

Regular Meeting #4

Maine Transportation Safety Commission Meeting

March 27, 2026; 8:30am-11:30am

45 Commerce Drive, Augusta, ME; and virtual

Chairs: Megan Welter, DOE; Bruce Scott, DPS

Participants: Megan Welter, Bruce Scott, Cheryl Brackett, Robert Skehan,

Stephen Marquis, Wayne LaPierre, Mitzii Smith, Chris Pasciuto

Staff Support: Deb MacMaster, Jason King, Jennifer Belanger

Agenda

Call to Order

Approval of Minutes: **Motion: St. Pierre, Second: Brackett; Vote: Unanimous**

Reports of Officers and Standing Committees: N/A

New Business:

Discussion of school bus safety trainings and best practices for school bus safety

- Review of training topics for drivers, transportation directors, and students
 - Have a standard set of topics that all districts throughout Maine must be trained on: Cheryl shared a document that summarizes topics to be required “Bus Driver Training Checklist”
 - Organized by: for brand new drivers, annual refreshers, every 2 years training
 - Suggestions:
 - New hire training:
 - include statutory / regulatory requirements very explicitly
 - Annual training:
 - Move student management to annual
 - Discussion regarding student behaviors, information sharing regarding student needs

- Consideration of FERPA, clarity for drivers needing information
 - Next step would be to define curriculum: a list of topics can be interpreted differently by different districts
 - Some items are easy to find quality curriculum; others are very difficult
 - Could the state provide a “library” of training materials?
 - We used to have this (on VHS), no longer exists
 - DOE Learning Management System: ENGiNE, could load modules onto the platform
 - But, being mindful of having accessibility for drivers of all technology comfort-levels
 - Would it be the responsibility of the DOE to vet and platform various training modules for the items on the checklist? How would modules be vetted?
 - Training for drivers vs. training for transportation directors?
 - NAPT offers certification programs for all of these areas: very time consuming, class offerings are limited. Likely not realistic for all transportation directors. Could we adopt something similar but tailored for our state?
 - Certification process for teachers, ed techs, principals, superintendents, etc. There is no such requirement for drivers. Should we adopt a similar model for drivers and transportation directors?
- What items are required prior to the start of the school year, and what items can be provided as professional development during the rest of the year.
- Is the current 16-hour requirement “enough” for driver training? Compared to other states, Maine’s 16-hour requirement is right in the middle.
- Are these trainings competency-based or awareness-based? Both.
 - How do we measure that drivers have “gotten it”?
 - Drivers have already passed their driving test prior to employment; would be significant challenges to require testing annually or in conjunction with training
 - Erosion of skill happens with all drivers, is there a place to have a check and balance after obtaining the license?
 - Can there be a happy medium? Stop and check that drivers successfully understood training, but not an onerous

assessment scenario. More of a “check for understanding” rather than a “test”.

- Could there be an every 5 year road check? Demonstrated, captured, pass/fail road check? Locally? Through BMV?
- Concern: we’re already having a difficult time hiring drivers now; would increased regulations, including a testing scenario, dissuade drivers from applying
- Could differentiate between various training items: some for awareness, others have a practical check for understanding – some in writing, some practical driving check.
 - Especially for the most dangerous parts of the job – loading /unloading, student crossing, etc.
- Need to raise the profile of the profession, make it more attractive. Needs to be a minimum salary, more stable hours, make the job more attractive. We need high-quality drivers, safe drivers. We should pay them like it.
- Suggestion: state sets curriculum, creates modules to cover required training, provide stipends to districts to pay drivers for taking the training
 - First step: create the mandate that meets the highest standard, and recommend the resourcing for what we need to meet that mandate
 - New hire requirements: more stringent
 - Ongoing proficiency checks: driving behavior is critical – minimum driver safety standard, and the proficiency check should be conducted by someone with expertise in driving
 - 5-year practical check, not conducted by the SAU, but an independent entity
 - Then: can discuss oversight and compliance, auditing
- Consideration of training requirements and how it will be disseminated
 - How can we support SAUs that do not currently have capacity for absorbing all of these training needs?
 - Regardless of how many students a driver must transport, the expectations and requirements should be the same
 - Required trainings, attestation, higher level of oversight for requirements – how will districts be held accountable?
 - Will there be additional funding needs for SAUs?
 - CDL Manual covers a lot of training topics
 - Ultimate responsibility for enforcing trainings in a district is held by Superintendent

- What do other states do for the monitoring and reporting? The 12-20 states that have been examined have similar framework as we do
- Districts have a handbook of required trainings for their school-based staff, but this handbook should include the trainings for bus drivers and transportation directors.
 - State should have SOPs for transportation directors – consistency across the board
 - Survey of transportation directors – they are seeking consistency, guidance, training from state; many directors are also driving
- For district-wide PD days, are drivers included in these days? Varies.
 - Recommendation could be that drivers are required to do their training on these PD days (would need funding)
 - Suggestion: state support 100% of driver training in the first year or two, then gradual handoff of funding responsibility to districts. That would help the “haves” and “have nots” situations.
- Effective communication of school bus safety info to students and families
 - Student training / drill is required 2x per year
 - Much is already being done on this item already: topics of training: bus rules, crossing the street, evacuation procedures
 - Procedure change: in NEO, require reporting by districts on dates and topics for student training
 - Hybrid training for students would be a good model:
 - Videos showing bus safety, how escape windows work
 - At least one training should be a drill to get hands-on
 - CTE considerations – students from different schools, who is responsible for providing the bus training, especially if different districts do it differently within the CTE center.

Discussion of reporting and monitoring: how do we make sure this is being done?

- Current practices:
 - EFT21 and EFT24 reports to the DOE; tied to school bus purchasing program
 - Report on deliverables: drivers, training, where training was completed
 - Contract with MAPT for training; if we increase the requirement, would need to increase the scope and funding of the contract with MAPT
 - Annual Training in Augusta:
 - Significant costs to SAUs for lodging

- Should the state cover the cost for these trainings? There are models for this in other areas of state government, utilization of federal grant funds.
- Monitoring / Auditing:
 - NEO software system that districts plug information into. Old, fairly rudimentary system. Some districts do not submit their reports.
 - DOE has one staff member dedicated to transportation, primarily in charge of the school bus purchasing program. If we are going to be adding monitoring and compliance, this would necessitate a team of additional staff.
 - Did request a second person in the governor's supplemental budget to manage the safety and training pieces, but this still wouldn't be enough to conduct monitoring of the scale we are discussing.
 - Bureau of Labor Standards has some oversight over training; could some of our checklist be offloaded to a different agency?
 - Could create consistency challenges – would need to coordinate among state agencies.
 - How much of that 16 hours of training must be focused on *safety* vs. administrative items? May be different for drivers and transportation directors.
 - Transportation directors need significant training as well, and there needs to be standardization there too.
 - Annual physical requirement, but no standard for what that means
 - There will be a failure rate; there will be attrition
 - This will make the current driver shortage worse
 - Accountability is key: there may be adequate rules on the books, but there isn't accountability built into the system. There's no one ensuring compliance to make sure it's done.
 - Create an inspection / auditing unit within the DOE to do accountability checks
- Summary of what the Legislature should determine:
 - Curriculum (who creates it?): if the DOE is in charge, would need stakeholders, experts to do the work itself
 - Communicate, collaborate, coordinate (who does this?): DOE
 - Confirm compliance (who does this?): Ch. 81, plus the National Congress creates very good regulations. Who is responsible for checking on compliance for training?

- DPS already reviews all commercial vehicles in Maine for compliance; DOL has a piece of compliance for labor laws, training, etc.
- Currently, district administrators self-certify, attest to DOE
 - To ensure compliance, we'd need a monitoring team. Should it happen in concert with DPS monitoring?
- Should there be a third party, non-SAU, to be checking on driver skill, physical fitness, enforcement of the DOE Rule Chapter 81?
- Private bus companies should be governed by the same rules, regulations, training, compliance checks
- Spot-checking vs. Monitoring:
 - Monitoring cycle: certain # of schools per year, do an audit – predictable, routine, proactive
- General group consensus that it should live with the DOE

Review of recommendations for report

Training:

- Create framework for training. To be created with leadership of DOE, with MAPT and Transportation Safety Commission,
 - Determining distinction between awareness vs. Skill proficiency
 - Ensure geographic representation throughout the state
 - Hire contractor to create the curriculum itself
- DOE responsible for bringing together the resources to support the framework/checklist
- CDL and bus endorsement training opportunities

Driver Requirements:

- Initial driver licensing certification
- 5-year recertification of driver training: written
- Annual ride-along to spot-check driver proficiency w/checklist
 - Need to train-up directors to support this
- Annual standard physicals for drivers
 - Includes random drug-test screening

Bus Driver Working Conditions:

- CDL drivers can make twice as much driving a dump truck

- Need to provide a living wage, consistent and/or full-time hours, consistent working conditions, etc

Maine School Transportation Safety Commission Continuing:

- Commission would study Driver Requirements and Working Conditions

Accountability and Monitoring:

- DOE to conduct monitoring to ensure compliance
- Routine compliance monitoring is established by the DOE in consultation with the Commission

Student Training and Family Communication:

- Rules are adequate; more discussion around enforcement

Next steps and discussion about a 5th meeting

- We're very close, but we aren't there just yet: Need April 3rd meeting
- Chairs bring consolidated recommendations to help move us forward, draft report outline by then
- Jen to send Draft Report outline to group by end-of-day Tuesday
 - Includes preliminary recommendations
 - Areas of attention to still discuss and iron out:
 - Where compliance measures land
 - Where is the \$\$\$ coming from? Perhaps come from the Highway Safety Fund, so it's from a completely different revenue stream, can be viewed through a purely safety-focused lens, outside of the "total cost of education" conversations

Public Comment:

Mr. Rice:

Worked 18 years as maintenance for a district, and had to drive a school bus in the job. Rigorous training. Went to another district as transportation director, completed oversight

of drivers, and had some very significant compliance issues from individual drivers in how they operated buses: did not use lights, ran through stop signs without correction or discipline.

Adjournment:

Motion: Lt Scott, Second: Brackett; Vote Unanimous of all