

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 30, 2019

Secretary Elaine Chao
Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Deputy Administrator James Owens
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Chao and Deputy Administrator Owens,

We write to you concerning the safety and well-being of students who are transported to and from schools on antiquated buses that lack proper temperature controls and who face exposure to extreme heat. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has the authority to regulate both vehicle design and passenger safety. We ask that you issue regulations to protect children from dangerous temperatures due to the lack of temperature control features on school buses.

Temperatures in our districts in Southern California and Florida can often approach or exceed one hundred degrees – including up to 120° F in the Coachella Valley – during months that students are attending school. Even during winter months temperatures can average eighty degrees or more. I am concerned and troubled that students are being transported on school buses that lack air conditioning, exposing students to dangerously high temperatures and putting them at risk for heat stroke and other heat related illnesses.

The Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards overseen by NHTSA outline multiple requirements for the safety of school bus passengers including requirements for driver visibility, passenger restraints, and braking systems. However, there is no requirement relating to the presence of climate control systems that can protect students from exposure to extreme temperatures. This feature of bus design should be considered paramount to the safety of our students.


Children are among the most vulnerable to heat related illness, and school buses are especially conducive to rapid rise in temperature. Prolonged exposure to high temperatures can overwhelm the body's natural cooling ability and lead to heat cramps, exhaustion, or heat stroke. In addition, a 2018 study showed evidence that cumulative heat exposure can reduce cognitive skill development.¹ When our children are transported to and from their place of learning in an overheated environment, they are not able to learn to their full potential.


We are asking NHTSA to use all available authority to implement regulations under the auspice of passenger safety and vehicle design to require that school buses nationwide, and especially those in high temperature regions, are equipped with proper air conditioning. In addition, please reply with an accounting of any work the department has done on this issue and whether such regulation has been considered previously.

¹ Goodman et al (2018) *Heat and Learning*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/joshuagoodman/files/w24639.pdf>

Thank you for your attention to this serious matter and we look forward to working with you in the interest of the well-being of our nation's students.

Sincerely,


Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress


Kathy Castor
Member of Congress