



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

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**A Weekly Column for the
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Back To School

JEFFERSON CITY – As summer slowly winds to a close, thousands of Missouri children and teenagers are preparing to go back to school. Missouri lawmakers offered parents a helping hand by making permanent the sales tax holiday that exempts back-to-school clothing, supplies and computer equipment from state sales taxes. Many communities and counties throughout the state joined the tax holiday earlier this month by exempting those items from local taxes as well.

For many students, especially those in rural areas, heading back to school involves another ritual – riding the bus. In order to ensure our children are safe when they board the big yellow bus for school, lawmakers enacted provisions in the 2005 legislative session dealing with school bus drivers.

House Bill 487, signed into law by Governor Blunt last month, makes school districts responsible for conducting criminal background checks for school bus drivers. Previously, that responsibility rested with the Department of Revenue. The new law requires school districts to have a statement on file from the local medical examiner that the driver is physically qualified to operate a school bus. Those files must be updated each year.

HB 487 also requires school districts to provide at least eight hours of training for each bus driver employed by the district or under contract with the district. The training will include special instruction in school bus driving.

Additionally, the new law requires annual examinations for school bus drivers 70 years of age or older.

An idea that may be considered by legislators during the 2006 session is to install lap-shoulder belts in school buses. A task force appointed by Governor Blunt to study school bus safety suggests that school districts in Missouri consider the use of lap-shoulder belts to improve student safety, although the panel did not suggest making the safety belts mandatory. It's an expensive proposition, but it's an idea that merits discussion when lawmakers return to Jefferson City in January.

The task force also recommends using adult monitors to supervise children getting on or off a bus, which is when the greatest number of injuries occurs. The National Safety Council reports that nationwide, 26 students were killed and 9,000 were injured in incidents involving school buses last year. Most of those deaths and injuries occurred when students were entering or exiting school buses.

It's also important for motorists to be on the lookout for young children heading to school, and to be aware of the frequent stops made by school buses on their daily routes.

The first day of the new school year is exciting time for many young Missourians. Let's make sure our students get to school each day, and return home each afternoon, safely.

If you have questions or comments about this or any other issue, please feel free to contact me at 573-751-8793 or by e-mail at: delbertscott@senate.state.mo.us

Senator Delbert Scott represents the people of Barton, Benton, Cedar, Dallas, Henry, Hickory, Pettis, Polk and St. Clair counties in the Missouri Senate.