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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES
COLUMBUS, OHIO
REGARDING VARIOUS SCHOOL BUS SAFETY ISSUES

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Senator DeWine, it is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss the issue of handrails on school buses, and the actions the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has taken and is continuing to take to address the safety hazards that handrails can present when they snag children's clothing.

To begin, I would like to show you the agency's brief video news release on the snagging problem, offered by satellite to TV stations across the country. This will take about 3 minutes, after which I will describe the steps NHTSA has taken to prevent these tragedies.

===== VIDEO =====

Since April 1991, when the snagging problem first appeared, our investigations show that 22 school bus-related accidents have involved this problem. In these accidents, 5 children died and 17 were injured.

The problem has two mechanical components: (1) the design of children's clothing; and (2) the design of the bus's handrail.

While school bus handrails have remained essentially unchanged for the past 30 years, children's clothing styles have changed in recent years to include strings or straps on hoods, waist-ties at the hip level, and adjustment straps on backpacks.

We believe the snagging problem first appeared when the use of drawstrings in clothing styles became prevalent. NHTSA has contacted the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), the agency with jurisdiction over clothing safety matters, about the redesign of clothing to eliminate the strings and straps that appear to have caused the handrail problem.

Many handrails on large school buses have a small space between the wall of the bus and the handrail where these strings or straps can become caught. If this happens and the bus door is closed, the driver can think that the child has exited safely and mistakenly drive away, dragging the child to a severe injury or death.

In early 1993, NHTSA issued a public warning to school bus drivers, parents, and children. We also immediately notified all State directors of pupil transportation and the Governors' Highway Safety Representatives of this potential danger. The agency asked these officials to make school bus drivers aware of these incidents and to be especially cautious at stops where no adults are present to help supervise the off-loading of students. We stressed how important these precautions are during winter months, when children are more likely to wear clothing with

drawstrings.

Also in 1993, the agency requested detailed information from all of the major school bus body manufacturers to determine the scope of the snagging problem and how to prevent it.

In 1994, Secretary Peña issued a second public warning to school officials and school bus drivers about the problem. The warning stressed that four children had died in snagging incidents since April 1991. It also urged parents and school administrators to teach children about the potential snagging hazard, and asked school bus drivers to be especially vigilant as students exit their buses.

After a fifth fatality occurred last February in Ohio, NHTSA Administrator Dr. Ricardo Martinez issued a further warning about the risk from snagged clothing.

Since NHTSA first publicized its concern about this problem in 1993, the agency has conducted a total of 14 vehicle defect investigations of North American school bus body manufacturers to determine if their handrails pose snagging problems. Ten of these 14 companies have conducted safety recalls to change the handrail designs of their buses to make them less prone to snagging clothing. For those companies conducting safety recalls, the repair rate is currently about 65 percent and climbing.

Three of the 14 companies did not have unsafe handrail designs. One company with an unsafe design, the Wayne

Corporation of Richmond, IN, has gone out of business. Because the Wayne Corporation is no longer in business, there is no existing entity that can be ordered to conduct and implement a safety recall of the buses manufactured by that company.

Approximately 100,000 Wayne Corporation school buses, built from 1979 to 1992, have handrails that should be remedied. Although an inexpensive remedy of either a replacement handrail or a rubber spacer that fits between the handrail and the bus wall is available, school bus owners are reluctant to make the repair without a formal safety recall, perhaps in part because of concern about liability for modifying a bus without officially being ordered to do so.

The agency is urging owners of these buses to inspect them and make necessary repairs. Also, since most States require an annual inspection of their school bus fleets, we have notified the State agencies responsible for inspecting school buses to suggest that their inspection teams examine the handrails on all their buses to see if they have a snagging problem.

During the past two years, I have met personally with all of the State pupil transportation safety directors and hundreds of local program directors responsible for pupil transportation. The issue of handrails on school buses has been a major part of my presentation to these officials.

Last May, NHTSA broadcast the news release on the snagging problem that I played for you earlier in my testimony. Since the

May broadcast, the agency has distributed more than 500 copies of this release in VHS format. Since we will be re-broadcasting this same release around the time of this hearing, we expect to distribute many more copies in the near future. The agency plans to issue a fourth public warning to publicize the handrail problem this week.

Senator, this concludes my remarks. I will be glad to answer any questions that you may have.