

The Elvis Way

[A common sense path to great pupil
transportation]

An invitation to all school bus safety stakeholders to better understand the concepts surrounding school bus safety and commit to becoming a partner in protecting students traveling to and from school on a school bus.

Garry Puetz
Transportation Director, Forsyth County Schools (GA)

5/1/2012

Introduction

Before we begin, let me admit to both my bias towards the fact that school buses are the safest, most effective form of pupil transportation available, as well as my vested interest in promoting student transportation as it relates to my job.

In 18 years serving students, drivers, parents and schools, I've encountered a certain amount of conflict. I've not found these moments to be very different from conflicts that occurred during the time I spent playing football, working in a bank or leading a recreation department. In general, I've found that the source of the tensions that arise as a result of transporting students to school every day is the same as the source of tensions that occur from the classroom to the boardroom. The vast majority of conflict I've encountered is rooted in poor communication and a lack of understanding. Most of the rest is a result of a lack of commitment to a common, important goal.

In the case of Pupil Transportation, I believe that every school bus driver, parent and school administrator wants exactly the same thing; "their" students to be protected while traveling to and from school! No motorist WANTS to cause injury or death to a child. Each group's goal is the same; 100% of the students protected 100% of the time while they travel to and from school on the school bus. It is the ONLY acceptable goal! The destination is clear. 100% success!

The path to that destination is not so clear. During the course of any school bus route, literally hundreds of students, motorists, parents and school bus drivers come to thousands of "decision intersections." Should I stand 12 feet away from the road or should I "play around" with my classmates in the road? Should I check my mirrors before I leave a stop or should I just pull away so I can get back into traffic quicker? Should I look both ways before I cross the street or should I assume the cars will stop when they see me? Should I supervise my child at the stop or do I need to get ready for work? Should I honor the child pick-up lights of the school bus or should I pass the bus since no students will probably cross the street and I have an appointment downtown? Each decision-maker has to choose which path to follow, and each choice either increases or decreases the risk of injury or death to its travelers. None is neutral.

Some may choose the path of the individual. They will do what **they** want to do, **when** then want to do it. It is about them and only them. This path is filled with danger and is difficult to navigate. They never really know what is about to happen and won't know what to do if something unforeseen does happen! It increases the risk of injury and death to its travelers and *if* they arrive at the right destination, it's only because they were lucky enough (dumb luck, maybe) to survive. They might not be so lucky next time.

The other is the path of the team member. You will do your part to help others because as a group, you are all committed to achieving a single, important goal. This path is straight, with

clear visibility. It has been traveled successfully thousands of times and has protections, safeguards and fail-safes built into it. While there are risks, you understand what they are and how to avoid them or react to them when they occur. This path minimizes the risk of injury and death to its travelers. When you arrive at your destination it is a result of thorough planning, good follow-through and exceptional teamwork. You can depend on the same path to lead to the same destination tomorrow!

The choice seems clear. If student lives depend on all of us choosing to work together by making good choices that protect them, we will all commit to taking that path. Won't we? The problem is we (pupil transportation professionals) need to do a better job of explaining the choices that must be made and where those choices lead. We need to be more inviting, and develop partners who will help us reach our destination. We have to improve the way we educate our partners so they can help us along the way.

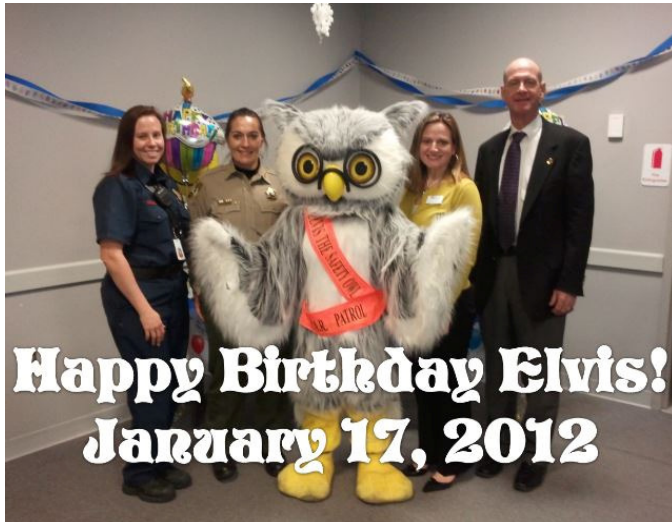
The goals for this book then, are the following: 1) Explain in simple terms, what is needed to protect 100% of our student riders, 100% of the time. 2) Invite all school bus safety stakeholders (and that includes nearly everyone) to actively participate in the process of learning about school bus safety and applying what they learn to protect students.

Millions of students begin and end school every day by stepping up to or down from the "safest form of school transportation" available, the yellow school bus! That means for the majority of school age children, "the door to the schoolhouse is yellow!" We need your help. It only requires two things of you; understanding and commitment. Join us as we travel the only path that will allow us to reach our goal of protecting 100% of our students, "The Elvis Way!"

This book is dedicated to Dannie Reed, my Gwinnett County School System Student Transportation Director (and mentor) who demonstrated passion and servant leadership in every thing I saw him do.

Chapter 1: Elvis is Alive!

“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” Ralph Waldo Emerson



(Elvis celebrates his birthday with Andrea Noble (FC EMS), Deputy Courtney Spriggs (FCSO), Beth Buursema (Childrens' Healthcare) and Forsyth County Schools Superintendent L.C., (Buster) Evans.)

Where to begin... Elvis is an owl but not just any owl. He is the School Bus Safety Owl! He helps drivers and students SOAR (safely, orderly and respectfully) to school in Forsyth County, Georgia. His parents named him Elvis because it means wise and he has grown to be just that; a wise owl who is an expert when it comes to protecting students in and around school buses. He was born on January 17th and shares a birthday with Benjamin Franklin, someone he admires for his common sense. He has had only one job his entire life and intends to continue working at that job for the rest of his life. He is the Captain of the SOAR Patrol!

Elvis is a "Transportation Educator"! He's been in town helping our department since 2005. His primary audience is students in 5th grade and below, but don't sell him short. He has a wide range of admirers and supporters that include our Superintendent, High School and Middle school students, our State Director of Pupil Transportation, our County Sheriff and our EMS Director. He engages our school bus safety learning community while they develop and practice Safe, Orderly, And Respectful (SOAR) school bus riding habits. He makes learning about school bus safety fun and easy! You know an owl can soar. What you may not have known is that this one special owl applied that ability to help children soar as well! This is the Elvis way.

It's really pretty simple. Students and parents (and yes, even teachers and administrators) are more interested and excited to learn about the benefits (and dangers) of riding a school bus from a 6 foot tall safety owl than they are from a transportation employee. Imagine that! When he appears, whether it's at a school, a classroom, a parade or a community event,

everyone is happy to see him. They all want to meet him and his message is greeted with enthusiasm. When Elvis “speaks” students listen! He is actually a cross between a school bus superhero and a rock star!

(Elvis the School Bus Safety Owl supporting the 2012 Forsyth County Schools’ Special Olympic Athletes!)



Elvis serves an example to our department and makes it easier for us to help students learn how to stay safe. Because his message is consistent, upbeat and easy to remember, students respond positively to him. Therefore, drivers and supervisors embrace the opportunity to include Elvis on their school bus! The use of Elvis and S.O.A.R. provides a path for each transportation educator (school bus driver) to help transport their students safely, orderly and respectfully to school on the school bus!

Finally, Elvis is a “team builder.” He makes us think about how we can BEST teach school bus safety. No, that’s not quite right. Elvis makes it FUN for us to think of new ways to most effectively engage our students in learning about school bus safety. He also makes it easier to reach out to the community. He helps us develop parents, motorists, and business and community members into partners who share our mission of “protecting students, supporting

quality learning and improving the community!” He has websites (soarwithelvis.com and gotsoar.com), facebook pages (Elvis The Safety Owl and Elvis Safetyowl) and a Twitter account @soarwithelvis.com) that communicate the message of school bus safety through the concept of SOAR! You can even ask him questions or give him ideas at elvisthesafetyowl@yahoo.com!

Elvis is indeed alive! He is the face of our department. He is unfailingly positive and holds high expectations for both our students and employees. He is fun and engages students, drivers and community members while they learn the common sense path to school bus safety. Elvis the Safety Owl and our school bus drivers help students SOAR to school; safely, orderly and respectfully!

Chapter 2: Why SOAR?

“Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone.” Albert Einstein



Why SOAR? IMHO, typical school bus rules contain TMI for students to remember IRL! “WHAT?!?!” you say? “In my humble opinion”, school bus rules contain “too much information” for students to remember “in real life”! We live in a world of 15 second sound bites and instant messaging. Students (and drivers) have no interest in reciting (reading or remembering) 37 school bus rules (yes, a Michigan school district has 37 school bus rules by which to ride!) SOAR conveys high expectations in everyday language using a limited amount of words. S.O.A.R. is an acronym developed by Elvis the Safety Owl that describes the types of behavior that are expected on our school buses. Students (and drivers) are expected to be Safe, Orderly, And, Respectful. Period!

These are behaviors that are expected in the classroom and pupil transportation is simply an extension of the classroom. Think of it this way. Students are expected to be safe, orderly and respectful in a 30 seat classroom managed by an adult who is focused on them, positioned to observe their behaviors and has the opportunity to seek immediate assistance from a supervisor or co-worker in the same building. What types of behavior should be expected from students in a 72 seat, 38 foot long classroom that weighs 25,000 pounds, is supervised by an adult that is seated with their back to them and tasked with navigating traffic while moving at up to 40 miles per hour?

SOAR is conceptual. When we think of safe behaviors, we are thinking big picture. Our mind is focused on what we should be doing and why. The ways to stay safe are nearly unlimited! There is always a limit to the number of rules we can post in a school bus (even if it may be 37!). Rules limit our thoughts to what we specifically can not do. What if the rule is not on the list? Are we allowed to do that, even if it’s unsafe? SOAR encourages students (and drivers) to learn

about school bus safety and make decisions that are aligned with keeping them safe. While tailored to specific situations on and around school buses, they can be applied in hundreds of everyday settings.

SOAR is positive. Our expectations are to develop positive behaviors, not prohibit negative ones. Which do you prefer? "Speak in classroom voices" or "don't yell." "Sit bottom to bottom and back to back" or "don't get out of your seat." "Choose your actions wisely" or "do what I say." How do you teach YOUR children? Do you identify every, single rule that they must obey because you are the parent? Or do you teach them using concepts like how to stay safe, how to keep your room neat (or maybe orderly) and how to treat others respectfully?

While some rules are necessary, and different maturity levels require different approaches (some more or less direct than others), shouldn't our teaching methods reflect the type of individual and organization we strive to be? Shouldn't they develop the type of person we want our children to be? Prisons require compliance with the rules. Schools should teach concepts and good decision-making skills. Which model do you embrace?

Finally, SOAR is simple. The concepts "Safe, Orderly and Respectful" are easily understood by adults and children alike. Every child has heard "that's not safe" or "that's not being respectful." Most every parent values the trait of neatness and order (however, the acronym "SNAR" just doesn't cut it as well for Elvis as "SOAR"! It is easier for students to think about what keeps them safe rather than trying to remember every rule.

It's easy to apply safe, orderly and respectful habits you learn at home to riding the school bus. Look both ways before crossing the street, applies to both home and school. Look for traffic before you open the car door. Keep up with your own belongings. Students understand treating each others like they would like to be treated as opposed to doing things because they are told by the adult in charge. They already know about being safe, orderly and respectful. These are concepts that are valued and taught by their parents.

SOAR encourages conceptual thinking and good decision-making rather than just "obeying the rules". Its expectations are positive and expansive as opposed to negative and limited to specific rule-breaking (and punishment). SOAR is easily understood and practiced by almost every family in the home, on their streets and in their own vehicle. SOAR applies everywhere. Whether at home, in the classroom or at the "Governor's Mansion," the concepts of acting safely, orderly and respectfully are both expected and taught in a civil society.

SOAR teaches and develops behaviors that are expected and embraced by individuals and groups with diverse cultural backgrounds. It is endorsed by society as a whole. We believe "SOAR" has the community "seal of approval!"

Chapter 3: Safe at first!

“Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus.” Alexander Graham Bell



(Elvis The Safety Owl teaches Chicken Little not to panic in or around a school bus!)

Safety is the single overarching priority of every school bus driver. What is safe? A school bus! School buses are arguably the safest form of student transportation available. A student on the school bus is many times safer traveling to and from school than in their parents' (neighbor's, sibling or friend's) vehicle. School bus passengers are protected by the structural integrity of the bus, the compartmentalization features of the seats and the location (height) of the floor and seats well above most collision points.

School bus transportation is further enhanced by laws and regulations that mitigate risks to students and the public. Speed limits are lower. School buses on routes are limited to 40 mph. School buses transporting children in Georgia are limited to 55 mph at all other times. Traffic is controlled. Motorists must stop when the “eight-way light system” is activated.

School bus drivers are prohibited from using cell phones when the bus is in motion and while loading and unloading students. Equipment (lighting, fuel tanks, seats, exits, paint) is prescribed and regulated to ensure visibility and safety.

School buses are inspected annually by the state and then again monthly by system mechanics. Every day before they are driven to the route, they are inspected yet again by the driver. Wiring, fluids, brakes, tires, horn, lighting, mirrors and emergency exits are checked to ensure that the equipment that is designed to keep students safe is working correctly.

Nearly every school bus driver is proficient at the job of driving the school bus. Every school bus driver knows and has been told that safety is the primary mission of his job. They are trained and tested to ensure that fact.

In Forsyth County, would-be school bus drivers spend 18 hours in the classroom learning what Safe, Orderly And Respectful means for them. They learn laws, procedures and “best practices.” They learn about our school system and how our mission, “protecting students, supporting quality learning and improving the community” is critical to the success of our students and the school system.

After classroom instruction they spend at least six hours driving without students (with a trained observer) to ensure they are proficient. When they are deemed skilled enough, they spend at least another 6 hours driving with students (again with a trained observer) before they are considered for full-time employment as a licensed school bus driver.

Once employed, their driving skills are assessed annually, both on a driving range and while on routes. Many drivers also participate in our annual School Bus Driver Road-e-o where they improve and polish their bus driving skills while competing against their peers in a rigorous driving skills test. Drivers receive annual professional learning, both from the state and from our department. They are subjected to passing an annual physical and are tested for drug and alcohol use according to Federal D.O.T. requirements.

A school bus is safer than a car structurally, procedurally and legally. School bus drivers are trained to be professional and drive defensively. They are required to meet physical standards and are tested routinely to ensure they meet all standards. Two of the three “inputs” to student safety (the school bus vehicle and its driver) are demonstrably safer than their counterparts by design.

The concept of “SOAR” enhances student safety by design as well. Students (the third “input”) learn, develop and practice riding habits that are safe, orderly and respectful. Sitting within the seat compartment protects students. Sitting with belongings in your lap keeps the bus orderly, respects the personal space of others and minimizes the chances of loose objects becoming projectiles in the case of a “hard stop” or collision.

Students who use classroom voices with their seatmates and respect the personal space and rights of others are much less likely to distract the driver while she (he) is performing the other parts of her (his) job. They also serve as an example to other students and provide positive energy that helps the driver teach and reinforce appropriate behaviors. Students who understand that body parts (and belongings) need to be controlled and kept in their own space

are less likely to stick (or throw) something out the window and be injured, damage a car or cause an accident. Students who understand and practice procedures designed to help protect them while loading or unloading are better prepared to respond quickly and appropriately if an emergency occurs.

Have you ever seen a car (or van) where the children are not seated, moving all over the car and generally causing chaos? Ever see a parent arguing with or correcting their children while watching them in the rear-view mirror? Not a pretty picture, is it? I generally try to stay many car lengths away from that driver as they wander through lanes, speed up and slow down and otherwise drive erratically. What about cell phones? Ever wonder what the driver in front of you is doing until you find they are dialing, texting or talking on a cell phone (or reading, eating or grooming?)

Safety inside a school bus is really pretty simple for students. Sit safely (within the compartment, “bottom to bottom and back to back”.) Speak quietly (use classroom voices and speak to those next to you). Be orderly and follow procedures (learn and practice the steps that are designed to help you stay safe; look both ways, stay out of the danger zone, hold the handrail, etc.) Respect the space (and rights) of others.

Ask any school bus driver whether they would welcome students who follow those simple steps. I’m willing to bet you get an emphatic “YES”!

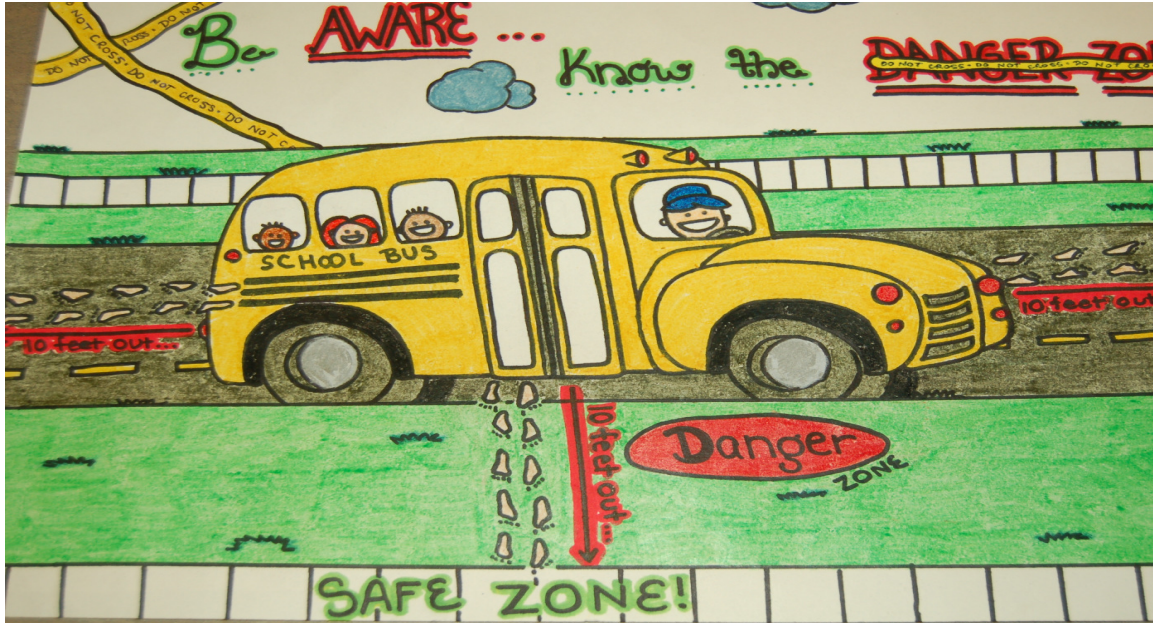
Students who do those simple things enhance their safety, the safety of their co-riders and the safety of the public. School buses with students who exhibit these behaviors (and yes, there are plenty of them) are serving to develop model citizens who will be safe, orderly and respectful when they use public transportation, travel in the vehicles of others or drive their own vehicles on shared roadways.

The safest driver, driving the safest equipment, can only protect their students effectively if the students help the driver SOAR to school (safely, orderly and respectfully.) Based on what you’ve seen and heard, wouldn’t you agree that helping students learn and develop safe, orderly and respectful habits is a worthy goal? Isn’t it worth it for both the safety of the individual student as well as the benefit of the community as a whole?

Chapter 4: Order Please.

“The Chains of Habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.”

Samuel Johnson



(Forsyth County Division III Poster Contest Winner 2010; Second Place, State of Georgia)

If safety is the number one goal of every school bus driver, order is probably the most important ingredient to the safety recipe. It is also probably the ingredient that varies most in terms of quality. Order on a school bus complements both the design of the school bus and the expertise of the driver. Order on a school bus involves three parts; 1) a stable, distraction-free environment 2) an organization and 3) procedures. A school bus route that is orderly, servicing students who are orderly and follow procedures is one of the safest, most effective school bus routes you can find. I've already discussed the dangers of distracted driving in the previous chapter. Many studies conclude that the safest driver in the safest vehicle is still many times more likely to be in an accident when he or she is distracted by something, either inside or outside the vehicle. Order limits distractions.

Students who sit safely, speak quietly and respect the space of others are far less likely to be a distraction to the school bus driver. Students who understand the importance of the loading and unloading process are far less likely to distract the driver or other students during the most dangerous time of a school bus route. A school bus driver, who serves students that are calm, is less distracted and much more likely to be paying attention to the critical process of protecting students. Drivers can focus on driving defensively, following established procedures, and identifying hazards and dangerous situations that threaten student safety.

If we truly believe that the school bus is an extension of the classroom, then shouldn't students (and buses) reflect the same type of environment? Shouldn't a school bus reflect (relative)

calm? Shouldn't a school bus be an environment where students learn how to travel safely, orderly and respectfully while allowing the driver to focus on protecting them as well as teaching them how to protect themselves? Shouldn't we have even higher expectations for order and calm in an environment that is many more times more dangerous than a classroom?

Order (a calm, stable environment) and chaos (you know what THAT is, don't you) are opposite ends of the school bus safety continuum. Which end of the continuum do you expect would be more conducive to student safety? Where does what you do fall on that scale?

Order, as in organization, is critical to safety on a school bus. The effective organization of a school bus and bus route clarifies expertise, ownership and responsibility. School bus safety is dependent on everyone doing their part to protect students. Students, parents, motorists and school bus drivers have to work in partnership with each other to ensure students stay safe. Partnerships by their very nature require clear understanding regarding the roles and responsibilities of each group. Each partner is responsible for a critical piece of the transportation process and each relies on other partners to help protect the students.

Parents (as well as school staff) can SOAR too! (Support, Oversee, Advocate, Reinforce). Both groups have similar, critical roles. First, they are teachers. Parents and teachers who take an active part in learning about school bus safety teach their children that safe orderly and respectful school bus riding habits are important and a part of everyday life, both at school and home. They understand both the "how and why" of the school bus transportation process and support and reinforce the behaviors that help to protect their children.

They are our partner "on the ground," and as such they oversee the transportation process between home or school, and the bus stop. Parents teach (and reinforce) safe walking habits that protect their students on the way to the school bus stop as well as safe waiting habits that protect them at the school bus stop. They develop a plan that teaches children what to do if they have trouble anywhere along the path they take from home to their school bus stop.

Parents serve as the first line of defense against the hazards and dangers that have become routine in neighborhoods across the country. No transportation department has the ability to supervise and protect its students until the school bus arrives at the stop. School bus stops are never completely safe, regardless of the location, unless the child knows what to do if they have trouble on the way to or at the stop. No child is safe at the stop unless they are receiving supervision that is appropriate to his or her maturity level, and to the environment in which the stop is located. High school students require one level of instruction and supervision while kindergarten students require quite a different level. Parents are both the legal and practical partner responsible for providing that instruction and supervision.

Parents and administrators partner with transportation departments when they serve as advocates. They advocate for the transportation process and for appropriate behaviors with the student. They support safety procedures and expect their children to follow them.

Parents and administrators advocate for the school bus as an extension of the classroom and not a playground. They know that the safety of their children is dependent on behaviors that are safe, orderly, and respectful and expect those behaviors from their children on the bus as well as in the classroom. They help the driver by working with their children to improve behaviors that are not safe, orderly, and respectful.

They also advocate for their child when conditions on the school bus require it. No driver can see everything. Children should be taught to talk with the driver when the child has a problem. Children should be taught when and how to talk with the driver (never during routes, the driver can't REALLY listen when they have so many other things to do). Most problems on the bus can be resolved when the driver and student(s) work cooperatively towards a solution.

If a child is unable to solve the problem, a parent advocates for the child with the driver (or supervisor). By understanding the process, a parent is able to communicate effectively to solve problems. Most drivers welcome parent participation. It improves communication and provides information that is needed by the driver to help protect the student.

Every department has different methods of receiving that communication. The least effective method though, is at the stop or on routes. The driver must focus attention on the students, traffic, and pedestrians at the stop. That is not the time to be discussing issues and concerns. The most effective way to communicate may be to have your student give the driver a note at the school asking to be contacted and giving appropriate contact information to the driver. You can always talk with a supervisor by phone.

Parents can advocate for the yellow school bus! Ask your system to support effective school transportation services at levels that protect students. Ask that schools support the transportation process by cooperating with the transportation department to teach safe, orderly, and respectful school bus riding habits and removing students from the bus who are unwilling to practice them. Parents should insist that neighbors (and strangers) respect the laws regarding loading and unloading and operate their vehicles accordingly.

Finally, parents and administrators can advocate in their communities. Student transporters need partners to advocate for appropriate funding, funding that allows service providers to operate effectively, and funding for mandates that prescribe what must be done with no regard to the cost. Parents should expect supportive legislation, appropriate enforcement, and effective consequences for non-compliance.

Motorists are partners as well. Distracted drivers threaten everyone's safety. Impatient, uninformed, or apathetic drivers pose the same threat. Motorists have only one job when they see a yellow school bus! You guessed it, they need to SOAR! How? ANY time a motorist sees a school bus it's time to Slow down (or STOP if the lights are activated). Observe the surrounding area. Analyze what is happening at and around the bus. Respond appropriately (and defensively) to the situation. A school bus means children, and children mean unpredictability.

You NEVER know what MAY happen when children are around!

MOTORISTS: If you see a school bus; SLOW DOWN. If you see a school bus with its eight-way lights activated; STOP! There is absolutely NO REASON to pass a school bus that has activated its eight-way loading and unloading lights! If you're confused and don't know what to do, STOP! Partner with us and you just might save the life of a child!

School bus drivers, students and transportation staff are partners in the process. They need to be "orderly" as well. School bus routes need to be designed to be safe. Stops need to be evaluated and set in locations that provide adequate visibility and allow a safe area for students to wait. Students need to be prepared at the stop (five minutes early). They need to wait in the designated spot. Routes must be run "on-time" and stops made at the approved bus stop location.

Orderly (dependable and consistent) school bus routes enhance safety for everyone. When students are on time, they need not run after the bus that arrives on schedule. Students won't need to wait more than five minutes before their scheduled school bus arrives. Drivers won't be "surprised" by a student at a different stop, an unauthorized location or a different time. The ability to provide transportation service that is dependable and consistent allows students, drivers and motorists to develop and practice routines that help keep them safe.

Imagine a school bus where chaos rules. No one knows when the bus (or the students) will arrive at the stop. Students are loud and out of their seats. Bickering, arguing and teasing are prevalent on the bus. Every student does things his or her way. Some cross behind the bus. Others walk along the bus. Some wear earphones while loading or unloading, preventing any communication from occurring.

Imagine motorists who pass school buses at their whim and "assume" no students will be crossing the street. Parents who refuse to follow (or support) safety procedures and appropriate riding behaviors that minimize risk. Everyone insists on doing things "their way."

Imagine the school bus driver who only wants to get the students off the bus as quickly as possible. When empty, driving the bus is a dream. When it's full it is a nightmare, something barely to be tolerated.

It's easy to imagine how a student could be injured (or killed) in this scenario isn't it? Each individual example increases the risk that a tragedy will occur. In combination, the risk to the students rises exponentially when procedures are not followed, "best practices" ignored and the driver is distracted from the job at hand.

Order means by design. In this case order means following the procedures that have been taught and implemented during the school transportation process. In most cases procedures have been developed, revised and improved over years to adapt to and protect students from evolving risks. Procedures are designed to maximize protection and minimize distraction. The

following are just a few examples of common student transportation procedures.

Students should never get within 12 feet of the school bus (except when the bus door is open and the driver has motioned the students to approach the bus by the path to the door).

Why? Students are in grave danger when they are within 12 feet of the bus because the driver can not see them. Student injuries and death sometimes occur when the student's own bus strikes them. A driver that can't see a student can't protect a student.

Students should look both ways before getting off the bus and before crossing the street.

Why? Believe it or not, there are motorists (or maybe bicyclists or motorcyclists) that pass the bus; EVEN ON THE RIGHT SIDE, at the passenger door! One extra second, glancing each way to make sure the way is clear may prevent one student from stepping off the bus or curb into injury or death.

Students should enter and exit the school bus in single file, use the handrail and never fool around when loading or unloading.

Why? The most dangerous time of a school bus route is when loading or unloading students. A driver must focus on the students, the traffic and the pedestrians around the bus. Any distraction that breaks the driver's concentration increases the likelihood that the process may be compromised. Compromise the process and the driver may not notice a hazard or risk that could jeopardize student (or pedestrian) safety.

Students should sit "bottom to bottom and back to back".

Why? School buses are arguably the safest form of student transportation available, especially when students remain within the "compartment" formed by their seat and the seat in front of them. When outside the compartment, students lose the protection of seat padding that helps cushion, contain and stop them in the case of an accident or "hard stop".

Students should NEVER stoop to pick up something they dropped until they signal the driver and the driver returns their signal.

Why? Any time there is a risk that a driver might lose sight of a student there is a serious risk of injury. No possession is important enough to take that risk. If there is any doubt the driver has seen you, the student should leave the belonging, go home and get a parent to assist them. Better an important paper with tire marks than a student.

Order clarifies, organizes and simplifies. Order reduces distractions. Order protects. Society values order as a necessary part of protecting its citizens. We value order in our schools and classrooms. Shouldn't we expect (and value) an orderly environment for children who ride our school buses?

Chapter 5: “R.E.S.P.E.C.T.”

“Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



(You just never know where Elvis may “pop up” next while helping others S.O.A.R.!)

“Respect”: esteem for or a sense of the worth or excellence of a person, a personal quality or ability, or something considered as a manifestation of a personal quality or ability. While “all men are created equal” is one of the great principles of our country, its application seems increasingly rare when we really don’t agree with (or understand) a different point of view.

As the world shrinks and we are exposed to more and more diversity of custom and thought, respect for others appears to have diminished. However, respect for self as well as for others is often one of the character traits that schools deem important to the development of the individual student. In Forsyth County Schools, our graduates are expected to “understand and

respect one's own culture and other cultures.” It is one way we expect our students to “engage and compete in a global environment.”

Respect for others, especially those who are different or less powerful would seem increasingly important as our society becomes more aware of the dangers of bullying. Respect (or the lack of respect) is a powerful tool that conveys the worth of an individual.

Respect is important to maintaining order as well. Respect for authority is a necessary condition for a civil society. Respect for all stakeholders (the passengers, parents, motorists, the school bus driver and school staff) and the importance of each group's role in the process, is necessary to ensure students receive optimum protection. Mutual respect, between drivers, passengers, parents and school administrators enhances the climate of safety on a school bus. Respect leads to trust and trust reinforces the importance of all these stakeholders to the protection of students who ride the school bus.

Students are most effectively protected when everyone “respects the rules.” As stated before, procedures are part of an evolving process of identifying and mitigating risks. Each rule or procedure is based on sound safety principles (developed by experts in the field of student transportation) and each enhances the safety of students using school bus transportation. While a school bus provides arguably the safest form of transportation available to students, there are risks inherent to its use as well. When students are outside the bus, visibility is limited; especially in the danger zone (within 12 feet of any part of the bus.) Students are at greatest risk whenever they are in the danger zone (and any time they are out of the driver's field of vision.)

Motorists pose a risk to students. Walking from the stop to home, or crossing the street to get home poses risks to students. Students (drivers and parents) should respect these risks and follow all safety procedures. Parents should teach children how to safely walk to and from the bus stop and what to do if they have any trouble walking to or waiting at the stop. Families should have plans for emergencies. All stakeholders need to respect the need to stay actively involved in identifying risks and taking steps to reduce those risks that are found. Parents should always provide supervision that is appropriate to the maturity level of their student(s) respecting their role in helping to protect their child.

A well-trained, professional school bus driver teaches students the proper way to wait, load and unload at the school bus stop. They should train students to respond effectively to a designated warning signal and help them to learn how to recognize and avoid danger if necessary. The professional school bus driver builds an effective “teacher/student” relationship with their students and helps them to understand their responsibilities towards making good decisions and choices that will protect themselves

Students accept and practice those procedures and develop safe routines while parents supervise their children, reinforcing the importance of following the directions of the driver and

helping the driver to protect the students.

A school bus should be viewed as a learning community, a mobile classroom where students learn good (or bad) safety habits that will either help protect them or place them at greater risk. Respect for the learning process requires that students, drivers and parents learn, practice and reinforce habits that enhance safety.

Respect for the learning process requires an environment where positive student behaviors are encouraged, developed and rewarded. Drivers should teach students, students should practice what has been taught and drivers should correct and re-teach when appropriate. Drivers should include the parents, respecting their place in the process and enlisting their help by requesting parent help to change inappropriate student behaviors when necessary.

School bus drivers are professionals and should be respected as such. They drive skillfully through traffic while maintaining an orderly and respectful environment with dozens of school children behind them. They serve as teacher, chauffeur, nurse, referee, mediator and more. Administrators, parents and supervisors should support the driver's efforts to teach students by reinforcing appropriate lessons and helping to modify and correct inappropriate behaviors.

Every person, every family, every organization needs respect to succeed. Respect builds trust and trust is a necessary part of any healthy relationship. Every school bus driver and student benefits by being respected and by respecting each other. Every student is better protected when they respect the risks inherent to school bus transportation (as well as the procedures by which those risks are reduced.)

Every family and school is improved when the school bus is respected as a learning community where safe, orderly and respectful riding habits are developed, practiced and reinforced and where students learn behaviors that are valued by the local, as well as the global community.

Respect yourself and respect others. Respect the risks and respect the rules. RESPECT THE BUS!

Chapter 6: And?

"In matters of style swim with the current; In matters of principle, stand like a rock."

Thomas Jefferson

(Principal Donna Morris accepts the S.O.A.R. Certification for Settles Bridge Elementary School!)



Why include “and”? “And” is one of the tiniest of words, used to connect “coordinate words.” It means “IN ADDITION TO”! While “and” is the smallest of the four words that characterize “SOAR”, it carries equal weight to the others in terms of importance to the concept. Nearly every school bus transportation department includes the word “safe” in their mission statement. It is simply put, the one, overarching priority of every school bus driver. The problem is, though simple to say, “safety” is not that simple to achieve. In reality, it’s much harder to “walk the safety walk” than it is to “talk the safety talk!”

“Protecting students” requires thousands of “moving parts” to operate seamlessly, each doing exactly what is needed to move students safely to school. Think that’s hype? School buses (drivers), students, parents, pedestrians and motorists all have a stake (and therefore a responsibility) in protecting students. How many of those parts do your school buses pass or interact with on routes every day? In the perfect (school bus) world, each part(ner) fulfills that responsibility completely by following laws, procedures and “best practices” designed to protect students. In the perfect school bus world, each partner needs to be prepared to serve as the “failsafe” if any of the others fail to perform appropriately.

For example, drivers should keep students on the bus until all vehicles stop. Students should look both ways before exiting the bus and before crossing the street and should be prepared to move to safety if a motorist decides to disobey the law by passing a school bus. Motorists should slow down ANY TIME they are around a school bus. By slowing, observing and responding (SOAR) defensively motorists may prevent a tragedy when a student (or toddler,

parent, pedestrian, etc) fails to follow procedures designed to protect them. School bus safety requires drivers, students, parents AND motorists to take an active (and preventative) role in protecting students.

In much the same way, we believe (as do the Georgia Associations of School Boards and School Superintendents) that each of our pillars of school bus safety (safe, orderly, respectful) is necessary to teaching and learning. As we've stated, teaching and learning school bus safety behaviors is required to fully protect our students. None of these three pillars however, is sufficient in and of itself. Any one or two may provide limited stability (picture a one-legged or two-legged stool), but complete stability (100% protection) is only possible when all three are present, tied to each other to provide the most stable of bases.

Students can't be protected if stakeholders commit to safety and act in an orderly way, but show disrespect for or between each other. Disrespect distracts focus from what needs to be done. Disrespect breeds mistrust. Mistrust invites stakeholders to question actions or motives and worse yet, choose actions that are based on individual desires or wishes as opposed to what is needed by all to protect students.

Students may commit to be safe, and may be very respectful of each other and the driver. But if they fail to follow any of the procedures they are taught by omitting (or choosing alternative) steps, they place themselves and others at risk (have you ever had someone tell you "yes ma'am or yes sir" to a request or direction, only to totally disregard it and do whatever they wanted when you are no longer around?). Order is necessary for the "common good," to minimize distractions and ensure that the best practices that have been developed to protect students are followed, even when concentration is broken or something breaks down.

Safe, or orderly, or respectful transportation practices are not enough. None of the three alone can effectively protect students. None of the three alone can provide an effective learning environment where students are taught school bus riding habits and decision-making skills that help them protect themselves (and each other.)

We believe the school bus (and driver) provides the safest transportation service available to students as they travel to and from school. We also believe that with help from our partners and attention to detail, we can improve that safety record while teaching students valuable lessons that they can apply in the larger world!

To do so we must insist that stakeholders develop habits and behaviors that are safe AND orderly AND respectful! We must develop and reinforce those behaviors in students AND drivers AND parents AND motorists!

We believe safe is not enough! We strive to be professional AND caring employees. Our goal is to "protect students" AND "support quality learning" AND "improve the community." We can only succeed by teaching AND modeling safe, orderly and respectful transportation behaviors!

Chapter 7: Elvis Wants You!

“Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” Vince Lombardi



(Everyone needs to do their part to help protect our students! The Settles Bridge Stars pledge to SOAR; Safely Orderly And Respectfully on the school bus.)

It really doesn't matter whether you're a bus driver, student, parent or motorist. Are you a pedestrian, police officer, school system superintendent, transportation director, citizen or school principal? You have a stake in school bus safety! No accident is as emotionally charged as an accident involving a school bus and the children who ride it. No job is more important than protecting students as they travel to and from school. Elvis, the Captain of the SOAR Patrol wants you! Why? Because students can only be protected effectively when everyone does their part to help students SOAR to school; Safely, Orderly And Respectfully!

Elvis invites you to adopt and reinforce his way to protect your student(s). It's easy! Teach students to travel SAFELY. Expect students to be ORDERLY. Encourage students to act RESPECTFULLY. AND make sure all three of these pillars of school bus safety are taught, developed and practiced to ensure the greatest degree of stability (protection) possible. These behaviors are meaningful and relevant. They are applicable to a wide range of activities and most probably embraced by your families and your community as well as society as a whole. You probably have taught (or learned) each of these concepts at home and in school.

Learn about school bus safety. Follow and support the procedures that the driver teaches the students. Demonstrate safe walking and waiting behaviors to and at the bus stop. Encourage your students to follow the rules by supporting the driver. One of the most powerful methods of teaching is by example and the support and encouragement you provide will reinforce the

importance of each of these concepts.

Respect the protection that the school bus and driver provide. The bus is designed to protect students by the strength of its structure, its design and by the laws and procedures by which it is operated. The driver is a professional, trained to handle the bus AND manage the children who ride it. They are transportation educators and should be respected for their knowledge and ability.

Whether you adopt Elvis' way or develop your own, he hopes you will take an active interest in protecting students. He hopes you'll do your part to ensure the school bus stays the safest form of school transportation available to students! He invites you to help us reach our goal; providing the safest, most orderly and most respectful transportation service to the safest, most orderly and most respectful students around. As Elvis would say, "SOAR always my friends!"

Have a question or comment? I'd love to know what YOU think! Let me know at gpuetz@forsyth.k12.ga.us. Want to talk with Elvis? Here's his contact information.



"SOAR With Elvis"

Elvis the Safety Owl
S.O.A.R. Patrol Captain

Forsyth County Schools
3710 Matt Highway
Cumming, GA 30028
www.gotsoar.com
www.soarwithelvis.com

 Follow *Elvis the Safety Owl*

 Follow Elvis @[soarwithelvis](https://twitter.com/soarwithelvis)

 elvisthesafetyowl@yahoo.com

One of Elvis' favorite quotes!

"If a man is called a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well." Martin Luther King, Jr.

Links and Resources

Elvis Sightings

- Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Elvis-The-Safety-Owl/142291862535006>
<http://www.facebook.com/#!/profile.php?id=100003258693940>
- Gotsoar <http://www.forsythcountyschools.org/teachers/csykes/index.html>
- Soar With Elvis <http://www.forsythcountyschools.org/teachers/csykes/soarwithelvishomepage.html>
- Twitter <https://twitter.com/#!/soarwithelvis>

Associations

- Georgia Association of Pupil Transportation
<http://www.gaptonline.org>
- Georgia Association of Pupil Transportation (facebook page) [GAPT Facebook](#)
- Georgia School Superintendents Association <http://www.gssanet.org>
- National Association of Pupil Transportation <http://www.napt.org>
- National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation <http://www.nasdpts.org>
- Southeastern States Pupil Transportation Conference <http://www.sesptc.com/>

Publications

- Dr. Cal Lemon- *Unreported Miracles: What you probably do not know about your child's school bus*
<http://www.amazon.com/Unreported-Miracles-probably-childs-school/dp/0787248932>
- School Bus Fleet
<http://www.schoolbusfleet.com/>
- School Transportation News
<http://www.stnonline.com/stn/>

State/Federal

Georgia Department of Education- Pupil Transportation Division

<http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/Finance-and-Business-Operations/Pupil-Transportation/Pages/default.aspx>

Georgia Governor's Office of Highway Safety

<http://www.gohs.state.ga.us/>

Georgia Homeland Security

<http://www.gahomelandsecurity.com>

Homeland Security

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>

NHTSA

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/portal/site/nhtsa/menuitem.e712547f8daccabbbf30811060008a0c/>

School Bus Information Council

<http://www.schoolbusinfo.org>

Traffic Safety Kid's Page

<http://www.nysgtsc.state.ny.us/kids.htm>

Training Sites

American School Bus Council

<http://www.americanschoolbuscouncil.org>

About School

<http://www.aboutschool.com/busstop.htm>

Georgia Department of Education- Pupil Transportation Division

<http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/Finance-and-Business-Operations/Pupil-Transportation/Pages/School-Bus-Safety.aspx>

North Carolina School Bus Safety Web

<http://itre.ncsu.edu/GHSP/NCBUSSAFETY.html>

Operation Lifesaver

<http://www.oli.org/>

Pupil Transportation Safety Institute

<http://www.ptsi.org/>

Safe Schools

<http://www.2safeschools.org/>

School Bus Information Council

<http://www.schoolbusinfo.org/>

School Bus Driver's Webring

<http://w.webring.com/hub?ring=busdriver>