

**To:** The Maine School Transportation Safety Commission

**From:** Matt Kearns, Assistant Director, DeVivo Bus Sales

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Valued Commission Members,

I respectfully submit this letter as a 25-year veteran of the pupil transportation industry in the State of Maine. Throughout my career, I have served in nearly every operational, supervisory, and administrative role within district-level transportation departments. In my current capacity as a dealer representative, I work closely with school districts, transportation directors, technicians, municipal leaders, and school bus manufacturers on vehicle specifications, safety features, and evolving equipment standards to support safe, reliable, and efficient school bus operations across New England.

Given this experience, I greatly value the Commission's efforts to enhance the safety and well-being of Maine students who rely on school transportation each day. Your work carries significant implications for policy development, district operations, and the protection of students statewide. As you continue deliberations and prepare recommendations to the Maine Legislature regarding potential amendments to LD 2159 — *An Act to Require School Buses to Be Equipped with and to Use School Bus Crossing Arms*, I would like to offer information and perspective that may help inform your decisions.

Current school bus equipment standards and manufacturer capabilities

- **School buses manufactured prior to January 1, 2025**

These buses are generally not engineered to support the retroactive installation of modern anti-pinch door-sensor technology. Over the past several years, manufacturers have significantly redesigned entrance door systems, incorporating new control modules, wiring harnesses, and integrated safety interfaces. Older models lack these foundational components, making OEM-supported retrofits technically impractical or impossible.

Additionally, even currently available anti-pinch technologies continue to undergo refinement by OEMs to improve reliability, ensure proper integration with evolving door systems, and meet long-term durability expectations. As manufacturers work to fine-tune these systems, retrofitting older buses—which were never designed for these components—remains a substantial technical and operational challenge.

- **Challenges with Aftermarket Retrofit Solutions**

In many cases, districts would be required to rely on third-party aftermarket sensor systems for older buses. These solutions are often more costly, may vary in quality and reliability, and typically do not integrate as cleanly or safely as factory-installed equipment. They may also increase maintenance burdens, require specialized installation expertise, and lack long-term manufacturer support.

- **Contrast with Crossing Arms**

This stands in sharp contrast to crossing arms, which have been available as optional equipment for decades and are broadly compatible with older buses. Crossing arms are mechanically and electrically simpler, and they can usually be retrofitted with far fewer challenges, lower costs, and minimal impact on existing vehicle systems.

Implementation considerations for new safety requirements, including operational impacts, training, and maintenance

- **Sensor Reliability and Vehicle Downtime**

Sensor-based technologies—whether anti-pinch sensors, ABS sensors, DEF dosing sensors, or other electronic safety components—are vulnerable to failure from regular wear, environmental exposure, road debris, and corrosive winter road treatments. A single failed sensor may place a bus out of service, raising an operational concern: *How many buses statewide could be sidelined due to these failures, particularly during peak transportation demand?* Increased reliance on electronic systems will inevitably increase diagnostic time, maintenance needs, and operational disruptions.

- **Driver Responsibilities During Mid-Route Equipment Failures**

If a required safety device fails mid-route, districts and drivers require clear policy direction. Under the proposed amendments to LD 2159, a driver will face a Class E crime if they operate a bus without functioning mandated equipment.

This creates significant uncertainty. In a failure scenario, is it safer to stop the bus on the roadside, possibly in an unsafe location—to transfer students, or to complete the route and remove the bus from service afterward? Clear, practical guidance from the Commission is essential to align safety, legal requirements, and operational realities should this proposed amendment stand. My professional opinion is that it should not.

- **Crossing-Arm Use in Constrained Operating Environments**

During the February 24, 2026, transportation committee legislative workshop, concerns were raised about the use of the momentary cancel switch for crossing gates. Many school campuses, bus loops, and fleet yards lack the physical space necessary to safely deploy a crossing arm without striking another bus or fixed object. In tightly spaced environments, mandatory deployment could damage equipment or immobilize a vehicle. Allowances or operational exceptions will be necessary to prevent unintended consequences for drivers operating in these common real-world conditions.

Procurement realities and timelines faced by districts under evolving legislative mandates

Should crossing arms and anti-pinch door sensors become mandatory on all school buses, it is critical to establish clear, attainable, and well-communicated implementation timelines. Anti-pinch systems may require additional development time for manufacturers to test, certify, and integrate into full production, ensuring safety and durability. Districts need definitive guidance regarding:

- How long will they have to transition to the new requirements
- Whether production capacity will meet statewide demand
- How older buses will be addressed when retrofit feasibility is limited

Additionally, many districts may have no option but to rely on third-party anti-pinch technology for older vehicles. These systems may not integrate seamlessly, could carry higher installation and maintenance costs, and may reduce long-term reliability compared to OEM solutions. Clear expectations and flexible timelines will help districts plan budgets, staffing, and fleet-replacement cycles in a sustainable manner.

Best practices observed across Maine and other states related to crossing-arm usage and student loading/unloading safety

- **Training as the Foundation of Safety**

Training remains the cornerstone of all effective school bus safety practices. A portion of any funding associated with increasing school bus safety from the Governor's proposed budget should be allocated to strengthening annual driver training requirements and establishing consistent, auditable reporting processes across districts. Additionally, requiring age-appropriate safety instruction for all students in Pre-K through Grade 12 is essential to reinforce safe loading, unloading, and roadway-crossing behaviors. These current requirements aren't auditable.

- **Driver and Student Competency in Safety Protocols**

Preventing incidents requires both drivers and students to demonstrate competency in essential procedures, including loading and unloading routines, proper crossing techniques, and emergency evacuations. Student behavior expectations must also be clearly supported and consistently enforced at the school level. Reducing distractions is critical, particularly during the high-risk moments of loading and unloading when drivers must maintain full attention to their surroundings. These safety processes and expectations should also be applied consistently statewide, ensuring that students who move between districts encounter the same requirements, procedures, and safety standards regardless of where they attend school.

- **Ongoing Reinforcement and Skill Retention**

Drivers need regular opportunities to refresh their skills and reinforce key safety content. Routine required retraining helps prevent complacency and ensures drivers maintain confidence in their responsibilities. Adequate funding and scheduling support from the Department of Education will be essential for districts to meet these expectations without compromising daily operations.

- **Funding and Cost-Mitigation Considerations**

Implementation of new safety equipment should not come at the expense of other essential transportation functions. Sustainable funding mechanisms will help districts comply without jeopardizing fleet maintenance, driver staffing, or student service levels.

While advancements in school bus technology continue to improve safety, it is essential that we avoid treating equipment as a substitute for comprehensive driver training. Technology can support safe operations, but it cannot replace the judgment,

attentiveness, and situational awareness of a well-trained professional. We can only make vehicles so smart; the true safety of any school bus ultimately rests on the driver behind the wheel and the time districts invest in preparing them for the complexities of the job. Robust, consistent, and ongoing training ensures drivers understand proper procedures, can respond effectively to unexpected situations, and maintain the confidence needed to navigate high-risk loading and unloading environments. When training is inadequate, no amount of added equipment can fully compensate for that gap. Placing greater emphasis on strengthening training standards, not solely expanding technological requirements, will yield more reliable and sustainable safety outcomes across Maine's school transportation system.

Maine school districts already face a persistent and well-documented shortage of qualified school bus drivers. Recruiting and retaining these essential professionals is challenging under the best of circumstances, given the modest pay, split-shift schedules, commercial licensing requirements, and the high level of responsibility the role carries. Adding new punitive measures or criminal consequences tied to equipment failures—particularly those outside a driver's direct control—risks discouraging current drivers and deterring prospective applicants at a time when the workforce is already strained.

Rather than creating additional fear or uncertainty for drivers, the most effective path forward is to reinforce their confidence and professional capability through investment in required training, ongoing refresher opportunities, and supportive policies. When drivers feel equipped, respected, and empowered—not threatened—they are more likely to remain in the profession and consistently demonstrate strong safety practices. Strengthening training standards, ensuring clear operational guidance, and providing resources that help drivers succeed will meaningfully enhance student safety without exacerbating staffing shortages.

Creating an environment where drivers feel supported—instead of apprehensive about potential penalties—aligns with the broader goal of keeping Maine's school transportation system safe, stable, and fully staffed to meet student needs.

My goal is to support the Commission with accurate, practical, and industry-grounded information that aligns with your mission to enhance student safety statewide. I appreciate the thoughtful work you are undertaking and your commitment to making evidence-based recommendations that will meaningfully improve school transportation safety in Maine.

Please let me know if I may be of further assistance as your work progresses.

Respectfully,



Matt Kearns

*Assistant Director, DeVivo Bus Sales*

*matthew.kearns@devivobus.com*

*(Fmr. Transportation Dir. for RSU 57 & RSU 21)*