



School buses are equipped with flashing lights on their stop signs to remind drivers to stop while the bus is loading and unloading passengers. Stephen Brooks/News Tribune

School bus stop-arm violations investigated

By **BOB WATSON**
News Tribune

Cole County Prosecutor Bill Tackett said this morning more cases might be made against people who don't stop when school buses are stopped, if law officers are brought into the investigation more quickly.

"Here's the rub on it — it comes down to identification," Tackett said. "We would be tickled pink to file all of these, if we just had the proper identification."

At least a dozen reports have been filed this year with officials in Cole and Callaway counties, saying motorists drove past school buses that were boarding or unloading students, said John Rodemann, the Jefferson City School District's director of Transportation, Health and Safety.

Tackett said nine of those were sent to his office, but he can't file charges until there's also been an investigation by a

police officer or sheriff's deputy.

In a trial, Tackett said, a school bus driver would be challenged about his or her ability to identify the driver of the offending vehicle.

That's why a deputy sheriff's or police officer's investigation is crucial in adding evidence that could make a case to support charges, he said.

State law requires other motorists to stop when school buses are loading or unloading passengers. The law also requires the bus drivers to activate flashing red lights and a stop sign that also has flashing red lights, so motorists know the bus is stopped to load or unload passengers.

But some bus drivers, who write the reports alleging violations of the law, and some parents told the News Tribune they wonder if anything will happen to violators

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until a child gets hurt.

Pamela Scheulen said her 6 year-old son could have been killed last week, while crossing Scruggs Station Road after getting off his school bus.

The bus driver's report said the boy's older brother pulled him back, out of the oncoming car's way.

A Cole County deputy still is investigating that incident, where a teen-age driver told the bus driver he hadn't stopped because he had not seen the bus' flashing lights or stop sign.

The bus driver's report said the bus was westbound and the driver eastbound, at 4:30 p.m.

Both Tackett and Roger DeGonia, manager of the First Student bus company's Jefferson City operations, agree that a bus driver's first job is the safety of the school children.

"They're trying to watch the kids and make sure the kids get off the bus and get where they need to go without a traffic problem," DeGonia explained. "We try to have the drivers train the kids, that if they're going to cross a street in front of the bus, that they watch the driver and let the driver motion them across the street when

they're sure it's safe."

DeGonia said bus drivers are trained to call First Student's dispatchers and report the license plate number of a vehicle violating the law.

Tackett said the investigation could begin more quickly if the bus driver called the law enforcement dispatcher, instead.

The state law says officials can presume the registered owner of a vehicle was driving if "the identity of the operator is not otherwise apparent" when a vehicle fails to stop for a school bus.

But the law says that presumption is rebuttable. Tackett said that makes a law officer's investigation even more important in determining who actually was driving the vehicle.

"Certainly, we don't shy away from these things — it just comes down to a proof issue," Tackett said.

"What we strive to do here is not falsely accuse people ...

"If we have an identification that we feel strongly about, then we go forward."

Both DeGonia and Rodemann said legal trouble also can be avoided if drivers just will be more careful around stopped school buses.