

HEALTHY PUBLIC POLICY:
Preventing Schoolbus Accidents

FOR Our Children's Sake



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(published in the Nation's Sunday Focus, July 6, 1997)

Hardly a month goes by without news of an accident involving schoolchildren. Often, school buses are involved and the casualties are high.

On Jan 26, for example, an 18-wheel truck hit a school bus in Chon Buri, injuring several children.

On Feb 5, a van full of kindergarten aged children plunged into a pond in Bangkok's Praves District, One boy died and 11 other children were injured.

Twelve days later, another bus full of schoolchildren was hit by a trailer truck inside Khao Yai National Park. Ten children were killed on the spot, four died later in hospital and 30 others were injured.

Three days after that, a speeding truck overturned and landed on a school bus in Bangkok's Nong Kham District. Luckily, there were no deaths this time but several children and the bus driver were injured.

On Feb 26, bus full of factory workers collided with a Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) school bus in Min Buri district. One boy died when his head was pinned under the bus and 22 other children had to be hospitalised.

The list goes on and on and the rate of school bus accidents appears to be increasing. The reason for this is clear: The absence of a public policy on the safety of school buses. At present, the responsibility for road and school bus safety is shared among various government agencies which don't coordinate or cooperate with each other.

This compartmentalisation of responsibility, and the fact that many departments within the bureaucratic system are not directly accountable to the public, makes it difficult to formulate and implement a public policy on the issue.

But such a policy can and must be formed if the safety of children on school buses is to be improved. To achieve this, the following steps must be taken:

- The responsibility for school bus safety must be centralised with a single government agency in charge. This could be relegated to The Office of National Injury Prevention under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister.

- Research must be carried out, identifying the causes of and solutions for school bus accidents.

- Once the causes are identified, measures must be taken to eliminate them. Such measures must be based on the results of research, not just thought up on a whim by politicians or other authorities.

- The preventive measures must be continuously monitored and evaluated by an expert agency which has the authority to adjust or change them as needed.

Many factors increase the likelihood of school bus accidents. Article 132 of the Land Transport act of 1979 already sets safety standards but has not been effectively implemented. There are, for example, many unregistered buses and vans transporting schoolchildren.

The Ministry of Education has a regulation which sets standards on buses but it only applies to those that operate in schools run by the ministry. Buses transporting private schoolchildren or those under other government agencies are not bound by this regulation.

School bus drivers must be closely monitored and supervised. When drivers speed, drive under the influence of alcohol or break other traffic and safety rules, the traffic police are the only authority that can take legal action. Unfortunately, their enforcement is weak. For instance, they have been slow to enforce the drunk-driving law passed last year using the excuse that they haven't calibrated their breathalyser test kits yet. Apparently this will take two years to complete.

An independent study a few years ago identified more than 500 "hazardous locations" on highways throughout the country.

These are spots where accidents have occurred repeatedly. The Highways department, which is in charge of all highways in the country, should take steps to improve the safety at these troubled spots and also ensure better standards in the design and engineering of all highways.

All of these contributing factors can be eliminated through a well-planned public policy on road and school bus safety, implemented by accountable authorities – not a difficult task if we confront the reality of the situation. Our only other option is to continue to stand by and watch our children being unnecessarily killed and maimed.