

By ROBERT PIERCE

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In 2011, Oklahoma lawmakers passed a regulation by which motorists could lose their driver's license for failing to stop for a school bus with its red lights flashing while loading or unloading children.

This is in addition to existing laws which call for a \$249 fine and four points on the driver's traffic record.

What is now known as Aaron's Law seems to have had little effect for one area school district, though. Turpin school board vice president Tara Kirkhart said at the state line of Kansas and Oklahoma on U.S. Highway 83, motorists have continuously ignored stopped buses on a curve there.

"Several phone calls have been made to the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, and nothing has been done," she said.

Ashley Lehnert, who has driven bus for the Turpin school district for three years, began driving the route by the state line just this year, and she said she has now seen first hand how drivers continuously pass her stopped bus.

"Our kids exit on the right side of the bus," she said. "My stop sign is on the left side, and

vehicles drive right there in that lane, never slowing or stopping.”

Lehnert said morning routes normally average about five to seven cases of cars passing a stopped bus at the curve, while afternoons will feature about 10.

The bus driver has also called the OHP, and she was informed that the law agency would get somebody to patrol the area, but as of now, nothing has been done.

“We haven’t seen anybody as of yet,” she said. “I’ve called the sheriff’s office. They said it was a scheduling issue, and they said they would see what they could do. We haven’t seen anybody from their office either. What scares me is that when they do have to come, it will be because somebody’s been hit – when it’s too late.”

Lehnert said she believes most of the cases of people passing her bus are due to driver unawareness.

“It’s four lanes, and they’re supposed to stop all the way across,” she said. “Anybody should know if they’re coming up behind a bus, they should have to stop. Even the cars going the other way, they don’t stop. To me, they don’t know the law that they’re going to have to stop that way.”

Lehnert said having a four-lane highway on her route makes it more simple for drivers to pass a stopped bus.

“It’s easier for them to not follow the law as far as what they need to do for the bus stop,” she said.

Lehnert said the new state laws in Oklahoma have done little to solve the problem.

“It doesn’t slow them down at all,” she said. “Several parents have also contacted the sheriff and Oklahoma Highway Patrol to see about getting somebody out there.”

Lehnert said parents of the children on her bus will stop, and this helps alleviate the issue somewhat.

“If they are the ones coming to the state line, they will stop,” she said. “That helps everybody else to stop and to know that they need to. If it’s not somebody that knows the law, then nobody stops.”

Lehnert’s is just one of three buses that run the state line route for Turpin’s school district, and with a total of about 180 kids on those buses, she said traffic stopping for a bus is truly a concern for the safety of children.

“People driving by at 65, 75 miles an hour never acting like they’ve seen a bus with big red flashing lights or stop sign or the signs that say ‘School Bus Stop Ahead,’” she said. “It’s a concern.”

Kirkhart agreed, saying the safety of the district’s children should be the number one priority.

“It scares me that other drivers are putting our children at risk every day,” she said. “It is a dangerous situation that happens, and something needs to be done to help insure the safety of our children.”