

My name is Molly Nelson, and I live in Hazen, North Dakota, where I work as a registered nurse at our local critical access hospital. My husband and I are the proud parents of two young boys. Bauer is 9 years old, and a third grader and Nash is 6 years old and in first grade.

Every morning at 7:27 am, Bauer and Nash cross highway 200 to get onto the school bus. Highway 200 is very well-traveled by both power plant workers and rural residents going to and from Hazen. Our home is on the south side of the highway, and the bus approaches from the east, which means my boys have to cross oncoming traffic to board the bus.

As a nurse, I've adjusted my work schedule to ensure I can help them watch for traffic and get across the highway safely every morning. While this gives me a sense of reassurance, it also fills me with deep fear as I have witnessed many vehicles passing the stopped bus and failing to stop in the oncoming lane, ignoring the flashing lights and extended stop arm. This is not just a violation of traffic laws; it's a threat to the lives of our children.

In November 2023, Mercer County Sherriff's Deputy Paul Martin pulled into our approach off Highway 200. Knowing ours is a busy stretch of highway, he kindly offered to monitor traffic for a few days to ensure Bauer and Nash could safely get on the bus. Tragically, Deputy Martin was killed in the line of duty less than one month later, on December 6th, 2023. I will forever be grateful to Deputy Martin for his awareness of the potential danger, his dedication to the safety of all children, and his kindness. However, the reality is that our law enforcement heroes cannot be at every bus stop.

Every year, children are injured or even killed in school bus-related accidents. Due to their developing nervous systems, children process information slower than adults, leading to slower reaction times. This, along with the ever-rising incidence of distracted driving and failure to follow school bus traffic laws, is a lethal combination.

House Bill 1294 proposes to increase the fee for violating school bus traffic safety laws. I believe that an increase in the monetary penalty for this violation will heighten awareness of the dangers of illegally passing a stopped bus and emphasize the importance of adherence to the law.

As a community, it is our duty to protect our children on their way to and from school. As a parent, I will continue to advocate for the safety of all children and work to raise awareness about the importance of following school bus traffic laws. Together, we can create a safer environment for our kids and honor the memory of those, like Deputy Martin, who dedicate their lives to our safety.

Your support of this bill helps ensure every child, including Bauer and Nash, get to and from school safely.

Thank you.