

Kathryn M. Mahlman Testimony

October 2, 2019

Good Morning. My name is Katie Mahlman and my husband Rob and I are the parents of James who is 9 and Blake who is 7. Both of our children attend St. Louis Elementary in Custar. Each day, our children are picked up and dropped off at my parents home by a Bowling Green School District bus. We are fortunate and grateful to have this public transportation available to our children. My children must cross a busy two lane State Route in order to get on and off the bus. We have taught our children to follow the hand signals of the bus drivers to know when to safely cross, as well as looking both ways themselves.

On Monday, September 23rd, of this year, a little after 8:00 a.m., I received a phone call from my mother. It's not a good feeling when you hear the words "...let me finish before you say anything but...we had an incident with the bus this morning..." I listened as my mother relayed her version of what she and my father had witnessed. A large truck hauling equipment failed to stop for my child's bus as my child approached the road. I was told the bus driver had her caution lights on well in advance and was at a complete stop. My mother saw the vehicle as it sped on by, just a few short feet in front of James. My mother informed me that James didn't seem upset, he crossed the road, and was on his way to school.

I'm sure you can imagine the range of emotions and "what ifs" that went through me as I listened to my mother tell me what occurred. The first emotion being relief. I was relieved that my son was safe. We were lucky...had he not been paying attention to the bus driver, or checking the road himself and reacting quickly, I am quite certain we would have had a tragedy on our hands.

Amongst the relief was anger. Who was so distracted that they missed a stopped, big, yellow school bus with flashing lights? It was not a foggy day, he or she was not driving into the sun, and there was nothing hindering their line of site. Someone was either clearly distracted or intentionally violated the rules that protect my son and the bus picking him up. I wanted and still want someone held accountable for their actions.

The bus driver contacted me right away and I could tell she was shaken by the events that transpired. I was told the bus had a camera but she "...hoped they were working..." I was not comforted by the fact that the cameras may or may not have been functioning. The hard drive was pulled and I was informed that the cameras did indeed malfunction and they were unable to get an image of the vehicle and the incident that took place. A formal written report was turned over to the Wood County Sheriff for an investigation. However, there isn't much to go on.

My next emotion was frustration. I instantly thought "what is the point of having cameras if they don't work!" Everything happened so quickly that the bus driver had no time to see a license plate or anything to identify the driver. We were hoping the camera would give more details and it failed. It frustrates me to know that the busses are equipped with technology to help in these

instances and they do not work. I think it a disservice to the bus drivers and the children they protect to have this technology available to them and it fails. It is really hard to make someone accountable for their actions if you can't identify them. A working camera may have given the Sheriff more information to work with.

James is safe and that is what truly matters and odds are we will never know who drove in between the bus and him. However, if this incident can help reiterate the importance of this bill, then maybe some good will come of it. I do believe in tougher penalties for violators who choose getting to their destination over the safety of innocent children. I believe in appropriating money to allow districts to purchase or obtain cameras for their busses. I'm an even bigger fan of awareness and education. Having August devoted to School Bus Safety Awareness makes perfect sense. Put the message out when the big yellow bus makes its debut for the new school year.

I want to sincerely thank Senator Gavarone for inviting my family to share our story and all of you for taking the time to listen.