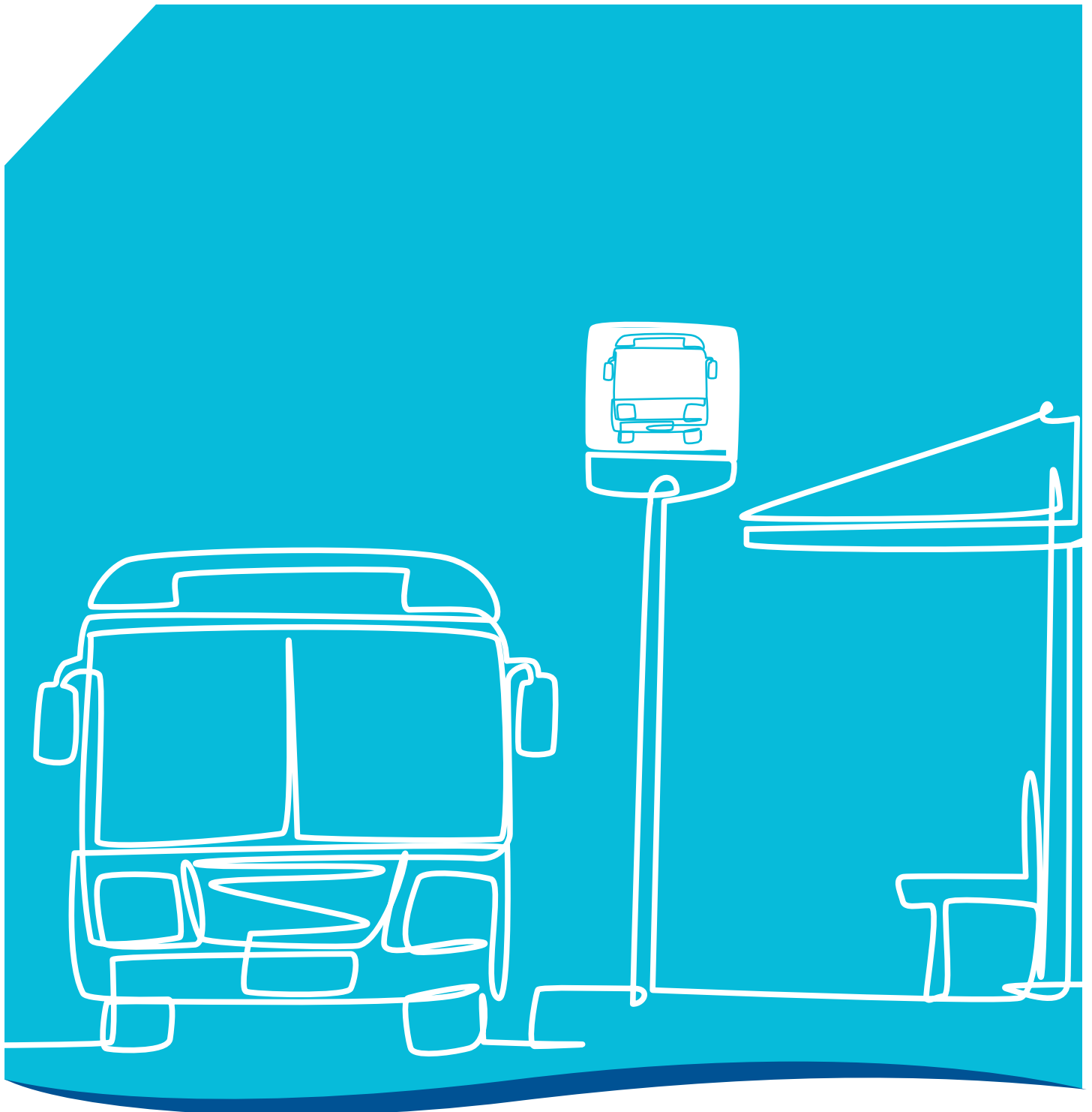


School Bus Safety



Background

The Department for Education, Children and Young People and the Department of State Growth were asked to review existing seat belt and standing passenger standards as they apply to school transport and consider how to build on the current public education efforts to promote safe behaviour around buses.

Tasmanian and Australian state policies and existing research were examined to identify where Tasmania's school bus standards could be improved.

What we learned

Buses are safe

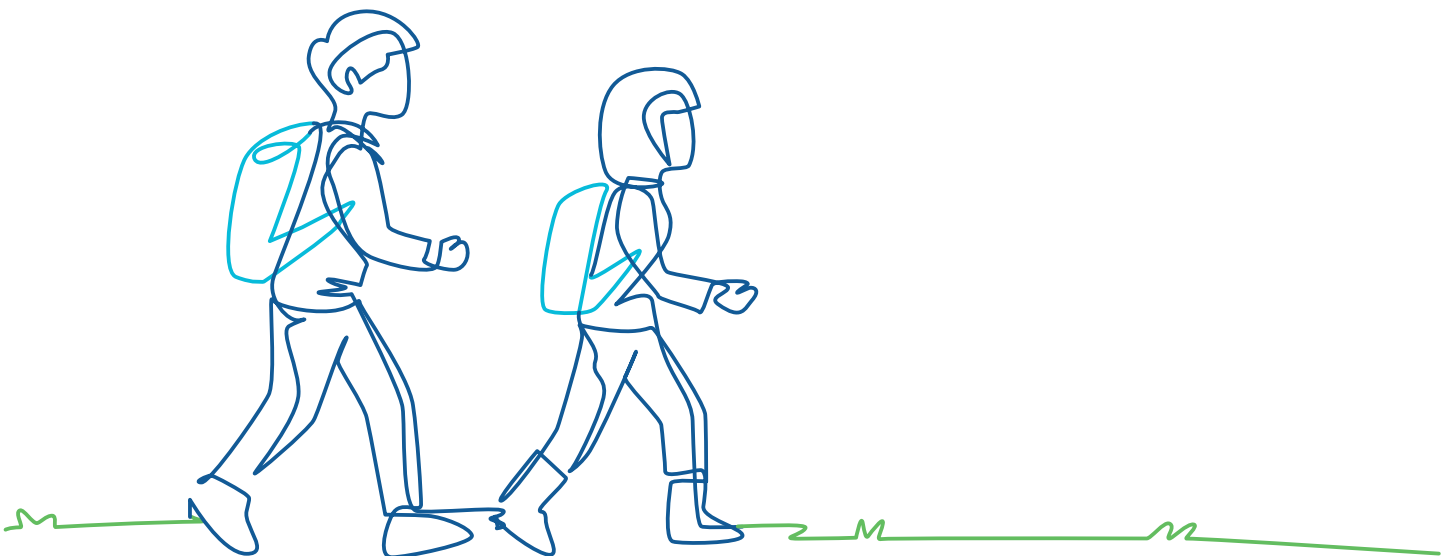
- 🚌 School buses are very safe. There is no record or information of which the Department is aware of any child fatalities when travelling on a school bus. A survey of statistics over 20 years shows there are very few injuries to passengers on school buses in Tasmania. School buses are the safest way to get to school.

Buses are different to cars

- 🚌 The community has extensive experience of road safety campaigns emphasising the importance and effectiveness of seatbelts in cars, but there has been no such campaign raising awareness of the alternative safety features in buses.
- 🚌 Buses in Australia have significant built-in safety mechanisms, including strong, closely spaced seats with energy-absorbing seatbacks which act like protective envelopes around passengers and stronger bodies that protect passengers in impact crashes.
- 🚌 Passengers in large buses are in a higher sitting position in relation to the road and the larger vehicle mass lowers the inertia in the event of a crash meaning better safety outcomes.

Seatbelts aren't a straightforward solution

- 🚌 Bus safety features and seat belts don't always work well together. Most school buses have seats that aren't suitable for installing seat belts, for instance, lower seatbacks mean the use of lap seat belts can increase the severity of head and neck injuries.
- 🚌 Seat belts only work if they are worn. We also know a seat belt must be fitted correctly to be effective, and if they are not fitted correctly, they can result in significant neck, spinal, and internal injuries.
- 🚌 A booster seat may be required for children to safely use a seat belt, raising additional challenges for safe and prompt boarding, fitting of the booster seat to the bus, and storage of the booster seat when not in use.





Standing on buses is a normal practice across Australia

- 🚌 Buses rated for standing must meet strict safety and structural requirements. This includes additional safety features such as handgrips, and generally, buses allowing standing are bigger.
- 🚌 Having standing passengers on a bus does not mean it is overcrowded, or that passengers stand for the entire journey.
- 🚌 Usually, passengers may have to stand for five to 10 minutes, or they have chosen to stand to be near their friends.
- 🚌 Standing on buses is especially likely where a school is perceived to be highly attractive and results in out of area enrolments.
- 🚌 Further work is planned to examine the extent of standing on school buses when travelling on high-speed sections of the road network.

3 for 2 seating is safe and effective

- 🚌 '3 for 2 seating' is where three children are seated on two adult seats. Up until recently the age limit for this was children under the age of 12.
- 🚌 Having three children to two seats on school buses is a normal and safe practice.
- 🚌 Availability of 3 for 2 seating decreases the need for standing passengers.
- 🚌 All jurisdictions apart from South Australia allow 3 for 2 seating on dedicated school buses.
- 🚌 There is no research available showing 3 for 2 seating results in more injuries to school children.
- 🚌 However, there is evidence that children today are growing faster than previous generations. Bus seating would be more comfortable for passengers if the age limit for 3 for 2 seating was lowered. From June 2023, the age limit for 3 for 2 seating has been changed to children under 10.

Off bus safety is paramount

- 🚌 The most dangerous part of a child's bus trip to school is when they are crossing the road, or near other vehicles before boarding or disembarking the bus.
- 🚌 Research shows that children (particularly those less than eight years old) are unpredictable and cannot accurately estimate the approach time of vehicles.
- 🚌 Children and parents need to understand the dangers of crossing the road when cars and other vehicles are around and how important it is to be careful around bus stops.
- 🚌 In the years between 2017 and 2022, 22 children aged between four and 15 years were injured as pedestrians in school zones as a result of coming into contact with vehicles.
- 🚌 Tragically, there have also been two fatalities prior to 2014 resulting from vehicles hitting students after they disembarked from buses.
- 🚌 Given the importance of off bus safety, school zones have 40 km/h speed limits, and all buses dropping off and picking up school children are required to have flashing lights that activate when they are stopping or stopped, and drivers must travel at no more than 40 km/h around them.

Changes we have made and are proposing

We can make improvements to keep school buses safe and comfortable.

Requirements on board school buses

- » Seat belts will continue to be required on small school buses as they don't have all the same safety benefits as large buses.
- » More work will be undertaken to examine the extent of standing on school buses when travelling on high-speed sections of the road network.
- » 3 for 2 seating will continue to be allowed on school buses but the age limit has been lowered from children up to 12 years to those up to 10 years making for a more comfortable journey.

Off Bus Safety

- » As the most dangerous part of the trip to school for students in Tasmania and across Australia is when they are around roads off the bus, one way to make children safer during their journey to school is through safety education campaigns.
- » It is important to ensure that students, parents, and drivers don't become complacent about safety around areas where children might be near roads.
- » We are examining whether technology can further drive behavioural change around buses.

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