

New Standards Introduced For Multi-Functional Activity Buses (MFABs)

Last January in New Brunswick, 7 students and a teacher were killed in a head-on collision while driving home in a storm from a basketball game. Although weather conditions and driver fatigue were found to have contributed to the accident, there has been much focus on the condition of the 15-person passenger van.

The safe transportation of children and youth is always of vital importance to all organizations. However, options have been limited to using private passenger vehicles, school buses or 11-plus passenger vans. Frequently, passenger vans are purchased or used by an organization, as they can be driven by nearly everyone, are able to carry more passengers or cargo than a car, and are cheaper than contracting with a bus fleet.

However, over the years, there have been numerous studies from the United States, which indicate that this type of vehicle tends to be top heavy and may be prone to rollovers. Following numerous accidents and fatalities, several U.S. states, municipalities, sports associations, church groups, and other organizations, have banned the use of these vans for the transportation of children, youth and the physically or mentally challenged.

In Canada, steps have been taken by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) to make these vehicles safer. In August, the CSA announced the publication of a new CSA D270-08 Multi-Functional Activity Buses (MFABs) Standard.

The Standard is effective as of November 1, 2008, and defines multi-functional activity buses to be a "bus for transporting:

- (a) persons with disabilities;
- (b) students to co-curricular and extra-curricular school trips, when traffic/pedestrian control devices (i.e., warning lamps and stop arm) are not required for school buses by provincial or territorial law;
- (c) persons to organizations, e.g. daycare centres, youth centres (YMCA-YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc), faith-based centres, seniors centres, and community transit organizations"

The Standard applies only to new vehicles, and is patterned after existing school bus requirements. It is broken down into several components, which address both the physical construction of the vehicle (for example brakes, tires, turning radius, emergency exits, safety equipment, etc.), and the testing of various components (for example, mirrors, heater, and roof hatch performance).

The vehicles are further classified into Types A1, A2, B, C or D depending on body construction, engine placement, service door location and vehicle weight.

Vehicle manufacturers who meet this Standard will be able to affix a label of compliance to the vehicle. The Standard does not apply to any after-market retrofits of equipment; these changes come under existing Provincial legislation.

Although the Standard is to be considered National, it is up to the individual provinces to adopt its use. At press time, British Columbia had announced it will adopt the standard, Alberta has advised that it will introduce legislation in the fall to reflect the new standard, and New Brunswick has indicated it will consider adopting the standard.

It is not possible to speculate if the New Brunswick accident could have been avoided had the CSA standard been issued and adopted. However, having a Standard for MFABs will allow organizations to once again put safety first in vehicle selection and operator training.

At the Frank Cowan Company, we would strongly encourage our clients to carefully review the provisions of CSA D270, copies of which can be purchased from the CSA website at: <http://www.shopcsa.ca>.