



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James L. Seward

## Back To School

JAMES L. SEWARD September 3, 2009

Summer will soon turn to fall and along with the change of season will come a change in lifestyle for our young people as school bells ring once again. For many students it is a return to a familiar routine, but for some it is the start of a whole new world. For all of us, it is a time to think of safety first.

According to a news story released in July 2008, 750,000 people illegally pass a school bus every day in the United States. In New York State alone, approximately 50,000 drivers fail to stop as required by law. This illegal practice endangers the lives of children trying to get to and from school.

In order to combat this dangerous and illegal behavior, New York has instituted Operation Safe Stop. The cooperative project is supported by the New York State Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, the New York State Education Department, the New York Association for Pupil Transportation, the New York State School Bus Contractors Association, the student transportation industry and state, county, city and local law enforcement agencies. Their mission is to promote school bus safety through education enforcement efforts.

The first thing a motorist needs to know is the law itself, which can vary a bit from state to state. In New York the law states:

- Drivers must stop when the school bus red lights are flashing;
- Even on divided, multilane highways or school grounds, drivers are required to stop for flashing red lights;
- Penalties for illegally passing a school bus range from \$250 - \$1,000 fines, points on your license, and/or possible imprisonment.

Students also have important safety rules to follow when getting on and off of the school bus. They include:

- Take five giant steps straight out the bus door to stay out of the danger zone around a stopped school bus where the driver is unable to see you;
- Make sure you have eye contact with the driver and wait for the driver to signal before you cross in front of the bus;
- Never go back for anything you left on the bus;
- Never bend down near or under the bus.

It is also important for children to understand and practice proper school bus behavior. Students need to listen to the bus driver in case there are any special instructions for the bus ride. They must also stay seated for the entire ride and speak quietly to others, limiting behavior that could distract the driver.

Many students may not ride the bus but do walk to and from school and should be familiar with another set of safety rules. They are the same rules any pedestrian should follow and include:

- Obey traffic signals and/or traffic officers;
- Always use crosswalks whenever they are available;
- Never walk or run directly into the street;

- Stop at the curb or at the edge of the road before crossing;
- Look left-right-left to make sure the road is clear before you cross the street;
- Make eye contact with the driver(s) so they see you before you begin to cross;
- Watch for cars backing out of parking spaces and driveways;
- Always use sidewalks whenever they are available;
- When sidewalks are unavailable, walk on the left side of the road, facing traffic.

Certainly the streets and neighborhoods around a school will be the busiest, especially during the morning hours just before the school day begins and in the afternoon when students are heading back home. Children dropped off or picked up by both school buses and parents, and motorists and pedestrians alike need to be on high alert.

The beginning of the school year is a wondrous time for all students, especially those who are off to school for the very first time. Establishing sound habits from day one is important in helping ensure they will enjoy a safe and successful school career.