

Article rank | 10 Sep 2009 | The Gazette | RICHARD FOOT CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

# What's the cost of a student's life? 1

**CSA-APPROVED MINIBUSES** are available, but so far governments haven't made them mandatory

Ron Campbell was dumbfounded in January 2008 when news broke that seven students and a teacher had died in a 15-seat van while driving home from a high-school basketball game in New Brunswick.

HUGH WESLEY CANWEST NEWS SERVICE



**Ron Campbell, a salesman for Drummondville's Girardin Minibus, which makes CSA-approved vehicles for transporting students.**

The tragedy shocked many, but for Campbell it hit particularly close.

He and other volunteers – all experts in school-bus transportation – had for several years been working with the Canadian Standards Association, writing the country's first national standard for a safe extracurricular school vehicle designed to replace 15-seat vans.

"The people around the committee table were really speechless," says Campbell, a salesman in the school-bus-industry. "When that tragedy occurred, the standard was already finished. The technical work had been completed. We had even been in contact with Transport Canada to see if they would adopt it into their regulations."

The CSA announced the standard four months later. Called the D270 standard for multi-function activity buses – or minibuses – it offers school boards and governments a set of criteria for what experts say is a safe alternative to the 12- and 15-seat passenger vans used to drive children to field trips, sporting events and other activities.

Those vans meet none of the safety requirements imposed on school buses and are considered so dangerous that they're prohibited for student transport in at least 30 U.S. states.

In Canada, only Quebec, Nova Scotia and now New Brunswick ban schools from using them.

Unlike 15-seat vans, CSA-approved minibuses come with all the safety engineering and child-protection features common on traditional yellow school buses.

But more than a year after the standard became available, no government in Canada has adopted it – despite pleas from the CSA and a recommendation to use the minibuses from the coroner's inquest that investigated the New Brunswick crash.

The CSA is an independent nonprofit agency. It writes safety standards for everything from light bulbs to hockey helmets, but the standards take effect only when governments put them into law.

"The (minibus) standard needs to be adopted or it won't be used," said John Walter in an interview conducted during the summer when he was vice-president of the CSA.

(Walter was recently appointed executive director of the Standards Council of Canada, a federal crown corporation. He is now the country's chief standards bureaucrat.)

"The CSA wouldn't have gone into this if we felt those vans were providing the safety that was needed," Walter said. "We obviously felt there was a need to fix what was there."

Campbell is an Ontario-based sales manager for Girardin Minibus, a Quebec company that makes the vehicles. In the 1990s, he helped various U.S. agencies develop a similar minibus standard that was eventually adopted as federal law in the United States.

He says Ottawa and the provinces should enforce the standard in this country. Governments at all levels already support standards for full-sized school buses taking children between home and school. If they adopted the minibus standard, it would impose a recognized safety threshold on what is now a disparate array of extracurricular travel policies, applied with varying degrees of safety, at schools across the country.

"A child that goes on a school field trip has none of the same regulatory protections they have being bused back and forth between home and school every day," Campbell says. "Why, between the hours of 8 and 4, do kids get the safety cocoon of a school bus, whereas after hours or on weekends that no longer applies?"

"I don't understand why, after the Bathurst tragedy, this hasn't been changed."

The minibuses advocated by the CSA are used by some school districts in Canada. And there are a smattering of regulations. In Quebec, schools must transport groups of 10 or more students in minibuses or school buses. In New Brunswick, schools are prohibited from "acquiring" vehicles for 10 or more passengers that don't meet the CSA minibus standard.

But in each case, private or rental vehicles, driven by teachers, coaches or parents, are also allowed for school trips. There are no laws anywhere in Canada requiring schools to use minibuses or school buses exclusively for extracurricular travel.

Campbell says it may fall to the insurance industry to move the issue forward. A rash of fatal 15-seat-van accidents in the United States prompted the industry to stop insuring the vehicles. That, in turn, led to a new federal minibus standard.

But Transport Canada should also show some leadership, Campbell said. "Transport Canada is our governing body for motor vehicles, and right now we have this standard but it's not recognized by them. It's still without any kind of authority or blessing from Ottawa."

The main stumbling block with adopting the minibus standard, says Dave White, the provincial bureaucrat who oversees Nova Scotia's Motor Vehicle Act, is the cost of equipping schools with enough of them to ensure that extracurricular activities can continue. A new 24-seat minibus costs at least \$40,000.

"There is a certainly a cost," Walter says. "But our position (at the CSA) would be that the cost is minimal if you look at this over the longer period of time and if you look at the deaths of all those young people and that woman in New Brunswick."

"What's the cost of having seven young adults die?"

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