

Marketing Contact:
Julie Cooley
IMMI Marketing
jcooley@imminet.com

School bus safety a must

CURRENT *IN WESTFIELD*

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As students across the country head back to school, Westfield's IMMI brought together elected leaders, school officials, emergency responders and concerned parents to have an honest discussion about the behavioral and safety issues facing children on its school buses.

"Every day, school districts deal with student injuries, bullies, bad behavior and distracted drivers on their school buses," said IMMI CEO Larry Gray. "At IMMI, we're committed to child passenger safety, and we know there are no more excuses for putting our children at risk. That's why we decided to hold our SafeGuard: School Bus Safety 101 event. The solutions are out there, but there is too much misinformation getting in the way of progress."

IMMI is the worldwide leader in advanced safety restraints. During the presentation, IMMI Vice President James Johnson said the United States averages six fatalities and 17,000 injuries on school buses each year. Of the injuries, 58 percent (9,800) were non-crash injuries.

"With a lap and shoulder belt, it ensures you are in position and it reduces fatalities and injuries by 50 percent," Johnson said.

Buses without seatbelts are designed for low-speed frontal crashes, where students must be in the "compartment" and facing forward. Crashes that occur from the rear or cause roll-overs make the vehicle not as safe. IMMI's SafeGuard brand leads the industry in providing more bus seats with lap-shoulder belts for school buses than any other manufacturer in the country.

"We're proud we are protecting 700,000 students every day, but yellow school buses transport 24 million students every day. We're just beginning to scratch the surface," Gray said.

The company's flex seats provide options for three small children to use seatbelts or two older students. Johnson said it costs \$7,000 to \$10,000 to place seatbelts in 66-passenger school buses – \$10,000 for larger buses and around \$3,000 for small ones.

"The safety of our children is something all school districts care deeply about," Congresswoman Susan Brooks (R-Ind.) said. "A lot of P.T.O.'s and school boards need to have this discussion."