudest arguments currently centers on whether or not NHTSA should require three-point belts in large school buses as well as those less than 10,000 pounds. NHTSA attempted to squash the issue on Aug. 25 when it denied a petition by several child safety advocacy groups that are pushing for mandatory lap-shoulder belts on all large buses. NHTSA's reasoning was that fewer than 1 percent of school transportation-related fatalities occur in school buses compared to 12 percent walking and 79 percent in cars. (*See related story in Industry Connections on page 16.*)

All major school bus seat manufacturers now offer school bus customers some peace of mind when navigating the seat belt issue with new products on the market that allow for retrofitting or upgrading a standard bench to one equipped with three-point belts. The thinking is that school districts or bus companies can more easily and inexpensively upgrade in the event the state passes a law on school bus seat belts or the local school board votes to require them.

In July, I had the opportunity to moderate a panel at the 18th Annual STN EXPO in Reno, Nev., on user experience with lap/shoulder restraints on school buses. Participating were Al Diamico, transportation director at Buffalo (N.Y.) Public Schools, which began offering its students the option to buckle up at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year thanks to a five-year fleet replacement program by contractor First Student. The company aims to have the three-point belts in all Buffalo school buses by the 2014-2015 school year.

Francine Furby, an assistant director at Loudoun County (Va.) Public Schools, had even more information to share, as her school district began voluntarily installing the seat belts in 2008. At last count, Loudoun County had about 20 percent of its bus fleet equipped with the seat belts. Transportation Director Pamela McDonald represented Orange Unified in Southern California, which responded several years ago to a state mandate for lap/shoulder belts in both small and large school buses. These three experts represented a cross section of districts from different parts of the country at different stages in their school bus seat belt program.

Diamico, Furby and McDonald, however, had similar insights to share, namely that the occupant restraints have had little negative impact on operations. Certainly, there is a cost involved in equipping buses with seat belts, as the new restraint systems reportedly add several thousands of dollars to the cost of new school buses. This past spring, Loudoun County Superintendent Dr. Edgar Hatrick told me that amortizing the additional cost over the life of each bus shows that the added safety is worth the price.

Diamico, Furby and McDonald each said the restraint systems, when used, have had a positive impact on student behavior as well.

But what especially surprised me was that several workshop attendees continued to voice opinions and concerns that seat belts will drastically reduce seat capacity and student ridership. Many said they were also unaware of the new seating solutions that are coming to market at improved price points for customers. This showed me that, despite the diligent work of the seat manufacturers and the trade press, there is still an information disconnect. This could be chalked up to school bus replacement cycles, which have lengthened since the recession. Many school bus operators simply don't have the funds to buy new, so they aren't aware of the new options available. An estimated 700 school districts nationwide are equipping some type of seat belt system in at least some of their buses, or about 5 percent of school systems nationwide.

This month, the NAPT Summit provides attendees yet another opportunity to see these new products and to speak with company representatives. Here's hoping that these attendees will also help spread the word back home. Eventually, all school buses nationwide figure to have lap-shoulder belts, whether or not you and I live to see that come to fruition. But research done today will lead to a smoother road to navigate for future generations of school bus operators. ■