

Focus on bus safety

LI district hopes cameras will make cars stop

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About once a week, school bus driver Anoop Keswani said he stops his bus to let off kids, extends the stop sign arm to halt traffic, and sees a car blowing right by the bus.

The moment sends a jolt of terror through the longtime driver for the East Meadow School District. He often hits his horn to warn the children and thrusts out his hand, palm up, to tell them not to cross the street.

"Imagine your own child was out there," said Keswani, 51. The youngest children are his greatest concern. "They're not as alert as the older ones. They're still in a playful stage and learning about life."

Keswani said he is thankful that East Meadow school officials will soon start a pilot program in which cameras will be installed on the stop arms of buses, allowing them to spot motorists who illegally drive around stopped school buses.

East Meadow's 30-day pilot program, expected to occur before the end of the school year in June, will install cameras on about a dozen of the district's 60 buses, officials said. The district serves 4,000 students who take a bus.

No tickets will be issued during the test period. But the cameras will collect footage that allows district officials to review where the incidents happen and how often, said Eileen Napolitano, an East Meadow school board trustee.

Napolitano has two children who passed through district schools, so she is familiar with the fears that arise while a mother waits for her kids when the bus is late.

"Things happen in life, accidents happen," she said. "Children can get killed."

A 10-year-old boy was struck by a vehicle that passed a stopped school bus in Kings Park in September 2017, police said. The flashing



Anoop Keswani, a driver in the East Meadow School District, says about once a week a driver illegally passes his stopped school bus.

red lights and stop sign on the Kings Park School bus had been activated. The boy's injuries were serious but not life-threatening, police said.

For Napolitano, the pilot program is a "no-brainer" because the camera vendor, Bus Patrol America, is providing the cameras and monitoring free of charge.

East Meadow's school buses are provided by Guardian Bus Co. of Oceanside. Company vice president Corey Muirhead said he believes the cameras will increase student safety.

"The cameras hold people accountable," Muirhead said. "People will be more responsible and attentive."

The State Assembly overwhelmingly passed a bill this month to make these school bus camera programs, including the issuance of fines, legal across New York. The State Senate is expected to vote within weeks.

The bill provides that the local municipality would decide whether to install the stop arm cameras on school buses.

Previous versions of the bill stalled because the measure placed the responsibility of the cameras in the hands of the

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local school district. Some school districts were reluctant to assume the responsibility of ticketing and collecting fines, said David Christopher of the New York Association for Pupil Transportation, which represents school bus managers.

Christopher, whose group supports the measure, said that when a vehicle is photographed passing a stopped school bus, the vendor would help prepare a report that is sent to the local police. The police would decide whether to issue a civil fine of \$250 to the registered owner of the vehicle. No points would be assessed on the person's license, according to the bill.

The revenue would be split between the municipality,

school district and vendor, Christopher said.

Passing a stopped school bus is already illegal. The first-time fine for illegally passing a school bus is \$250 to \$400, five points on your license, and possibly 30 days in jail.

Catching motorists who break this law can be challenging because the violation must be witnessed by a police officer. When a police officer is around, people often improve their driving behavior, said Suffolk County Police Chief Stuart Cameron.

Suffolk police issued 118 tickets last year for failing to stop for a school bus, he said, and 36 so far this year.

"We consider this an extremely serious offense," Cameron said. He also worried most about the youngest students. "A lot of young children simply assume that traffic is going to stop because of the [bus'] red flashing lights. It's very dangerous."

Cameron said he could not comment on the legislation until he fully reviewed it.

Nassau County Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder said it's vital that officers always look for individuals passing a stopped school bus while its

red flashers are activated. He added that officers also follow school buses to observe firsthand these violations.

"If the State Assembly does pass this bill, it will be another tool that we will use to keep our residents safe," Ryder said.

An estimated 50,000 motor vehicles illegally pass New York State school buses every day, according to an informal survey by New York Association for Pupil Transportation. Christopher, the group's executive director, said he believes the problem is worsening as drivers become more distracted by their cellphones.

Keswani, the school bus driver, said he does all he can to make sure students are safe when crossing a road. He waits until he sees traffic stop before he lets the kids leave the bus, he said.

Keswani transports students of all ages to the district schools. He knows many by name. He said he hopes the bus camera legislation becomes law and that East Meadow adopts the program. Once drivers start getting fined, they will stop breaking the bus stop law, he said.

And, he added, kids will be safer.