

Maine School Transportation Safety Commission

Report to

The Honorable Janet T. Mills, Governor of Maine

Maine State Legislature

April 30, 2026

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Acknowledgments

The Maine School Transportation Safety Commission respectfully acknowledges, with profound sorrow, the deaths of two Maine children in school transportation-related incidents in November and December 2025. These tragedies had a deep and lasting impact on the children's families, classmates, schools, and communities, and they brought renewed urgency to the State's responsibility to examine and strengthen every aspect of student transportation safety. In response to these losses and their effect across Maine, Governor Janet T. Mills issued an Executive Order in January 2026 establishing this Commission to review current laws, rules, practices, and training requirements and to recommend improvements intended to help prevent future tragedies.

The Commission extends its sincere appreciation to Governor Janet T. Mills for her leadership in establishing the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission and for affirming the importance of protecting the safety and well-being of Maine students, school personnel, and school bus drivers. The Commission also acknowledges the Maine State Legislature for its continued attention to school transportation safety and its engagement with related policy matters during the period of the Commission's work.

The Commission further expresses its gratitude to the Maine Department of Education, the Maine Department of Public Safety, the Maine Department of Transportation, the Maine Department of the Secretary of State, and the Maine School Safety Center for their partnership, support, and shared commitment to this work. Special recognition is due to Associate Commissioner Megan Welter and Lieutenant Bruce Scott for their service as co-chairs and for their leadership in organizing and guiding the Commission's work within a limited timeframe. Lieutenant Scott and Associate Commissioner Welter were heavily supported by their team members within their respective agencies. Particularly, they would like to recognize the administrative and technical assistance of, Legislative & Constituent Services Specialist Jennifer Belanger at the Department of Education, Supervisor Jason King of Maine State Police Inspection Unit and State Police Office Associate II Deborah MacMaster.

The Commission is deeply appreciative of the dedication and expertise of its members, including representatives of the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation, the Maine School Management Association, local school administrative units, and other partner organizations. Their professional knowledge, practical experience, and thoughtful deliberation were indispensable to the development of the findings and recommendations set forth in this report.

The Commission also wishes to acknowledge the transportation professionals, vendors, and subject-matter experts who contributed technical information and practical perspectives regarding school bus specifications, safety technologies, training practices, and implementation considerations. Their contributions informed the Commission's understanding of both immediate opportunities for improvement and matters requiring continued study and evaluation.

Finally, the Commission expresses its sincere gratitude to the students, families, educators, school leaders, and community members who shared comments, testimony, and written feedback through Commission meetings and the public comment opportunities made available by the Maine Department of Education. Their perspectives grounded the Commission's work in the lived realities of school transportation across Maine and strengthened its commitment to recommendations that support the safe transportation of every student.

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Section One – Executive Summary

This report describes the work and findings of the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission, established by Governor Janet Mills in January 2026 following two tragic, bus-related student deaths. The Commission was charged with reviewing Maine’s statutes, rules, practices, and training related to school transportation and recommending changes to improve student safety statewide. Its members included representatives from the Maine Department of Education (DOE), Department of Public Safety, Department of Transportation, the Secretary of State, and key stakeholder organizations such as the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT), and Maine School Management Association.

Over the course of five meetings between February and April 2026, the Commission reviewed relevant law (including Title 29-A and Title 20-A), DOE Rule Chapters 81 and 86, and the school bus purchasing and inspection framework; it also took public comment and consulted with vendors and subject-matter experts. A particular focus was the relationship between the Commission’s work and LD 2159, a bill to require school bus crossing arms and, in proposed amendments, anti-pinch door technology. Because LD 2159 ultimately did not become law the Commission incorporated core elements of the bill into its recommendations. The Commission also acknowledged that the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and law enforcement investigations into the 2025 crashes were not yet complete, and that future work should revisit the final investigative findings.

The Commission found that Maine’s existing statutes and rules provide a strong basis for transportation safety, but identified significant gaps and inconsistencies in implementation, training, and oversight. Current law requires crossing arms on buses manufactured in or after 2021 and technology that prevents doors from closing on a limb or other body part (anti-pinch technology) on buses manufactured in or after 2025. Retrofits for older buses are left to local discretion. Expert testimony indicated that crossing arms can be reliably retrofitted on all Maine bus types within 18 to 36 months, but that after-market anti-pinch retrofits present unresolved questions about compatibility, liability, warranty, and vendor capacity. The Commission concluded that requiring crossing-arm retrofits is feasible now, while statewide anti-pinch retrofits should await further development, guidance, and standards.

Beyond hardware, the Commission identified driver and transportation director training as major areas of need. While DOE Rule Chapter 81 sets minimum hours for new and veteran driver training, it does not specify topics or curriculum, resulting in wide variations across school administrative units (SAUs). Training for transportation directors is not addressed in

statute or rule, despite the central role these positions play in safety and compliance. The Commission noted that Maine relies heavily on the state's volunteer-run professional organization, MAPT, to provide statewide training, a model that creates inequities and is not sustainable, particularly given driver shortages, part-time employment structures, geographic distances, and the costs of travel and lodging for rural SAUs.

The Commission also examined driver physicals and medical standards. The repeal of DOE Rule Chapter 82, *School Bus Driver Fitness Determination*, in 2018 removed a statewide standard tied to U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) medical requirements for school bus drivers. While the repeal addressed earlier concerns about access to certified examiners, the Commission concluded that the absence of a uniform medical standard for school bus operators is now a safety concern, especially given that Maine's broader commercial driver's license (CDL) population has been able to meet DOT medical certification requirements.

A further concern is the lack of robust, centralized oversight of training and safety compliance. Although DOE Rule Chapter 81 requires annual reporting and authorizes the withholding of state subsidy for non-compliance, the Maine DOE currently has limited staff capacity and no dedicated monitoring infrastructure for transportation safety and training. The Commission observed that, even if existing laws were fully sufficient on paper, the state lacks the enforcement mechanisms necessary to ensure consistent implementation across all districts.

Based on these findings, the Commission makes several core recommendations. First, it proposes statutory changes to Title 29-A to require crossing arms on all school buses, mandate their use at all stops (with limited exceptions), prohibit movement of a bus with the door open and any passengers on board, and require that buses be equipped with technology that prevents the door from closing on a limb or other body part and triggers both audible and visual alerts if the door senses an obstruction, with corresponding testing and rejection standards incorporated into the Maine State Police Motor Vehicle Inspection Manual. Related changes to DOE Rule Chapter 86 should bring the state bus specifications into alignment with these statutory updates and with the latest National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures adopted by the National Congress on School Transportation.

Second, the Commission recommends revising and readopting DOE Rule Chapter 82 to restore a statewide standard for school bus driver physicals, consistent with DOT medical certification practices. It also recommends strengthening DOE Rule Chapter 81 by requiring pre-trip inspections before every trip and directing the Maine DOE to develop standard training curriculum for students, families, drivers, and school staff. Third, it calls

for the Maine DOE to convene experts and stakeholders to define standardized training topics and curriculum for bus drivers, transportation directors, and students, and to develop model communications for families. This work should include clear expectations for demonstrating and periodically reassessing driver and director proficiency and may incorporate “train the trainer” models to build local capacity.

Fourth, the Commission urges increased state investment to support these changes, including funding for curriculum development, training delivery, and SAU implementation costs. It also emphasizes the need to address compensation and working conditions for bus drivers as part of a sustainable workforce strategy. Fifth, the Commission recommends expanding the Maine DOE’s explicit statutory authority, staffing, and funding to provide meaningful oversight of transportation safety, training, recordkeeping, and compliance.

Finally, the Commission recommends that the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission be formalized as an ongoing body. A standing Commission would review final investigative reports from recent crashes, monitor implementation of the recommended changes, continue to study complex issues such as licensing and working conditions, and examine emerging safety technologies as the field evolves. Collectively, these recommendations aim to strengthen Maine’s school transportation system by pairing clear, modernized safety standards with the training, support, and oversight needed to ensure that every student can travel to and from school as safely as possible.

Section Two – Context

Following the tragic deaths of two Maine students in transportation-related incidents, Governor Janet Mills signed an Executive Order in January 2026, establishing the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission. This Commission reviewed current statutes and practices related to school transportation protocols, safety standards, and training to recommend changes or improvements to school transportation in Maine that will enhance traffic safety and mitigate the risk of future incidents. This work will help improve the safety and well-being of all students, staff, and school bus drivers across the state.

Thousands of Maine students rely on school transportation each day to attend school and school-related activities. For many of these students, the school bus driver is the first and the last interaction a student has with school staff each day. It is imperative that student safety is regularly assessed and affirmed in all areas of the student experience, including transportation.

The Maine Department of Education, Maine Department of Public Safety, and Maine Department of the Secretary of State share a joint responsibility for supporting and enforcing safe transportation policies in Maine. As such, members of this Commission are representative of these various agencies and others, including the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation, Maine Department of Transportation, and Maine School Management Association.

It is important to note that at the time of this Commission report, neither the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) nor law enforcement in Maine had publicly released their final reports on either of the two fatal tragedies in 2025. The Commission applied their best collective understanding of the crashes to generate these recommendations. If the Commission is indeed established on an enduring basis, final investigative reports will be reviewed in future meetings to determine if additional recommendations should be made.

Scope of the Commission's Work

Governor Mills' executive order outlined the following priorities for the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission:

- A. Review current statutes and regulations related to safety standards, protocols, and school bus driver training and ensure clear communication of these requirements to all school districts;
- B. Produce an updated set of best practices for school bus safety and disseminate it to all school districts;
- C. Identify changes or improvements needed in school transportation rules to ensure the safety and well-being of all students, staff, and drivers;
- D. Identify school bus safety features that can be installed, upgraded, or replaced, including door anti-pinch sensors and control (crossing) arms;
- E. Encourage and assist school districts in the effective communication of school bus safety information to students and families;
- F. Confirm that school districts have a process to complete, on a semi-annual basis, school bus safety training checklists; and
- G. Identify training needs for bus drivers and a mechanism for this training to be provided to all school transportation units.

Preparation for the Commission

Associate Commissioner Megan Welter from the Department of Education and Lieutenant Bruce Scott from the Department of Public Safety were chosen to represent their respective agencies and serve as co-chairs for the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission. With a short turnaround time to complete this report, the chairs quickly moved to conduct outreach for the remaining Commission members, select a series of dates and times for meetings throughout February, March, and April 2026, and set agendas for these meetings.

To ensure transparency and public access for the work of the Commission, a webpage¹ was published on the Maine DOE's website, and all Commission materials were uploaded to that page regularly. Public comment was actively sought through a form located on the webpage and through public comment periods at Commission meetings.

¹ Maine Department of Education. *Maine School Transportation Safety Commission*. <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/transportation/commission>

Commission Meetings

The first meeting of the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission was held on Friday, February 27th at the offices of the Department of Public Safety in Augusta. Subsequent meetings were held on March 13, March 19, March 27, and April 3 to fully discuss the topics set forth in the executive order.

During the first meeting, the Commission discussed the current landscape of statutes and rules that govern school transportation, including:

- DOE Rule Chapter 81: School Transportation Safety
- DOE Rule Chapter 86: Maine Uniform School Bus Specifications
- Title 29-A, Chapter 19: Operation: – Subchapter 4: School Buses
- Title 20-A, Chapter 215: Transportation

Additionally, the Commission discussed LD 2159, *An Act to Require School Buses to Be Equipped with and to Use School Bus Crossing Arms*, which had been referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation and was being considered simultaneously with the convening of the Commission. Given the importance of the work and the timing of the measure, LD 2159 was recurring conversation in Commission meetings.

Finally, the first meeting of the Commission also hosted a dedicated public comment period that allowed for any interested members of the public to share their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions for the work with the Commission. Ongoing public comment was collected via the webpage's form as well as through email.

The second Commission meeting was held on Friday, March 13. The Commission delved deep into bus specifications, including the proposal to retrofit crossing arms and anti-pinch sensor technology into the established fleet of school buses in Maine. Guests with specific knowledge regarding these technologies provided key information to members of the Commission, especially regarding timeline, cost, and the feasibility of installing these safety features into Maine school buses. Further conversation regarding the development of LD 2159, *“An Act to Require School Buses Be Equipped with and to Use School Bus Crossing Arms,”* was also discussed, including voting upon recommended language for an amendment of the bill, as requested by the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation.

During the third Commission meeting on Thursday, March 19, the Commission completed a review of statutory and regulatory bus specifications and then transitioned to a focus on bus driver and transportation director training requirements, curriculum, and the availability of offerings. Further discussion and recommendations regarding LD 2159 were

determined, and Lieutenant Scott delivered these recommendations to the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation that afternoon. LD 2159, which included some of the Commission's recommended language, was voted "ought to pass as amended" by the Transportation Committee on March 19.

The fourth meeting was held on Friday, March 27. During this meeting, members of the Commission continued to explore driver training, ongoing professional development, and re-certification. During the meeting, the Commission sought to reconcile the need for more training and oversight and the working conditions and compensation for drivers engaged in training. In many districts throughout Maine, the bus driver role is a part-time, hourly role that pays less than other positions requiring the same licensing and training. In an environment where there is already a driver shortage in many school administrative units (SAUs), there is concern that greater oversight and accountability would deepen this shortage by making the job less attractive to prospective drivers. The Commission grappled with this reality, leading to discussion around structural solutions to this foundational challenge.

The fifth and final convening was held on Friday, April 3. In this meeting, the group solidified their recommendations for the report and discussed future work that the Commission could consider in potential future convenings.

Section Three – Review of Current Statute and Regulation

The responsibility for school transportation safety is shared between multiple state and local agencies. Similarly, the statutory and administrative foundations of school transportation safety are located in both education and public safety sections of Maine law.

To complete this charge from the Governor’s executive order, the Commission reviewed Title 29-A: Motor Vehicles and Traffic, and DOE Rule Chapters 81 and 86.

Agency rules are created to outline and define the implementation of statute under the authority and scope of the executive branch agency. The Maine Administrative Procedure Act (MAPA) governs the rulemaking process and establishes the process that State of Maine agencies must follow when they propose and adopt rules that they are to administer and enforce.

Rules are considered to either be “major substantive” or “routine technical,” as directed from the authorizing statute. Major substantive rules require Legislative approval of proposed rule changes. Routine technical rules can be adopted without Legislative approval.

The two rules that were reviewed by the Commission were DOE Rule Chapters 81 and 86. Both rules are considered routine technical and do not require Legislative oversight for amendment.

Title 29-A, Chapter 19: Operation: Subchapter 4: School Buses

Title 29-A contains many sections applicable to school bus operations and driver qualifications. In the short period of time allotted for this initial report, the Commission closely studied the portions in Subchapter 4 related to school bus configuration and operation of safety equipment. Should the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission be authorized to meet again in the future, other portions of Title 29-A that are relevant to safe school bus operation may be reviewed.

Title 29-A §2302: School bus markings; lights; mirrors; school bus crossing arms

This section of statute provides stipulations for school buses. The mandate for buses to be equipped with school bus crossing arms for model year 2021 and newer is within this section.

Title 29-A §2303: Bus operating requirements

This section of statute outlines requirements for bus driver licensing and endorsements. Before a driver can begin training as a new hire and are subject to the training rules outlined in Maine DOE Rule Chapter 81, a prospective driver must first obtain appropriate licensure through the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

In addition to driver qualifications, driver responsibilities are defined, in Title 29-A §2304 (3) and (4), §2306 (1) and (2), §2308 (1) and (4), and Maine DOE Rule Chapter 81.

Title 29-A §2304: Bus seating, doors, seat belts

This section of statute governs passenger safety in seating, seat belts, and door operation. The requirement for buses to be equipped with anti-pinch sensor technology for model year 2025 and newer is within this section.

Title 29-A §2307:

Regular safety inspections are required in accordance with Title 29-A §2307. This section also outlines maintenance standards, requires the documentation of repairs, and provides guidance on when to remove unsafe buses from service.

LD 2159, An Act to Require School Buses to be Equipped with and to Use School Bus Crossing Arms (Emergency)

Following the tragic death of a student in Rockland, Representative Valli Gieger (D-Rockland) introduced LD 2159, “*An Act to Require School Buses to be Equipped with and to Use School Bus Crossing Arms*,” as an emergency measure to the 132nd Legislature. The bill was referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation, which held a public hearing on January 29, 2026. This bill has been considered and amended through multiple work sessions and was reported out “ought to pass as amended” (OTP-A) and referred to the full legislature on March 19, 2026. While the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission was undertaking the work outlined in Governor Mills’ Executive Order, the Commission also collaborated with the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation to ensure that the legislation and the findings from the Commission were in alignment.

Summary of LD 2159 and Requested Input from the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission

The original language of LD 2159 would require that all buses in Maine are equipped with a school bus crossing arm and would require its use when stopped to receive or discharge passengers. The bill would also make a violation a Class E crime and would initiate suspension of the driver’s school bus operator endorsement for at least 2 years. At the

public hearing, the sponsor proposed an amendment to add “anti-pinch” door technology as a required safety feature to be equipped and utilized on all Maine buses.

The first work session for LD 2159 occurred on February 24, 2026. During this work session, Lt. Bruce Scott, Commanding Officer of the Maine State Police Traffic Safety Unit and cochair of the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission, provided the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation with information regarding the Commission’s scope, timeline, and goals. In subsequent work sessions on LD 2159, Lt. Scott continued to provide feedback and findings from the Commission, ensuring that LD 2159’s final version was aligned with the work of the Commission.

As of this writing, LD 2159 has not been signed into law or enacted. While it passed out of the House, it was placed on the Special Appropriations Table in the Senate, and was not voted “off” the table. Therefore, with the assumption that LD 2159 will not take effect as law, the recommendations of this Commission will include components that were incorporated into the text of LD 2159.

DOE Rule Chapter 86: Maine Uniform School Bus Specifications

Purpose of the Rule

The purpose of DOE Rule Chapter 86 is to establish minimum uniform school bus specifications to aid SAUs in obtaining safe, cost-effective transportation for the State of Maine.

Minimum Specifications for School Buses

The Maine DOE adopted the *National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures 2015* as enacted by the 16th National Congress on School Transportation and with some exceptions specific to Maine.

Key Maine exceptions to the *National Congress on School Transportation* include:

- White roofs are not required on school buses
- Air conditioning is not a state school bus specification
- Overloading school buses is prohibited
- Activity bus operations must follow 49 CFR 395.5
- Escorted crossing procedures is not a state school bus specification

Maine has also established additional regulations. All new buses in Maine must have onboard video systems, with a minimum of four cameras. Each of the interior cameras must be set to record continuously. While the installation of a three-point lap-shoulder

belt is recommended, seat belt installation beyond federal mandates is a local SAU decision. If seat belts are installed, they must be used.

School Bus Purchase Requirements

Chapter 86 outlines the requirements for SAUs to meet when purchasing a new school bus, which are tied to the highest effective safety standards.

All buses must, at a minimum, conform to the *Maine Uniform School Bus Specifications*, federal, and state standards. Adherence to these specifications must be certified by the vehicle manufacturer. SAUs must employ a competitive bidding process that does not exclude any manufacturer. The lowest acceptable bid that is received determines the maximum amount of state subsidy. SAUs may exceed the minimum bus specifications to utilize the subsidy program, with approval from the Maine DOE.

DOE Rule Chapter 81: School Transportation Safety

Purpose of the Rule

The purpose of DOE Rule Chapter 81 is to establish uniform safety requirements that include: student riding safety practices training, transportation employee in-service safety training, entry-level school bus driver training, prohibitions, school bus daily inspections, contracts, year-end transportation reports, and records retention.

The rule establishes the minimum training requirements for students and school bus drivers. It also outlines the daily inspections for school bus safety. The rule specifies the reporting requirements for SAUs.

Student Training Requirements

Chapter 81 outlines training requirements for students, including riding safety practices instruction at least two times per year. This instruction must include procedures for loading, unloading, and safe street crossing techniques. In addition to this basic bus safety education, schools must also provide emergency evacuation drills two times per year. The SAU must maintain records regarding student training and drills.

School Bus Driver Training

Chapter 81 distinguishes between “entry level drivers” and ongoing driver training needs. In this context, an “entry level driver” is a new hire driver who has already obtained their commercial driver’s license (CDL) license with a school bus driver endorsement.

For an entry level driver, a minimum of 40 hours of training is required prior to transporting students. This training must include both classroom and practical, behind-the-wheel

components. For experienced drivers, 16 hours of training are required each year, which includes both classroom and practical, behind-the-wheel training components.

The content and curriculum of these training modules are not specified in rule.

Consequently, training content and curriculum are determined locally, at the discretion of SAU leadership. Each SAU determines how their transportation departments will operate based on their local needs. Some SAUs' drivers are full-time, forty hour per week employees, while others work as part-time, hourly employees. Other SAUs contract for school transportation with private companies. There is considerable variation in how and when drivers in each SAU are trained and these determinations are made locally.

There are numerous free and low-cost training opportunities provided to the field by the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT). The Department of Education partners with MAPT to fund and deliver regional and annual trainings for school bus drivers.

However, due to the practical realities of student transportation logistics, the impact of high seasonal lodging costs on a fixed school budget, and the nature of part-time employment, many of these training opportunities are not feasible for many school bus drivers and their employing districts.

Daily Inspection Requirements

The current Rule Chapter 81 requires the following daily inspections for school bus safety:

- Daily pre-trip and post-trip vehicle inspections
- Prompt reporting of safety defects or deficiencies to the SAU's transportation department
- "Bus clear" inspections after each run to confirm all students exited
- Immediate reporting of any student remaining on bus

Annual Reporting and Compliance

Annual reporting is a requirement in Chapter 81. SAUs must report to the DOE using their standard reporting software, NEO. There are two required reports: the Transportation Safety and Training Report (EFT 21), and the Vehicle Mileage and Operations Report (EFT 24). In addition to these reporting requirements, SAUs must retain all safety records, which must be provided to the DOE upon request. If a SAU does not comply with these reporting and safety requirements, their state subsidy may be withheld. Reporting in NEO is a critical data collection process that directly impacts a school's eligibility when applying for a new school bus. The required information, specifically the age and current mileage of each bus, is used to determine subsidy qualification. If a school fails to report this information in NEO, it will not be eligible to receive subsidy, as funding decisions are based on these factors.

Section Four – Bus Specifications

As part of the charge of the Governor’s Executive Order, the Commission closely reviewed available technology for bus safety, with a focus on crossing arms and anti-pinch sensor technology. Simultaneous to Commission meetings, the Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Transportation was working to amend LD 2159, *An Act to Require School Buses to be Equipped with and to Use School Bus Crossing Arms*. Interaction between the Committee and the Commission occurred in real-time, with co-chair Lt. Bruce Scott sharing Commission responses to the questions raised during bill work sessions. As a result, the Commission’s recommendations were integrated into the language for LD 2159.

Stakeholders, including transportation experts and vendors, provided information to the Commission about technology that could enhance school bus safety. This perspective was of great value to the Commission and helped to inform the recommendations regarding bus specifications.

School Bus Crossing Arms

School bus crossing arms are safety devices that are installed on the front bumper of a bus and are deployed at bus stops. These crossing arms extend 6-10 feet from the bumper when deployed. The purpose is to limit how close to the front of the bus students could cross, thereby ensuring that students remain within the driver’s line of sight as they cross the street. Public Law 2021, Chapter 413 took a significant step in requiring that all buses of model year 2021 and newer must be equipped with a school bus crossing arm. However, the retrofitting of older buses was at the discretion of local SAUs.

In conversations with experts regarding the feasibility and reliability of retrofitting of older buses, the Commission learned that the technology is compatible with older models, and a retrofit is considered reliable. Every bus type in Maine is able to be retrofitted.

The cost of retrofitting was estimated between \$1,500 and \$2,000 per bus. For an experienced technician, it was estimated to take 6-8 hours for proper installation per bus. Given the scope of Maine’s need, the greatest challenge that was foreseen by experts was the time it would take to complete a retrofit of all buses in Maine. The estimate for time it would take to retrofit Maine’s bus fleet was 18-36 months, depending on if SAU mechanics could be trained in how to conduct the retrofits themselves, or if bus vendors would be required to do so.

Anti-Pinch Sensor Technology

School bus anti-pinch door sensors are safety devices designed to detect obstructions in the door opening and immediately stop or reverse the door to prevent dragging incidents. Public Law 2023, Chapter 423 required that all buses manufactured in year 2025 and after must be equipped with anti-pinch sensor technology. However, the retrofitting of older buses was at the discretion of local SAUs.

In conversations with experts regarding the retrofitting of older buses, the Commission learned that the technology may not be compatible with older bus models. A manufacturer of anti-pinch door sensors, Mayser USA, has an existing partnership with Blue Bird buses, but does not yet have official partnerships with IC Bus or Thomas Built Bus. A representative from Mayser USA told the Commission that these partnerships and after-market retrofitting options are expected soon but cannot be relied upon within the time frame in which the Commission was operating.

In conversations with experts familiar with Maine's school bus landscape, the Commission was cautioned against requiring the retrofitting of anti-pinch technology onto Maine's older buses at this time. The rationale was that while this technology is evolving rapidly, vendors do not have the guidance or expertise to be able to support the retrofit of Maine's bus fleet, which is comprised of a variety of buses and year of manufacture, with this technology. The cost of retrofit was estimated to be between \$2,500 and \$4,000 per bus, but this was an estimate and it ranged depending on the bus and the labor costs associated with retrofitting different kinds of buses.

Concerns regarding the retrofitting of buses are captured by the following questions from a vendor's comments to the Commission:

- Who will certify these systems?
- Who will install them?
- Who will have liability for these systems?
- How will the aftermarket retrofit affect the bus's warranty

Members of the Commission agreed that these questions would need to be addressed and answered before requiring that all buses be equipped with this technology.

Other Safety Technology Considerations

In conversations with vendors and among Commission members, other technological safety options were briefly discussed. These technologies included micro lock systems,

360 degree cameras, enhanced illumination, and collision-avoidance systems. These technologies could enhance school bus safety and are worthy of consideration but require further study and discussion before additional requirements are adopted.

Commission Recommendations Regarding Bus Specifications

Recommended Changes to Title 29-A

- Require that all school buses be equipped with a school bus crossing arm, including those prior to model year 2021.
- Require that the operator of a school bus must use the school bus crossing arms at all times, unless there is a physical barrier that prevents the crossing arm from extending safely.
- Prohibit the school bus from being motion if the door is open and any passengers are on board.
- Require school buses to be equipped with both an audible alarm and visual alert if the door senses an obstruction.
- Require that failure to follow the rules adopted by the DOE are traffic infractions.
- Clarify that failing to follow laws governing school bus operations in Title 29-A are traffic infractions, unless they are already designated as crimes.
- Relevant rules should be amended in accordance with changes in statute.

Recommended Changes to DOE Rule Chapter 86

- Update rule to reflect changes in Title 29-A
- Update references to the “National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures 2025 as enacted by the 17th Congress”

Recommended Changes to DOE Rule Chapter 81

- Require pre-trip inspections before every trip instead of just daily.
- Require DOE create the training curriculum for students, parents, drivers and staff.

Recommended Changes to Maine State Police Motor Vehicle Inspection Manual

- Create new testing and rejection standards for the school buses required to be equipped with technology that prevents the door from closing on a limb or other body part.
- Require that both a visual alarm and audible alert must be activated if the door senses an obstruction.
- Require that the door audible alarm be noticeably louder than other ambient noises within the environment.

- Require that the door visual alert is brighter than or somehow distracts from other dash or telematic lights.

Section Five – Best Practices

Driver Training

While statute and rule mandate the number of hours of training that new and veteran bus drivers must have, there are no requirements specifying what must be included in the training. As a result, the curriculum, timing, and rigor of the training varies widely throughout the state.

The Commission identified this as a major gap in current practices. While Maine’s commitment to local control over education is foundational, it was the unanimous opinion of Commission members that there should be standardization of driver training across the state of Maine.

The Maine DOE is best suited to convene experts and stakeholders to establish the areas of training and create a common curriculum for new and ongoing driver training, utilizing best practices outlined in the National Congress on School Transportation. The expertise of the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT) will be invaluable in this effort.

Further discussion of driver training best practices will be discussed in Section Six of this report, along with Commission recommendations for driver and Transportation Director training.

Licensing

Currently, prospective bus drivers must obtain a CDL with an endorsement for school bus operations. While this was an area of discussion for the Commission, further study is needed to provide recommendations. Should the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission be authorized to continue convening, this would be an area of focus for future meetings.

Driver Physicals

In 2018, the Maine DOE repealed Rule Chapter 82, which outlined physical requirements for school bus drivers that were consistent with the U.S. Department of Transportation. At the time, it was seen as a necessary change due to the prescriptiveness of the rule, and the availability of licensed medical examiners registered with the U.S. Department of

Transportation (DOT) Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners needed to meet the requirements of the rule. With the repeal of Chapter 82, drivers were able to access their own physicians or physicians recommended by the SAU to complete the certification.

The Commission discussed the impact of this rule repeal. While, at the time of the repeal, SAUs reported challenges finding certified physicians in different regions of the state, this challenge is not one raised by Maine's nearly 70,000 CDL operators (non-school bus drivers) who are currently able to get their required Medical Certifications from care providers in Maine who are certified by the U.S. Department of Transportation. While there were practical reasons for making this change, the repeal left the state's school bus operator population, and the doctors evaluating the operators without a common medical safety standard. The Commission weighed the challenges and unintended consequences and recommended reinstating the rule to establish a state-wide standard for annual school bus driver physicals.

Commission Recommendations Regarding Best Practices

- Revise and adopt revised DOE Rule Chapter 82 to establish a state-wide standard for annual school bus driver physicals.

Section Six - Training Drivers and Transportation Directors

As part of the work of the Maine School Transportation Safety Commission, driver training was identified as a priority area of need. The Commission has reviewed current requirements for driver training, the availability of training materials, and what other states require. While the number of training hours required is consistent with other states, the Commission identified that Maine should adopt a standardized framework outlining the training topics and curriculum. In addition, the Commission explored avenues for improving oversight of each SAU's compliance with driver training.

Current Practices in Driver and Director Training

Current rule requires forty hours of training for a newly hired bus driver, and sixteen hours of ongoing training each year. Their employer, the SAU, is required to report to the Maine DOE and affirm that drivers have completed the required hours of training. Beyond those requirements, SAUs have broad flexibility in how they train their drivers, including the topics and when the training occurs.

The requirements and training needs of transportation directors are not addressed in statute or rule. This vital role supports driver training and the management and safety of the SAU's bus fleet.

While the role may differ between SAUs, those assuming the responsibilities associated with the role would benefit from consistent training, particularly in the first year in the role.

While the National Association of Pupil Transportation has certification programs for transportation directors, this training is costly, time-consuming, and can only be earned at national convenings. There is not a separate certification or endorsement required for those serving as transportation directors. Additionally, not all SAUs employ a full time, dedicated transportation director. Instead, the responsibilities of this role are assumed by another employee or employees of the SAU. In some of the smaller SAUs, the superintendent serves as the transportation director in addition to their other responsibilities

Within this decentralized landscape, the Maine Association for Pupil Transportation (MAPT) supported the field by providing training for drivers. MAPT holds regional training sessions throughout the state and holds two annual trainings in Augusta, at low- to no-cost for membership districts. They provide training in nationally recognized best practices

and help districts meet their training requirements. While this work is important and of great value to participants, there are numerous barriers that make MAPT's model insufficient and unsustainable.

One significant barrier is the fact that MAPT is a volunteer organization, with its leadership also serving as transportation directors in their SAUs. These professionals are organizing every aspect of the training opportunities in addition to their responsibilities of their full-time jobs. As a result, there are financial and human costs that are absorbed by these leaders, and there are no guarantees of institutional continuity or stability. This model is not standard practice in other states and poses a significant barrier to effective statewide training requirements.

The practical realities of transporting thousands of children each day throughout the school year, in addition to extracurricular activities, create a significant logistical challenge to planning and holding training sessions for bus drivers. The only times when all drivers from an SAU are available for training are during school vacations, and some school vacations also have high demand for busing due to athletic events. This leads to very limited windows of time where drivers are available, most of which are outside of their regular working hours.

Driver employment hours and availability pose another significant barrier to statewide training. In many SAUs, drivers are part-time, hourly employees who work in a split shift, driving in the morning and afternoon – the hours that the majority of buses are on the road. To standardize and require certain types of training may cause SAUs to incur significant additional costs to their transportation budgets. While some SAUs have full-time drivers with regular 40-hour workweeks, this is not the case for many other SAUs.

Geographic considerations are another factor when determining how to deliver driver training. For each of Maine's small, rural, and remote districts, the financial costs of participating in MAPT training can be especially burdensome because travel to regional and statewide conferences require SAUs to pay for travel and lodging expenses. It also means that drivers are not available to drive buses in their communities during the training. With tight budgets and numerous competing priorities, many SAUs are unable to afford the costs associated with sending drivers to statewide and regional trainings.

While these barriers are understandable, the Commission's view is that Maine provide consistent training to drivers in the state. To do so, there must be financial investment to ensure that all drivers can access driver training developed and overseen by the state.

Compliance and Oversight

Maine DOE's Rule Chapter 81: *School Transportation Safety* defines the year-end transportation reporting requirements for SAUs. Each year, SAUs are required to submit three reports:

- Transportation Safety and Training
- Vehicle Inventory
- Transportation Data Out-of-District Special Education Students, Homeless Students and Career and Technical Education Students reports

Each of these reports is to be submitted to the Maine DOE between July 1 and October 15. The school bus purchasing program, defined by Maine DOE Rule Chapter 85: *School Bus Purchasing Program*, outlines procedures for a SAU to receive subsidy to purchase new school buses and receive subsidy. SAUs must submit the Vehicle Inventory Report in order to participate in the program and receive subsidy.

The responsibility for ensuring that drivers and transportation directors meet their training requirements rests with the local SAU leadership. This dispersed structure of responsibility means that there is no central accountability system, and compliance varies each year from SAU to SAU.

While the rule authorizes the Maine DOE to withhold state subsidy if a SAU does not submit the report, the Maine DOE does not currently have the infrastructure and staff capacity to absorb additional oversight duties, nor does it have the statutory authority to do so. Currently, there is one full-time staff member at the Maine DOE responsible for school transportation, and that role is primarily responsible for the school bus purchasing program. The 2026 supplemental budget authorizes a second staff member in FY27 to help support safety and training initiatives, but this is still not enough capacity to conduct monitoring and compliance checks across all of Maine's SAUs.

Further, Maine's current practice of relying upon the volunteer-led MAPT for driver training causes significant compliance challenges. In other states, training provisions, compliance, and monitoring are responsibilities of state agencies.

Even if existing law and policy were fully sufficient, without an enforcement mechanism in place, it is impossible to ensure compliance across the entire state.

Commission Recommendations for Training

Bus Driver Training

The Commission found that the number of training hours required by the State of Maine is sufficient, appropriate, and consistent with other states. However, the Commission has the following recommendations for improving bus driver training:

- The Maine DOE should convene a group of stakeholders with expertise in the area of school transportation to identify and define bus driver training topics, to develop curriculum, and to continue discussion regarding training needs, demonstration of proficiency, and reviewing proficiency of experienced drivers at a regular interval. Requirements for school bus driver training should be distinct from other standard employment training requirements, such as blood-borne pathogen and sexual harassment training.
- Allocate funding adequate for the development, implementation and maintenance of driver training curriculum.
- Allocate funding adequate for the provision of statewide and regional bus driver and transportation director training, including the cost of travel, lodging and wages incurred by a SAU.
- Identify other sources of funding in addition to and apart from General Purpose Aid (GPA).
- Additional consideration and study is needed to identify investments that can be made in professionalizing school bus drivers. Given the qualifications required to drive a school bus and the tremendous responsibility of the role, the state should invest in building the workforce pipeline to ensure that the profession is seen as career that would allow a driver to stay in the role and earn a livable wage consistent with what other CDL holders earn.

Transportation Director Training

The Commission has found that the role of transportation director varies from one SAU to another. While small SAUs may not have a dedicated transportation director due to capacity or funding, there should be standardization of the role's responsibilities, minimum requirements, and training needs. The Commission has the following recommendations for transportation director training:

- Standardize and articulate the responsibilities of a transportation director. Because some of the responsibilities for this position may be divided between roles in a SAU, the Maine DOE should add this position to the existing required District Role that must be reported.

- The Maine DOE should convene a group of stakeholders with expertise in the area of school transportation to identify and develop transportation director training topics, to develop curriculum, and to continue discussion regarding training needs, demonstration of proficiency, and reviewing proficiency of experienced drivers at a regular interval. Requirements for transportation director training should be distinct from other standard employment training requirements, such as blood-borne pathogen and sexual harassment training.
 - This stakeholder group should consider a “train the trainer” model with transportation directors, to be able to implement training requirements for drivers.
- Allocate funding adequate for the development, implementation and maintenance of driver training curriculum.
- Allocate funding adequate for the provision of statewide and regional bus driver and transportation director training, including the cost of travel, lodging and wages incurred by a SAU.

Compliance and Oversight

The Commission has learned that while Maine’s mandated training hours are sufficient and consistent with other states, there are significant challenges regarding compliance and oversight with Maine’s current system. To increase compliance and safety, the Commission recommends the following:

- Implement the statutory changes recommended in this report.
- Provide the Maine DOE with the statutory authority for greater oversight and monitoring of SAU transportation training, practices, and record keeping.
- Increase state funding aligned with the costs for expanded oversight and compliance work within the Maine DOE.

Section Seven – Communication with Students and Families

Rule Chapter 81 outlines required student training, and mandates that training is provided to students at least two times per year. The Commission noted that this work is largely being done well throughout the state, with student training being provided on bus rules, safe street crossing, and emergency evacuation procedures. Furthermore, many districts already provide transportation safety messages to their school communities, reaching parents and caregivers through regular email and newsletter communications.

While this is an area of relative strength, there is a concern regarding compliance across the state, as this is another topic where the rules are sufficient, but there is no standard set of training topics, or curriculum that guides the training. The field could benefit from a comprehensive set of training topics and classroom-based modules to standardize the student training approaches throughout the state. Considerations should be made for student age and developmental needs and the variability of student familiarity with bus rules. There should also be consideration for the transportation of students involved in Career and Technical Education (CTE) and athletics, as these serve different functions than the traditional beginning and end-of-day bus routes. The resources produced should include model communications and information to families about safe school transportation.

Commission Recommendations for Student Training

- In addition to the Maine DOE convening a group of experts and stakeholders to identify and define driver and transportation director training, this group should also create a list of recommended training topics and modules for students, and communication resources for families.

Section 8 - Recommendations

Statutory and Regulatory Changes for Bus Specifications

Recommended Changes to Title 29-A

- Require that all school buses be equipped with a school bus crossing arm, including those prior to model year 2021.
- Require that the operator of a school bus must use the school bus crossing arms at all times, unless there is a physical barrier that prevents the crossing arm from extending safely.
- Prohibit the school bus from being motion if the door is open and any passengers are on board.
- Require school buses to be equipped with both an audible alarm and visual alert if the door senses an obstruction.
- Require that failure to follow the rules adopted by the DOE are traffic infractions.
- Clarify that failing to follow laws governing school bus operations in Title 29-A are traffic infractions, unless they are already designated as crimes.
- Relevant rules should be amended in accordance with changes in statute.

Recommended Changes to DOE Rule Chapter 86

- Update rule to reflect changes in Title 29-A
- Update references to the “National School Transportation Specifications and Procedures 2025 as enacted by the 17th Congress”

Recommended Changes to Maine State Police Motor Vehicle Inspection Manual

- Create new testing and rejection standards for the school buses required to be equipped with technology that prevents the door from closing on a limb or other body part.
- Require that both a visual alarm and audible alert must be activated if the door senses an obstruction.
- Require that the door audible alarm be noticeably louder than other ambient noises within the environment.
- Require that the door visual alert is brighter than or somehow distracts from other dash or telematic lights.

Best Practices

Driver Physicals

- Revise and adopt DOE Rule Chapter 82 to establish a statewide standard for annual school bus driver physicals.

Training Standardization and Accountability

Bus Driver Training

- The Maine DOE should convene a group of experts and stakeholders to identify and define bus driver training topics, develop curriculum, and continue discussion regarding training needs, demonstration of proficiency, and periodic review of experienced drivers' proficiency. Requirements should be clearly distinguished from other standard employment training, such as blood-borne pathogen and sexual harassment training.
- Provide increased state funding aligned with the costs of designing, implementing, and maintaining the standardized driver training requirements, and to offset additional costs SAUs will incur.
- Consistent with increased requirements for bus drivers, the state should consider investments that improve compensation and working conditions to support a sustainable workforce pipeline.

Transportation Director Training

- Define and standardize the transportation director role and codify it in statute, rule, certification, or policy.
- The Maine DOE should convene a group of experts and stakeholders to identify and define transportation director training topics, to develop curriculum, and to continue discussion regarding training needs, demonstration of proficiency, and periodic review of proficiency. Requirements should be clear and discrete from other standard employment training requirements, such as blood-borne pathogen and sexual harassment training.
 - The group should consider a “train the trainer” model with transportation directors, to be able to implement training requirements for drivers.
- Increased state funding aligned with the costs for designing and implementing the training mandate and to offset increased costs SAUs would incur.
 - As the Legislature continues to work on improving the Essential Programs and Services model of school funding, to consider transportation director training in any future proposed changes.

Compliance and Oversight

- Implement the statutory changes recommended in this report.
- Provide the Maine DOE with explicit statutory authority and resources for greater oversight of SAU transportation training, practices, and recordkeeping.
- Increased state funding aligned with the costs for expanded oversight and compliance work within the Maine DOE.

Student Training

- In addition to the Maine DOE convening a group of experts and stakeholders to identify and define driver and transportation director training, this group should also create a list of recommended training topics and modules for students, along with model communications and resources for families on safe school transportation.

Maine School Transportation Safety Commission

- The Commission should be formalized and allowed to meet in an ongoing fashion, to continue studying driver requirements, licensing, working conditions, and emerging safety technologies, and to oversee the implementation and impact of the changes recommended in this report.