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Bus safety a priority at Hutto ISD

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A recent alleged molestation case involving two bus riders has raised concerns about bus safety in the area. Safety has always and continues to be a top priority, officials at Hutto ISD said.

"This was an incident involving two high school students. It is not a common situation but one we certainly want to ensure doesn't happen again," said Hutto ISD Public Information Officer Emily Parks.

"It is important to look at how we can improve anytime something like this happens but safety is critical to our students. We work with students and staff about the importance of speaking up any time something happens so we can address the issue immediately and will continue to do so."

The school district carefully selects its bus drivers who undergo training that includes courses dealing with a range of issues. Courses cover sexual harassment response, health emergencies response —especially as related to life-threatening allergies, seizures, diabetes and asthma awareness, blood-borne pathogen exposure prevention, child abuse identification and prevention, student confidentiality and sexual misconduct .

They undergo motor vehicle records check, criminal history record check, work history and personal background check and an annual physical exam. They also undergo drug testing, training including behind-the-wheel, they must possess a State of Texas Commercial Drivers License, successfully attain school bus driver certification, special needs training and other required training.

Transportation staff also completes monthly training, evaluations and retraining, and are expected to read, understand and comply with the department procedure book.

"Some of the real obvious things we look out for are kids that are crying. We have kids that are crying throughout the ride. You want to ask the kid what's going on and deal with it in a sensitive manner and contact school administration," explained Director of Transportation Dennis Bigbee.



Bus safety

A close-up of a Hutto ISD school bus.

"Another big thing is change in behavior — if a kid is normally calm and friendly and then changes. Bus drivers really work to get to know the student. Everyone tries to learn all their names. It can be a real daunting task because there are as many as 100 kids a day — 50 on one run and 50 on the next."

When drivers sense something is wrong they will address it in a private manner with the student.

Bigbee said it's a "cultural taboo" for students to tell on other students. It's an issue bus drivers face with students in prekindergarten all the way to high school.

"If you don't actually see it happening then you have to wait until they tell you. Sometimes, we get caught off guard. A parent will call me and say, 'Hey, my student is being bullied on the bus,'" he said.

The bus driver sometimes doesn't know there is a problem going on in the bus. The driver has to keep focus on the road, and in high congestion areas, it is especially difficult to keep eyes on student riders.

"The driver has an interior mirror and looks at students when they're not watching traffic. If a student is intent on doing something they know is not appropriate, they learn the route and know when the driver can't be watching them," Bigbee said. This is why it's especially important for students to speak up when something isn't right.

Bus drivers undergo SafeSchools training as well as attend a number of seminars. They know what bullying is and how to address it. They constantly ask students to let them know if someone is bothering them on the school bus.

"When a student says, 'Hey, something is happening to me,' you need to pull over the bus and find out what's going on right then and there," Bigbee said. "Don't think you're too busy to deal with it. You've got to immediately deal with it and ask what's going on to communicate, 'Hey, [I'm] going to do something about it.'"

The first thing bus drivers counsel students on is for them to stay in their seats. Buses are safe for students provided they stay in their seats. Bus policies are included in the student handbook and bus rules are within eyesight of students at the front of the bus.

The district uses material from Positive Promotions during National School Bus Safety Week to promote bus safety. Elementary students also participate in bus evacuation drills each year so they have it down by the time they reach middle school.

The transportation department sends out a letter to parents of elementary schoolers as part of a Bus Safety Activities Book during National School Bus Safety week.

"The workbook and parent participation helps students understand how to ride safely and how to treat others when on the bus," Bigbee said.

Hutto ISD operates 55 buses including 42 regular buses, which transport 77 elementary school students and 52 middle or high school students. Two transit buses transport 84 elementary students and 11 buses transport special needs students including two wheelchair positions. 32 buses are used for regular routes and nine buses are used for special needs routes.

"Safety is a top priority for Hutto ISD, whether in the schools or on the bus. We have excellent transportation staff that are experienced and care about our students, Parks said. "They work hard every day to get our children to and from school safely. As a district, we will continue to uphold that standard and keep our children safe in and out of the classroom."