

# Lawmakers rushing to protect children at risk near school buses



Camera lenses on a Gwinnett County school bus are triggered into recording passing drivers when the bus is stopped.

By [Ty Tagami](#)

Feb 12, 2019

Legislation to protect children at school bus stops is racing through the Georgia General Assembly, as members fear each day of delay could cost a child's life.

It's so urgent that lawmakers from both the House and Senate drew up essentially the same bill, and Rep. Bill Hitchens, R-Rincon, chairman of the House Public Safety and Homeland Security Committee, gave the first hearing to the Senate version because it is farther along.

It would have taken more time to get the House bill through the process because the Senate already approved Senate Bill 25, [by a unanimous vote last week](#). The bill seeks to reverse a law passed last year that lets drivers pass by stopped school buses in certain situations.

It's expected to get a vote on the House floor soon, before a trip to the desk of Gov. Brian Kemp.

“There’s a lot of initiative to get this thing on the books. In fact, I believe with the language here the governor may sign this thing forthwith because he’s concerned about it. I can tell you personally about that,” Hitchens said before his committee approved the bill Tuesday.

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 school bus in the oncoming lane that is boarding or releasing students.](#) Soon after the legislation became law, Georgia Attorney General issued [an unofficial opinion](#) that said the change means drivers no longer need to stop for a school bus in the oncoming lane if there's a painted turning lane in between.

RELATED | [Why a small change in law could create danger for students](#)

SB 25 requires oncoming vehicles to stop unless there’s a “grass median, unpaved area, or physical barrier” between their lane and the one with the bus.

The vote of approval by the House committee came despite concerns raised by Atlanta Municipal Court Judge Gary Jackson. He said it’s unfair that drivers cited prior to July 1, when the change in the law took effect, could have to pay a much higher penalty. The revised law reduced the maximum penalty to \$250, and SB 25 doesn’t address that. The cost used to be as high as \$1,000, so two people in court on the same day, one for an offense on June 30 and the other on July 2, could be ordered to pay different amounts.

The judge, who gets about 50 of these cases a day, was also concerned about the language specifying when oncoming drivers must stop, saying it left too much to interpretation. He noted the word “median” is not defined by law.

But he said those concerns weren’t worth the delay of sending the bill through the amendment process. “I’d rather save the lives,” he said.

Hitchens agreed, saying he’s noticed drivers hesitating when they encounter school buses on the other side of a turn lane. “People don’t know whether they should stop or not, you see them ease up there and then move forward,” he said.

The former state patrolman said he investigated cases of children killed near a stopped school bus.

“You try and go deal with parents who’ve lost a 5- or 6-year-old child because somebody’s run through there in a hurry to get to work or to the mall or something like that,” Hitchens said. “It’s horrific.”