

Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

The ins and outs of bus safety

Region's school boards hope education program will help prevent tragedy

BY LISA QUEEN
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When five-year-old Jacob Parke was killed by a school bus two years ago in Aurora, it was just days before his class was scheduled to take a bus safety course.

The lesson was set for the end of November, almost three months after school started, meaning the children were expected to ride the bus for 11 weeks before they were formally taught basic safety rules.

But Jacob never made it to the class. As he crossed the road after getting off the bus on Nov. 15, 1996, the kindergarten student dropped his Batman backpack and bent over to pick it up.

He stumbled and fell as he tried to hurry across the street in front of the bus. Unaware the boy was on the road, the bus driver drove over him.

Last year, a coroner's jury investigating the boy's death stressed no child should ride a school bus without first being taught how to get on and off the bus safely.

Jacob's tearful father Kevin told the jury no one in his family was ever given bus safety rules prior to the accident.

"I didn't know about bus safety," he said. "I didn't know until this happened to my son. Our feeling is that if Jacob would have walked 10 feet in front of the bus and (the driver) would have indicated now is the time to cross, he would've been here today."

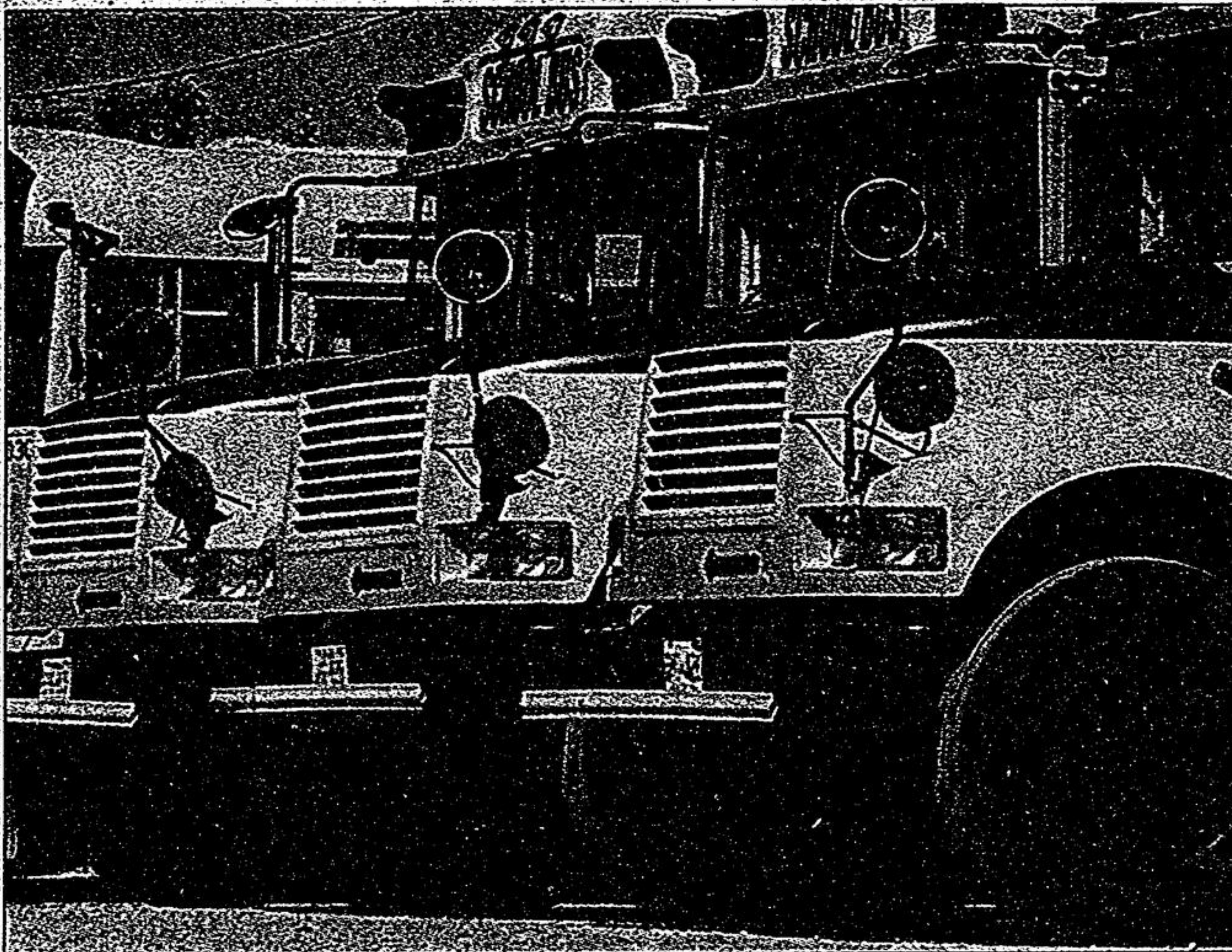
Kevin Parke said the jury's most important recommendation was a mandatory first-rider program for primary grade students and their parents.

In response to the inquest, this fall, for the first time, York Region junior and senior Kindergarten students were given a one-hour lesson on bus safety, just before the beginning of the school year.

My daughter, who turns five next month, was among the first group to take the class at Dr. John M. Denison Secondary School in Newmarket.

Even though she doesn't know anything about Jacob, I feel a debt of gratitude to the coroner's jury, and especially Jacob's parents, for helping ensure another child doesn't suffer the same tragedy.

Thanks to the class, my daughter was taught the importance of bus safety two weeks before she started school.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

York Region junior and senior Kindergarten students received lessons on bus safety this year before the start of class — a recommendation handed down last year by the coroner's jury that investigated the death of a five-year-old Aurora boy in 1995.

She can rhyme off most of the rules by herself: "Don't go near the tires; if you drop something don't pick it up; hold on to the handrail because you might fall off the bus; don't touch the bus because it's powerful; don't stand up; be quiet because the kids might not hear the driver; make sure I see the driver and the driver sees me before I cross."

She thinks the class was a good idea.

"It's a good idea because they tell you important stuff," she said.

You need to know the rules "cause if something bad happened, it would not be very healthy and you would be really, really sick."

But there were a couple of areas where the class failed.

First, the kids were shown a video which contained incorrect information.

In the film, the driver points his index finger to indicate it is safe to cross. But in York Region, the driver swipes his hand in front of his face to signal when to cross.

In the video, the driver honks to warn children not to proceed if a car is illegally passing the bus.

But York drivers won't honk because they don't want to frighten the kids into darting across the road.

Instead, York children are advised to stop at the edge of the bus and check for traffic before continuing across the street.

The differences may seem small, but children riding the bus can be as young as three- and-a-half-years old. Remembering safety rules is difficult enough without making them confusing.

Dave Martin, York's student transportation manager, agrees the discrepancies are a problem and hopes to have them corrected by next year.

He said a dozen recommendations from the coroner's jury have been implemented — at a cost of \$1,000 a bus, or about \$60,000 for York's fleet.

Some of the improvements include swing-out safety arms to keep students far enough in front of the bus for the driver to see them while crossing the street; better mirrors at the front of the bus; and adjustable seats for drivers.

But Martin said the recommended bus patrols — with older students assigned to

THE POINTERS

- Be ready five minutes early.
- Watch for driver's signal before crossing the road.
- Board quickly using the handrail and go right to your seat.
- Remain in your seat until your bus stop.
- No eating or drinking on the bus.
- Keep the aisle clear.
- Don't put anything out the window.
- No shouting, fighting or horseplay.
- When leaving the bus, stay off the road.
- Always stay two giant steps away from the bus.
- If you must cross the road, walk 10 giant steps in front of the bus, wait for the driver's signal, look both ways and then cross the street.
- Never cross behind the bus.

help young children board and disembark — don't appear to be feasible.

Instead, all children from Grade 6 onwards will be encouraged to act as patrols for younger kids who get off at the same stop.

Martin said the York boards have gone a long way toward improving safety on its school buses since Jacob's death.

"I'm confident enough I would put my children on them, if they were that age," he said. "I think we've done everything in our power to make them safe. I don't think we've left any stone unturned that is reasonable. There may be some things we haven't thought of."

Martin said Jacob's legacy is an improved bus system for other children.

"Something like Jacob Parke tells us it (the safety program) just wasn't enough," he said. "We hope we've done everything reasonable in ensuring a serious injury or death doesn't occur."

But because of student and driver error, Martin admits it's virtually impossible to make buses 100-per cent safe.

In fact, less than a year after Jacob was killed, six-year-old Newmarket student Peter Stanzone suffered a broken elbow when he was run over and dragged by his school bus.

Peter stumbled and fell as he bent over to pick up his hat as he was crossing in front of the bus. Fortunately, the wheels missed the boy as the bus drove over him.

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