



Crossing Arms: Do They Work?

Written by **Jeff Cassell**



As the former VP of risk management for Laidlaw for over 21 years, I was responsible for the safety of operating 38,000 school buses. To this day, I clearly recall one specific tragic accident that resulted in a 6-year-old boy being killed by the bus he rode. Upon exiting, he walked in front of the bus, where the driver did not see him, and was struck by the front of the bus and killed by the rear wheels. There was no crossing arm on the bus.

Two years later, I was subpoenaed to a deposition by the plaintiff's lawyer. I was asked if the bus had a crossing arm and if this tragedy could have been prevented. Obviously, the answer was yes, it may have been prevented. In fact, I believe there was more than a 90 percent chance it would have been prevented. Due to this tragedy, Laidlaw retrofitted all 38,000 school buses with crossing arms. This led to no further front of the bus danger zone student fatalities.

Let us consider the overall U.S. danger zone fatalities over the past 20 years. In the last decade, there were 51 student fatalities. In the previous decade there were 111 student fatalities, a 54 percent reduction. So, how did we achieve this? I believe that the fitting of crossing arms was one of the primary reasons for saving these young lives, and the numbers prove this statement.

In more specific terms, there were nine front-of-the-bus fatalities in the last decade. In the prior decade there were 28 front-of-the-bus student fatalities. That is a significant reduction, 68 percent in fact. More importantly, 19 children's lives were saved.

Crossing arms are mandatory on all school buses in Canada. However, only 25 states require crossing arms. In the remaining 25 states, crossing arms are optional. It is estimated that 60 percent of all the school buses in the

U.S. have crossing arms.

On Sept. 13, 2022, a 6-year-old girl in Fort Worth, Texas was killed at the front of her bus—no crossing arm. Crossing arms were fitted to all that district's buses after this collision.

On Feb. 16, 2024, in New York, a 5-year-old girl was killed at the front of her bus, and again no crossing arm.

If these buses had crossing arms, it is likely that these children would still be alive. Do crossing arms work in reducing danger zone fatalities? Absolutely, as proven by the data.

What Costs are Involved?

A crossing arm retails around \$400. If purchased in volume, this cost can be reduced. Many districts install them on all new school buses and the cost is spread over the life of the vehicle. For example, a Type C propane school bus without a crossing arm costs \$140,000. The additional crossing arm would increase the cost to \$140,400. Clearly this is a no brainer.

Installation takes between two and three hours depending upon the make and model of the bus. However, if required on new school buses, the manufacturer would install the crossing arms.

Ideally, all school buses used to transport students should have a crossing arm. At the least, they should be required on all new school buses, then, look to retrofit them on existing buses starting with the newer buses in your fleet.

What States Do Not Require Crossing Arms?

The last study of crossing arm requirements was performed by the National Association for Pupil Transportation in January 2019. At that time, crossing arms were not required in the following 25 states: Alaska,

Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, and Vermont

California has its own practice, where the driver exits the school bus and helps students cross the street, using a stop sign. This makes California an exception to needing crossing arms.

However, it does not matter if your state requires crossing arms. For the safety of the students, it is the right thing to do. Had I been doing my job better in 2004 and fitted crossing arms sooner, it is likely the 6-year-old would still be alive. I accept this responsibility, and it continues to weigh upon me.

What do some of the leaders in the industry think of using crossing arms?

Dick Fischer: "We must do everything possible to make our school buses safer. I strongly support having crossing arms on all school buses."

Robert Pudlewski: "Of all the items you can add to a school bus to make it safer, the crossing arm is by far one of the most effective. To operate school buses without a crossing arm is needlessly putting student's lives at risk. It should be mandatory in every state."

Shelly Hall: "Student Transportation of America have crossing arms fitted on every school bus, in all the states we operate and in Canada. We believe this is an essential item of safety equipment and should be included on every school bus in North America."

There are many devices on the market you can add to a school bus to improve its safety. However, none are proven to save more lives than crossing arms, and for such a low cost. Nineteen less front-of-the-bus fatalities, decade over decade, proves this to be true.

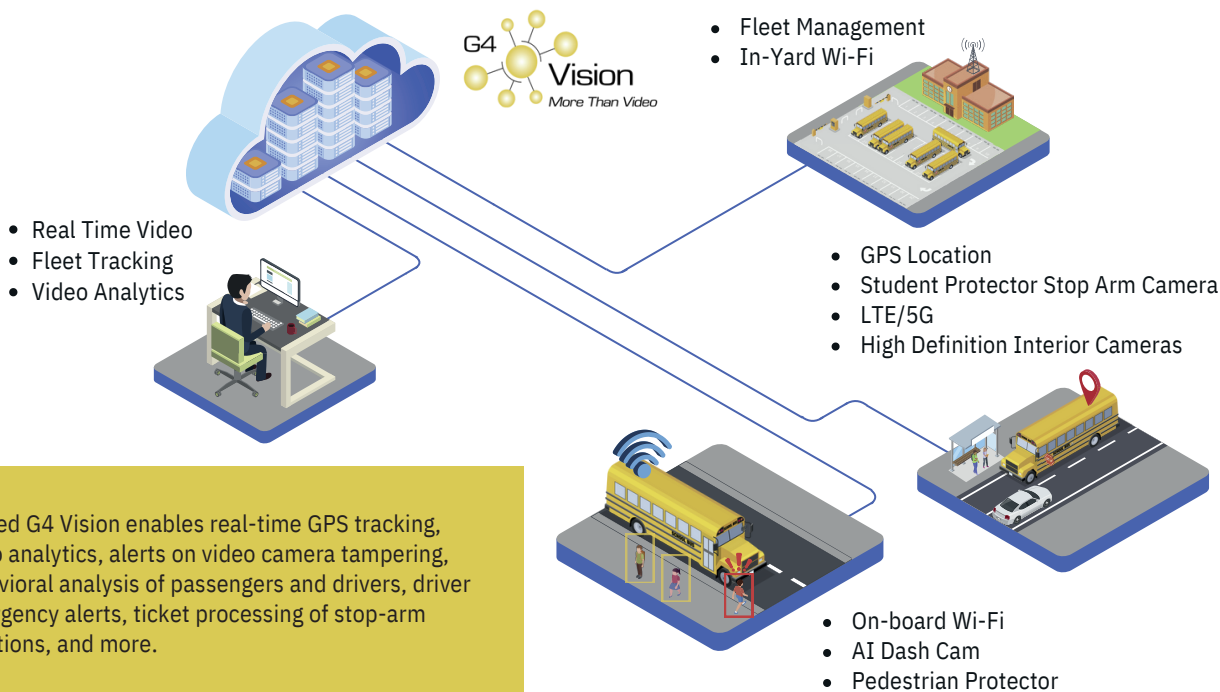
Please do not put yourself in my position, knowing you could have saved a child's life for only \$400 per bus. Fit crossing arms to your fleet now.

Please note, neither I nor my company sell crossing arms or have any financial interest in any company that does sell them. My interest is in trying to persuade as many school districts and school bus contractors as possible to add crossing arms to further reduce front-of-the school bus student fatalities. ●

Jeff Cassell is the president and founder of School Bus Safety Company. All data cited is sourced from the National School Bus Loading and Unloading Survey performed each year by the Kansas State Department of Education.

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