

Log H-344

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: October 5, 1982

Forwarded to:  
Honorable Clarence E. Hodges  
Commissioner  
Administration for Children, Youth  
and Families  
U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
400 6th Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)  
H-82-37

About 7:25 a.m., on December 17, 1981, the driver of a 16-passenger Head Start school van, traveling southbound on a two-lane dirt road near Hermanville, Mississippi, lost control of the vehicle and ran off the right side of a one-lane wooden bridge. The roadway condition on the approach to the bridge was muddy as a result of rain, and there was a light rain at the time of the accident. The van fell about 9 1/2 feet onto a creek embankment and came to rest on its right side. A fire developed in the front engine compartment and, after burning for 11 to 13 minutes, spread through the interior of the van. Five of the 32 occupants of the van were killed and 11 persons were injured. 1/

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of this accident was the failure of the driver to stop and align the van with the bridge in the presence of adverse weather conditions and an exaggerated steering maneuver that was further aggravated by the van tires striking the sides of the bridge running boards. Other difficult maneuvering conditions confronting the driver included a downgrade; a relatively sharp, unbanked curve leading to the bridge; a "bump" at the bridge; and a narrow 8 1/2-foot defined lane width across the bridge. The driver was familiar with the bridge but had not had special driver training. Because of the driver's failure to align the van with the bridge and the consequences of her later steering maneuver, guardrails or similar barriers would have been necessary to contain the van on the bridge and reduce the severity of the accident. However, the bridge did not have guardrails because the narrow bridge was used to transport wide farm equipment with limited ground clearance. Because of these factors, schoolbus operators should avoid using hazardous bridges and other roadways of this type, especially during inclement weather conditions that could make driving conditions even worse along these routes.

The most significant factors that may have influenced the severity of the accident and loss of life after the crash were the lack of precise Head Start occupant capacity guidelines which permitted an excessive number of passengers in the van, a lack of driver emergency training, and a limited availability of exits. The driver and two men who arrived after the accident risked their lives and made a heroic attempt to evacuate the van passengers. However, continued use of a single method of evacuation through the driver's window during the early stages of the slow-developing fire did not maximize chances for total evacuation and survival. Better evacuation methods could be fostered through emergency evacuation training.

1/ For more information read Highway Accident Report--"Pattison Head Start Center School Van Run-off Bridge and Fire, Near Hermanville, Mississippi, December 17, 1981" (NTSB-HAR-82-5).

The Administration for Children, Youth and Families has no national pupil transportation safety standards, and the guidelines that were developed and used by the statewide and local Head Start programs involved in this accident provided no real assistance in preventing or reducing the severity of this accident. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has developed a Pupil Transportation Safety Standard, Highway Safety Standard Number 17, 2/ to improve both public and private pupil transportation safety. This standard establishes policies, guidelines, and references for passenger capacity, route selection, equipment checks, schoolbus driver training, and emergency evacuation procedures and drills. Perhaps following this standard would have alerted officials of the Mississippi Head Start program to the need for a more systematic safety program and would have better prepared the driver to deal with the emergency after the accident.

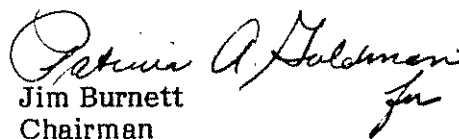
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Administration for Children, Youth and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

Advise all Head Start grantees and delegate agencies of the circumstances of this accident and adopt and emphasize the need for adherence to the policies and guidelines provided by the Pupil Transportation Safety Standard, Highway Safety Program Standard Number 17. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-82-37)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "... to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (P.L. 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendation(s). Therefore, we would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation(s) in this letter.

GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, McADAMS, BURSLEY, and ENGEN, Members, concurred in this recommendation. BURNETT, Chairman, did not participate.

By: Jim Burnett  
Chairman



2/ Highway Safety Program Standard and Program Manual No. 17, "Pupil Transportation Safety," February 1974, U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.