School Bus Safety Awareness Initiative

Purpose:
- To reassure parents of approximately 66,000 students – who ride a school bus each day – and the Virginia Beach community that the school division’s transportation system offers a safe means of travel.
- Increase the level of awareness for bus safety to students, motorists, and pedestrians.

Analysis:
- In the fall of 2005, VBCPS became the target of much public scrutiny and excessive media attention due to four high-profile school bus accidents. Three of the four bus accidents involved a death: one student; two adults. The date and nature of the four accidents are as follows:
  1. October 24 – driver of vehicle dies after head-on collision with a school bus;
  2. October 31 – school bus transporting 24 students flips on its side – 14 students transported to hospital;
  3. November 8 – nine year-old student dies after being struck by school bus;
  4. December 1 – jogger dies after running into path of school bus
- Even though the bus drivers of the three accidents involving a death were not at fault and/or charged, the level of safety for the VBCPS transportation program was publicly questioned by local and state media.
- Front-page newspaper stories and breaking/headline television/Internet/political cartoons questioned the safety record of the VBCPS transportation program. One news outlet stated the school division “has a black cloud hanging over its transportation program.”
- Data collected from other school divisions and transportation businesses in the region, state and nation, show that VBCPS bus drivers have fewer accidents per mile. During the previous school year (2005-2006) the school division’s 601 bus drivers traveled 10.1 million miles and were involved in 24 reportable accidents or 1 accident per 213,000 miles.
- A trend analysis conducted in December 2006 showed that over the past 5 years there had been a decrease in the number of bus accidents.
- Due to the nature of the accidents involving a death and comparison data collected, it was determined that an aggressive bus safety awareness campaign was necessary for three target audiences: students, motorists and pedestrians.

Planning:
- An ad hoc School Bus Safety Committee was formed the first week of December 2005 to review the status of the school division’s transportation program. The committee consisted of staff from the departments/offices of transportation, safe schools, risk management, and media and communications.
- A communication plan was developed targeting students, parents, bus drivers, and motorists. This plan identified bus safety initiatives in place and additional initiatives that would reinforce the VBCPS commitment to bus safety.
- A report on the State of the Transportation was presented to the School Board on December 20, 2005. This report presented an opportunity to provide, publicly, an overview (reality v. perception) of the existing bus safety procedures/guidelines in place and ensure all that bus safety is the number one priority for VBCPS’ transportation operations.
Execution and Communication:

■ With low morale among the bus drivers due to the negative publicity of the VBCPS transportation system, a letter was sent to all 601 bus drivers thanking them for driving students to and from school safely each day.

■ Speaking points were developed and distributed to all school bus drivers reinforcing the VBCPS commitment to safety and ensuring all parents that there is no safer way to transport a child than in a school bus.

■ An article was published in the school division’s parent newsletter Apple A Day in February 2006 reinforcing bus safety as a priority and highlighting the extensive training program all bus drivers must complete in order to drive for the school division. School bus safety tips for parents, students and motorists were included.

■ The bus transportation section was expanded on the school division’s web site – vbschools.com – and added to all parent/student handbooks for the 2006–2007 school year.

■ Six area school divisions (VBCPS, Norfolk, Chesapeake, Suffolk, Portsmouth and York County) collaborated to produce and promote a series of public service announcements (PSA) addressing school bus safety (students, pedestrians and motorists).

■ During the months of August and September 2006, the school division placed a bus safety ad on an admobile targeting motorists. The admobile travels around the city from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm Monday–Friday.

■ Back to School section of the school division’s web site and local newspaper included bus safety tips.

Evaluation:

■ In December 2006 the results of a Student Safety Transportation Study, conducted by an independent contractor, was presented to the School Board/citizens. The study reported no evidence of unsafe school bus operations in the city.

■ Based on recommendations reported in the Student Safety Transportation Study, bus routes are being examined that could reduce the potential of accidents.

■ As of January 2007, there have been no high-profile bus accidents. There has been no increase in bus accidents.

■ Bus drivers report that motorists are more courteous around bus stops and moving traffic near school buses.

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