

Dept. of Transportation: September law of the month - drive with caution as school buses return this fall

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After an unprecedented pandemic school year, students across Wisconsin are going back to the classroom, which will bring out more traffic near schools.

September's Law of the Month reminds drivers of the rules involving school buses and ways to protect young passengers.

"School bus law violations pose serious risks for children, but the threat can be prevented with careful driving. Watch closely for kids who may not be able to recognize dangers on the roads," said Wisconsin Department of Transportation Secretary-designee Craig Thompson.

In the past ten years, 33 people have died in crashes involving school buses. Despite fewer in-person classes during the pandemic, there were still 342 school bus-related crashes in Wisconsin in 2020. That's down from 835 in 2019.

Wisconsin State Patrol officers play a key role in working to prevent these tragedies.

"Getting children to school safely is very important to us. School buses are among the safest vehicles on the roads. Our work to inspect those vehicles and uphold laws makes sure buses stay a protected place for kids," said WSP Superintendent Anthony Burrell.

Wisconsin law requires drivers in both directions to stop at least 20 feet from a school bus with its red warning lights flashing. The only exception is for vehicles on the other side of a divided road that's separated by a median or other physical barrier.

648 drivers were convicted for failure to stop for a school bus in Wisconsin last year.

Most Wisconsin school buses also have amber lights. When the bus is about to stop, the flashing amber lights come on. That signals drivers to slow down before red lights are activated.

WSP inspectors examine every school bus in the state, conducting about 12,000 inspections annually. The inspectors look at mechanical equipment like steering, brakes, and lights. They also check emergency equipment, including first aid kits and fire extinguishers.

As school begins, drivers are also reminded of state laws involving pedestrians and bicyclists:

- Always follow the directions of a school crossing guard. If instructed to stop, the driver must do so at least 10 feet away from the school crossing area and stay stopped until the guard directs the driver to proceed.
- Yield to pedestrians who have started crossing an intersection or crosswalk on a walk signal or green light. Drivers must also yield to pedestrians crossing the road in a marked or unmarked crosswalk at an intersection without signals.
- Leave three feet clearance when passing bicycles traveling in the same direction.

Officials also recommend parents talk with their children about safe travel before school starts. Encourage kids to look both ways before crossing the street, use crosswalks, and obey bus drivers and crossing guards.