

Safe PASSAGE

Cameras and GPS devices make buses—and students—safer.

BY PAM DERRINGER

A FEW YEARS AGO, THE LIVELIHOOD of a Florida school bus driver with a spotless 13-year record was jeopardized when a railroad crossing gate crashed into the rear of her vehicle.

Hoping to get Pensacola schools to pay for a new gate, railroad employees claimed the driver failed to stop before the tracks and was struck while running the barrier, according to Eric Fritz, former transportation director for the Escambia County School District.

Fortunately, the bus was equipped with Seon cameras and a GPS system from Everyday Solutions which proved that no warning bells had sounded and the bus had come to a full stop before proceeding over the tracks, Fritz says.

“The driver would have lost her state license and her job” based on the account of two railroad employees, recalls Fritz, who is now the district’s energy manager. “But she was right, and we were able to prove it.”

Once unthinkable, cameras and GPS systems are becoming increasingly popular on school buses where bullying and fights can frighten students and distract drivers, jeopardizing the safety of the entire vehicle. Officials from Seon, the largest manufacturer of school bus video



✓ TAKE AWAY

Whither Video Cameras? Consider These Benefits

- 1 INCREASED TRAFFIC SAFETY** Externally mounted cameras can catch drivers who illegally pass a bus with flashers on, as well as collect information on the bus operator’s driving.
- 2 DECREASED BULLYING** According to one study, middle schoolers are likelier to be bullied on the bus than at school. Video cameras allow monitoring of behavior and appropriate response.
- 3 RECORD OF EVENTS** If a problem does arise, bus cameras allow the documentation of the chain of events.

systems, estimate that at least half of all school buses have cameras, with installs growing steadily.

“These systems have made a huge impact with kids,” Fritz says. “They are going to school ready to learn. And they’re on time.”

Tracking Devices

CAMERA/AUDIO AND GPS SYSTEMS VARY in features and cost but schools can

BUS SAFETY

expect to pony up \$1,000 to \$3,000 per bus for Seon's camera/GPS systems and \$400 to \$700 per bus for Everyday Solutions' GPS offerings. In addition to tracking bus locations, Everyday Solutions' system offers options that let parents check actual morning bus arrival times on the Web and bar-coded student ID cards that pinpoint when a child gets on and off the bus.

Escambia's cameras and GPS systems have not only calmed the onboard climate but helped the schools improve bus routes, Fritz says. The district has cut the number of buses and the number of employees answering complaint calls, while boosting on-time bus arrivals from 62 percent to 99.95 percent, he says.

Although primarily intended to prevent student misbehavior, these systems also provide physical evidence against drivers who speed, idle excessively, deviate from the designated route, or engage in improper behavior.

School bus horror stories abound. Drivers have forgotten to make sure the bus is empty at the end of its route. One district had a male driver who propositioned male high school students. In another district, a driver closed the

door on a student and continued driving down the road, with the student half in and half out of the vehicle. In cases like this, video evidence is critical.

However, Brian Moore, public safety supervisor with the Red Clay CSD in Wilmington, Delaware, blames student misbehavior, not poor drivers, as the leading cause of bus accidents.

Video/audio systems are a great deterrent on buses, even more than in schools, because there's nowhere to hide, Moore says. All a driver has to do is hit the "event" button and the recording is flagged and time-stamped, he says.

Of Red Clay's 17,000 students, only about 100 are frequent troublemakers, with middle schoolers most likely to be the problem, Moore says. Most disturbances start with paper throwing, name calling or students videotaping each other with cell phones, he says.

"Sometimes, the students actually help us by posting videos of the fights on YouTube," Moore says. "I'll take whatever I can get. If they are going to videotape each other, I warn them not to be surprised if they are suspended or arrested."

Beyond cameras and GPS systems, drivers can do a lot to keep a busload of students under control. For example, they should be making frequent eye contact with students and checking the seats for vandalism or weapons after each run, Moore says.

Rob Doss, Escambia's current transportation director, says the drivers today view video systems not as a negative watchdog, but as a positive tool for driver coaching and quick resolution of student disputes.

Video only tells part of the story, he notes, citing a driver's good judgment when a bus burst into flames recently. The driver quickly pulled off the road after he and the students simultaneously spotted smoke. Ten minutes later, the bus was fully ablaze, but the students had already calmly exited the vehicle. Recent evacuation drills and quick action by the driver and students prevented a tragedy, Doss says.

To foster a safe atmosphere aboard the buses, Doss also stresses the role of positive leadership. He meets with the drivers every day, encouraging them, finding out how they are doing, and listening to their ideas. Hopefully, that effort filters down to the buses themselves, prompting drivers to form positive relationships with students that will, in turn, promote a calm trip to school, he says. ■

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Student Behavior Is the Key to Safe Bus Service

These three tips can help make sure each morning and afternoon bus ride unfolds uneventfully!

- 1** Training and attitude are still the best ways to control behavior, officials say. Drivers should set the tone—smiling, greeting students. At the same time, drivers must set clear limits, provide written rules, and stay calm.
- 2** Know your neighborhoods. Where are the traffic dangers? Use bus routing software to create safer routes.
- 3** A comprehensive, continuous training program can teach drivers how to deal with disturbances and bullying, says Brian Moore, public safety officer with Delaware's Red Clay CSD. Drivers can learn watchfulness, allowing them to anticipate misbehavior or conflict before it happens. "Watch which students are watching you," says Moore, "because those students are probably doing something they shouldn't."