



Wyoming Department of Education

Dr. Jim McBride, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Hathaway Building, 2nd Floor, 2300 Capitol Avenue
Cheyenne, WY 82002-0050
Phone 307-777-7673 Fax 307-777-6234 Website www.k12.wy.us

MEMORANDUM NO. 2007 - 185

TO: School District Superintendents
School District Principals

FROM: Jim McBride, Ed.D. 

DATE: November 30, 2007

SUBJECT: School Bus Trips with Regard to Inclement Weather

INFORMATION TO SHARE

As the weather begins to turn wintery and the school bus trips start to get more involved, it is time that local school districts begin to plan for winter travel. There are several areas that need to be addressed at the local level.

You are probably aware that there are presently no limits on the "hours-of-service" for school bus drivers employed by school districts. Unlike other commercial motor vehicle drivers, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration driving limitations do not apply to us. However, should there be a traffic accident with a school bus, it is very likely that, in a lawsuit, the district will be asked to explain why it did not voluntarily follow the same driving limits as for-hire motor coach drivers. Those limits are presently 15 hours on duty, 10 of which can be driving, after 8 hours off-duty. Local districts are encouraged to review their driving policies and attempt to get them in line with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration rules for the safety of the students being transported.

A major concern on the federal level is the effect fatigue has on a driver after many hours awake, not just those hours spent driving. Some districts have chosen to adopt a travel policy that states if a trip bus cannot reasonably be expected to arrive home by a certain time (usually 1:00 a.m.), the students will stay overnight.

A second area of concern is determining whether a route or activity trip should proceed in bad weather. While the Wyoming Department of Transportation (WyDoT) often recommends "no unnecessary travel," there is no definition of that term. Some districts interpret this to mean no routes and/or no activity trips. Other districts have a policy that the routes are run since school is a necessary activity. Some districts decide if a bus leaves for an activity based on the weather in the local area without consideration of the weather along the way or at the destination.

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It has been shown by experience over many years that if a road or highway is given a "no unnecessary travel" label, it will most likely be closed within an hour or two—either by WYDoT or the Highway Patrol.

If asked, the Highway Patrol will usually tell people that if there is a "no unnecessary travel" warning on a roadway, the drivers who go on the road are responsible for themselves and any problems that might occur. When a highway is closed, WYDoT or the Highway Patrol will try to make one final sweep to make sure no one is stranded out in the weather; but there is no guarantee that this sweep will be done in a timely manner if the weather and road conditions do not allow safe travel for this task.

I encourage local districts to make a policy dealing with road closures and "no unnecessary travel" postings. This policy should include designating who is responsible for deciding when to stop a bus that encounters bad roads while traveling—the sponsor, the coach, the driver, the transportation director, or the superintendent. Most districts that have put a policy in place use a combination of these people, with the drivers having a major say since they are out on the road and know the true conditions.

In recent years there have been several incidents when a school bus has been involved in an accident or encountered bad weather and had to stop. If students and other passengers on the bus have not prepared for the weather by either wearing or carrying warm clothes, it can get very uncomfortable on the side of the road. If the bus is in an accident or stops working due to mechanical problems, the heaters may not work. Due to the construction of buses, there is a limit to the heat they can retain; and with the new emission standards, engines only put out a limited amount of heat. As ordered from the factory, Wyoming school buses have an adequate number of heaters to spread the heat throughout the bus. Adding more "heaters" only adds more points of distribution, not more BTU's of heat. The only way to stay warm in a school bus in Wyoming winter is to dress appropriately. Again, I encourage local school districts to adopt a policy for school bus passengers that requires them to dress appropriately for the anticipated travel. This policy needs to cover drivers, sponsors, coaches, students and any other passengers.

These suggestions are aimed at providing our students with a safe, efficient ride to school and school-sponsored activities. Working together, we can all assure that Wyoming's students get the most out of their education and activities and support our efforts to provide the safest possible environment. In even the most challenging situations, please always set policy on the side of safety and caution—our students deserve it!

JM:LP