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Log# H-552E



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: August 22, 1990

In reply refer to: H-90-86

Mr. Ralph Cantu, Superintendent
Mission Consolidated Independent
School District
Central Office
1201 Bryce Drive
Mission, TX 78572

About 7:34 a.m., central daylight time, on Thursday, September 21, 1989, a westbound school bus with 81 students operated by the Mission Consolidated Independent School District, Mission, Texas, and a northbound delivery truck operated by the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, McAllen, Texas, collided at Bryan Road and Farm-to-Market Road Number 676 (FM 676) in Alton, Texas. Nineteen students died at the accident scene, and two died later in the hospital. The 21 fatalities were the result of drowning or complications related to the submersion. Furthermore, 3 students sustained serious injuries, 46 others sustained minor injuries, and 11 students were not injured.¹

The busdriver's August 21, 1989, Texas Education Agency Medical Examination Report indicated that he was "qualified only while wearing glasses." However, he was not wearing glasses at the time of the accident. Although the busdriver's last three physical examinations indicated that he should wear glasses while driving a school bus, the school officials did not require him to comply with this restriction. The Mission School District director for special services indicated that he missed these notations when he checked the driver's medical forms. The director for special services also indicated that he was not alerted to any possible vision problems because the busdriver held a driver license without restrictions and had never displayed any noticeable signs of visual deficiency. The busdriver denied having a vision problem and stated that he did not wear glasses when he took his eye examinations in 1988 and 1989.

¹For more detailed information, read Highway Accident Report--"Collision between Mission Consolidated Independent School District School Bus and Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer, Intersection of Bryan Road and Texas Farm-to-Market Road Number 676, in Alton, Texas, September 21, 1989" (NTSB/HAR-90-02).

Although an accurate measurement of the busdriver's uncorrected vision at the time of the accident is unavailable, the effect of his failure to wear corrective lenses on his ability to perceive the approaching truck appears to be minimal and did not contribute to the accident. The evidence suggests that he detected the presence of the approaching truck within a reasonable time frame and that he reacted appropriately by attempting to maneuver to avoid the collision. A medical advisor to the Safety Board confirmed that because of the busdriver's recorded eye test results, it is likely that the degradation of his visual acuity affected to a greater extent his near vision (his ability to read and to discriminate fine detail) and had little bearing on his distant vision (ability to perceive large moving objects, such as other vehicles). Further, it is unlikely that the busdriver's reported corrected eyesight was indicative of a visual acuity deficiency that would have prevented him from detecting a large moving object during uncorrected viewing and, thus, did not contribute to the accident.

However, the Safety Board is concerned that a busdriver with restricted certificates could have slipped through the screening process at the local level for 3 consecutive years. The Safety Board believes that a more conscientious review of the examination forms by the school official would have disclosed the busdriver's eyesight restriction.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Mission Consolidated Independent School District:

Institute procedures that will ensure accurate review of the school busdriver medical examination report form and related documents and enforcement of any limitations.
(Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-86)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations H-90-74 through -78 and reiterated H-89-5 to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; H-90-79 through -80 to the Texas Department of Public Safety; H-90-81 to the Texas Education Agency; H-90-82 through -83 to the Hidalgo County; H-90-84 through -85 to the City of Alton; H-90-87 to the Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc.; H-90-88 through -89 to the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Inc.; and H-90-90 to the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services.

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" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation H-90-86 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Chairman, COUGHLIN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER and BURNETT, Members, concurred in this recommendation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James L. Kolstad". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

By: James L. Kolstad
Chairman