

# Georgia Legislature passes school bus safety bill



Fulton County Schools bus stops on Powers Ferry Road in Sandy Springs on Wednesday, May 23, 2018. A phrase added to a 15-page bill approved late in the Georgia legislative session last year has caused panic among officials responsible for getting children to and from school safely. HYOSUB SHIN / HSHIN@AJC.COM

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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Acting with deliberate speed, Georgia lawmakers on Wednesday rushed through legislation to protect children from motorists at school bus stops.

With nearly every member of the House of Representatives voting for [Senate Bill 25](#), the legislation, which passed the Senate by a unanimous vote last week, now goes to the desk of Gov. Brian Kemp. The approval comes just a third of the way through the 2019 legislative session. Lawmakers feared that any delay could increase the risk of a child dying on the roads.

“There’s a lot of initiative to get this thing on the books,” Rep. Bill Hitchens, R-Rincon, said Tuesday as the legislation sped through the House Public Safety and Homeland Security Committee, which he chairs. “In fact, I believe ... the governor may sign this thing forthwith because he’s concerned about it.”



Kids head into James Jackson Elementary on the first day of school Monday, August 6, 2018, in Jonesboro GA. STEVE SCHAEFER / SPECIAL TO THE AJC

The legislation by [Sen. Bill Heath, R-Bremen](#), undoes what Hitchens called an "inadvertent" change to the law last year. House Bill 978 appeared to relax the requirement to stop for a boarding or unboarding school bus in the oncoming lane.

Soon after last year's legislation became law, Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr issued an unofficial opinion that said the change, which took effect July 1, meant drivers no longer must stop for a school bus in the oncoming lane if there is a painted turning lane in between.

SB 25 undoes that by requiring oncoming vehicles to stop unless there is a "grass median, unpaved area, or physical barrier." Assuming Kemp signs the bill, "it means a very dangerous loophole's been closed," said Atlanta Municipal Court Judge Gary Jackson, who handles 200 to 250 of these cases each week.

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Many police officers refer to the painted turning lanes as “suicide lanes,” and the judge, who testified as an expert during the legislative hearing process, concurs. “This is the last place that you would think someone would legalize passing a school bus,” he said.

At least one child has died crossing to a school bus since July 1, according to the Georgia Department of Education. In that incident in October, a boy in Colquitt County was struck by a vehicle passing a bus in an oncoming lane, the agency said.

Jackson had asked lawmakers to consider an amendment to the legislation that would have future and past offenders facing the same penalty, but ultimately concluded it wasn’t worth the delay. Under this new bill, Jackson said, two people in court on the same day convicted of illegally passing a bus would face different penalties if one of the incidents occurred before July 1, 2018, and the other after. Prior to that date, the penalty was as high as \$1,000, but as of July 1 it was capped at \$250.

The legislation approved Wednesday didn’t raise the penalty cap or reduce it for earlier offenders.