



# Ohio Association of Public School Employees

*American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO*

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Joseph P. Rugola  
*Executive Director*

**October 11, 2023**

Lois Carson  
*State President*

Michael Lang  
*State Vice President*

Sandra Wheeler  
*State Secretary*

## STATEMENT OF

### **THE OHIO ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL EMPLOYEES TO THE GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL BUS SAFETY TASK FORCE**

The Ohio Association of Public School Employees, Local 4 of AFSCME, has 30,000 members in Ohio and represents 470 Local Unions across the state. We have bargaining units in all of Ohio's counties and represent 6,000 School Bus Drivers who are covered by our collective bargaining agreements.

OAPSE/AFSCME has a standing Safety Committee chaired by our State Vice President, Michael Lang. When Governor DeWine created the School Bus Safety Task Force, OAPSE President Lois Carson appointed a subcommittee of our Safety Committee to address the concerns arising from the terrible tragedy that occurred in Clark County when a student lost his life in a school bus accident. The OAPSE School Bus Safety Committee is composed of seven members with a combined 188 years of experience in dealing with student transportation.

We appreciate the Governor's continuing commitment to the safety of Ohio's schoolchildren. We also want to thank Governor DeWine for placing a school bus driver on the Task Force. Davida Russell is an elected leader in our union and has served the disabled and schoolchildren of Ohio for many years. She is a longtime advocate for school bus safety.

Everyone involved in and affected by the Task Force examination of school bus safety understands that school buses in the United States are among the safest mode of transportation in the world. It is always appropriate and essential to continue to study ways in which our school buses can be made even safer.

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The most visible and obvious question in front of the Task Force is whether school buses should be equipped with seat belts. While the OAPSE School Bus Safety Committee is not opposed to the installation of seat belts on buses, the members do have concerns that range from potential practical problems to serious policy considerations about enforcement and liability.

Since the creation of the Governor's Task Force, OAPSE Executive Director Joe Rugola, who is in his 46<sup>th</sup> year with our union, has traveled to eight of OAPSE's ten Ohio Districts and has discussed the issue of seat belts on buses with our members. The question has met with reactions ranging from a lack of enthusiasm to outright opposition. Concerns are focused around the following:

- How will the wearing of seat belts on buses be enforced and who will be responsible for doing so?
- How will seat belts affect the evacuation of buses in the event of catastrophic accidents, fire, or submersion in water, as well as other contingencies?
- If seat belts are not properly worn because of non-compliance, where will liability rest in the event of injury or fatality resulting from an accident?
- How will school districts deal with objections by parents or guardians to the wearing of seat belts?
- How will drivers be trained about the proper use of student seat belts?
- And very importantly, what real world experience do the safety experts who advocate for seat belts on buses have with the transportation of schoolchildren? How many miles have they logged on a school bus as the only adult school employee responsible for the welfare of those children?

Those questions represent just some of the concerns voiced by OAPSE school bus drivers based not only on recent discussions with them, but also the accumulated years of experience of our Committee related to the transportation of Ohio's schoolchildren.

As stated earlier in this paper, all parties in this examination of school bus safety acknowledge that those vehicles are extraordinarily safe as currently constituted. Years of study and experience have gone in to making them so. While seat belts [**may**] improve the margin of safety, there are other practical steps that can be taken which we believe would have as much, and possibly more, impact for the better. Among those are the following:

- Improved, increased and standardized training for all school bus drivers and, where applicable, school bus aides is central to the safe transport of children. OAPSE Committee member Stephanie Wiley is a Child Care Attendant Aide

who has worked for the Columbus City Schools for 33 years. She points out that training for all school bus aides and bus drivers is central to the level of safety assurance that all involved in this discussion would hope to achieve. Adequate training, in the view of the overwhelming majority of OAPSE drivers, is the first and most important component of student safety. Committee member John Sindeldecker has been an On Bus Instructor for 30 years and a driver for 38 and affirms this belief. John believes that the 17 hours of OBI time with a new driver should be increased to adequately address the complex process of preparing that individual for the grave responsibility they are assuming. A review of the On Bus Instructors Evaluation Form should bear out that concern, considering its length and complexity. While it is possible that certain aspects of the pre-trip inspection process might be adjusted, there are few drivers who would feel confident beginning a run without a thorough look at the vehicle systems. There should also be a constant review of training to ensure uniformity of content and quality across the state.

- It is difficult for anyone who has never done so to imagine the challenges involved in closing oneself in a moving vehicle with fifty schoolchildren behind you driving on the highway at speed. There is a strong sentiment among school bus drivers that the importance of [**minimizing distractions**] is as critical to safety as any other factor involved in school transportation. It is the dominant sentiment that this is more of a challenge post-pandemic than ever before. The first potential distraction among many possibilities is the issue of student behavior. Nothing poses more of a potential danger than the challenge of maintaining a safe environment inside a school bus while it is in motion. There are two actions that a school district can take to address this concern. The first is giving appropriate attention to student behavior, including administration support of drivers who are following the rules of driving and interaction with the children on the bus. The second is placing another school employee on the bus to monitor student conduct, thus giving the driver the ability to focus on the road. There is a strong consensus among school bus drivers that a trained bus aide would play a significant role in the safe transport of children to school and home again. Our union has extensive experience with the concept of bus aides, as mentioned earlier, so we can attest to the effectiveness of their presence on a bus in increasing the margin of safety.
- There are numerous mechanical elements that can be added to school buses (in fact many already are incorporated in buses) to improve safety. They include sensors which monitor lane change, object proximity, and speed.

There are systems which automatically set the brake when the door is ajar that help secure student safety during the critical act of student pick-up and discharge.

- Driver recruitment and retention are at the center of safe school bus operation. This has always been the case as it is now. So more than ever, our union is working with employers to address the crisis in school bus driver recruitment. We recognize the difficulties posed by the times we live in and the economic limits imposed by public budgets. But it is a fact that no one has ever taken up a career as a school bus driver or aide for personal gain.

As mentioned earlier, John Sindeldecker is a 38-year veteran of school bus driving who also serves as a bus driver trainer in the Buckeye Local Schools in Jefferson County. As is the case with all of the school bus drivers who are members of our union, John takes great pride in his profession and demonstrates the care and commitment all school employees have for the welfare of their kids. John trained bus driver Carri Justice whose skill was validated in 2021 when a flatbed truck veered left of center directly into the path of her bus of junior high and high school students. Carri avoided a direct head on collision and still managed to bring her heavily damaged bus to a stop without any serious injuries to her kids. John and Carri represent the real world in which drivers transport students to and from school every day in Ohio. Our members believe in the idea of service and are committed to the welfare of Ohio's schoolchildren.

Recognizing that fact and honoring the place of school employees and the other jurisdictions served by our members would go a long way to insuring the continuing and remarkable safety record of school bus transportation.

Respectfully submitted,

The OAPSE School Transportation Safety Committee  
Mike Lang, Chairman and OAPSE State Vice President  
Lois Caron, OAPSE State President  
Stephanie Wiley, OAPSE Executive Board Member  
Kathy Chamberlain, OAPSE Executive Board Member  
Bev Payne, OAPSE Executive Board Member  
John Sindeldecker, OAPSE Executive Board Member  
Joe Rugola, OAPSE Executive Director