

Reviving yellow school buses could save kids' lives, study says

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Friday, September 19, 2003

By Michael Cabanatuan
Chronicle Staff Writer

As the big yellow school bus becomes an increasingly endangered species in California, so, too, are children who are forced to find other ways to get to school, a report released Wednesday concludes.

California's transportation system is built for automotive speed, not pedestrian safety, according to the report by two groups that advocate alternatives to driving. And that places the state's youth in danger, whether they walk, pedal or catch a ride to class.

"We've built our neighborhoods for traffic rather than for children," said James Corless, California director for the Surface Transportation Policy Project.

Traffic accidents, the report points out, are the leading killer of California children under 17. Between 1995 and 2000, 1,523 children died while riding in cars, and 572 were killed after being hit by cars while walking.

The report calls for California to develop safe bicycling and walking routes to school and bring back the big yellow buses.

Metropolitan Transportation Commission spokesman Randy Rentschler said the commission, the region's transportation planning and financing agency, has backed a program to make it safer for students to walk and bike to schools by encouraging sidewalk and bicycle lane improvements and encouraging more students to walk or bike. It also helped fund a test program offering discount transit passes to low-income students who ride AC Transit.

California has the lowest rate of school bus ridership in the nation, the report says, in part because buses lose out to education when it comes to funding. Just 16 percent of public school students rode school buses in 2001, down from 23 percent in 1985. Nationally, the percentage rose from 51 percent in 1985 to 54 percent in 2001.

With fewer school buses, students are left to ride in cars or walk or pedal bicycles, and in California's car culture, automobiles are more popular than the alternatives. Fear of child abduction and sprawling development patterns also increase reliance on the auto as a means to commute to school, the report says. That increases not only traffic but pollution, the report says, as well as the likelihood of children getting killed or hurt in accidents involving cars.

About 74 percent of Californians younger than 17 relied on cars to get between home, school and activities, according to a 2001 Caltrans study cited in the report. Another 16 percent walked or rode bicycles while only 8 percent rode school buses and 2 percent took public transit.

"We're forcing children to negotiate dangerous streets to walk to school or we're forcing parents to drive them," said Diana Williams, executive director of **Urban Ecology**, an Oakland organization that supports more environmentally sound cities.

The decline of the school bus in California is driven by the lack of a state requirement to provide bus service, financial constraints and a low state reimbursement for transportation, which forces many districts to pay for buses from their general budget. Most other states, the report says, mandate bus service and pay more of the costs.

E-mail Michael Cabanatuan at mcabanatuan@sfchronicle.com