

Hello,

My name is Kaelan Akvik, and I am a resident of Walcott, ND in Richland County. I would like to write in support of HB 1294 as it relates to increasing fines for people who overtake a school bus while the stop arm is extended.

I am a second-generation school bus driver. My dad recently retired from the Richland #44 School District after 35 years behind the wheel. In his many years, a small stop sign and red lights were the only thing standing between his passengers and other motorists on the roadways. He was fortunate to never have any child struck by a vehicle, but far too many times to count, a vehicle decided the stop sign didn't apply to them.

A bus driver is one of the best multi-taskers you can ask for behind the wheel of a vehicle loaded with children. His last bus had a capacity 65 passengers, was registered for 30,000lbs, was painted in the required "National School Bus Glossy Yellow", letters at least 8 inches tall spelling out "SCHOOL BUS", and a white strobe light adorning the top of the massive vehicle. Not only was he tasked with piloting this vehicle, but also for the safety and wellbeing of his passengers. Beyond the standard road hazards, he also needed to be aware of two special things that pertain to school busses. Railroad tracks and use of the stop sign.

The only days when my dad would arrive home after his route upset or angry was when someone had disregarded his stop arm. In the frenzy of hauling a bus load of kids, obeying traffic laws, knowing who is riding and who is not, and keeping peace in the bus, the most stressful part of driving is a pick-up or drop-off. We are in control of most things inside our bus, but these two events introduce the external factor of other traffic. You approach the stop, activate the amber warning lights as you approach, make a full stop, and only when you can confirm all approaching traffic can safely stop, open the passenger door to activate the red warning lights and stop arm. You scan your mirrors excessively because someone's life depends on it. When it is safe, you allow the children to exit the bus. When they are completely out of the roadway and safe, you can then shut your door, allowing the red lights to stop and stop arm to retract. You rejoin traffic and continue on to perform this process again and again.

Before the addition of stop-arm cameras on our busses, you would need to try to write down or remember the plate number, radio it into the school, and they would follow up. The end of the drivers involvement is not done. The local authorities will contact the bus driver to follow-up. He will usually have to attest to this report being factual, and in some cases verify who the driver of the vehicle was.

In the last stop-arm violation my dad had before retiring, he ended up knowing the individual. What makes this more frustrating is the other person approached the bus, stopped, then proceeded. This person had kids who graduated from our school. His own kids had relied on that stop sign to keep them safe. But upon the deputy taking time out of his day to track this driver down, he admitted to doing it, stating "I was running late for a meeting". A meeting could have cost a kid their life. Poor time management on the part of the vehicle driver could have cost a child their life.

One of the closest calls my dad had in his 35 years was on a 2-lane highway about a mile from the city limits of a town. This was an extra dangerous stop because the children had to cross in front of the bus to cross the road into their driveway. He did everything as he had thousands of times before. During one of the mirror checks, he noticed a car coming up fast behind him. He put his arm out in front of the two children approaching the steps to leave the vehicle and said stop. Sure enough, the driver was distracted and saw the stopped up at the last second, swerved to avoid a collision, and blew past the stopped bus at highway speeds. If those kids would have been 10 seconds faster getting their backpacks on, they would have been hit. This driver did not see an enormous yellow bus, with a strobe light, stop sign, flashing yellow and red lights and nearly caused a tragedy. Its not about lack of visibility, its about lack of accountability and punishment.

During my CDL road test for my bus license, at a simulated bus pick-up, two vehicles drove around my stopped bus like it was an everyday occurrence. The road test admins did their best to gather the plate information and file a report, but the one said this is a far too common occurrence.

For those of you who can't wait for the bus to offload its passengers and feel the need to disregard the stop-arm, my average stop time from activating my amber lights to reentering traffic is 20 to 45 seconds. Not even a full minute of waiting is putting children's lives at risk. I am fully in support of raising the fine. In fact, I do not think it goes far enough.

Thank You.