

Driver Safety

## The Other Driver

News reports of several serious school bus and student vehicle accidents point out that “other drivers” were the cause of the accident. In one such case, the vehicles were driven off the road by a tractor trailer truck. That might have you thinking that there isn’t much you can do; it’s the other guy’s fault. While not all accidents caused by others can be eliminated, a driver practicing defensive driving techniques can help minimize accidents caused by “other drivers.” So what’s involved in defensive driving?

Driving defensively, like defense in any sport, involves things you do to react to or anticipate the actions of others, in this case other drivers. These actions can minimize an accident caused by another’s unsafe driving. I am certain you have seen or heard of these techniques and activities before. While they may not be new, reviewing them in light of accidents caused by the other driver may prove enlightening.

You may remember from physics class long ago that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Maintaining a “buffer zone” of safety around your vehicle (front, sides and rear) is a primary defensive driving technique. Doing this requires you as the driver to be aware at all times of what is around your vehicle. You can easily see what’s ahead and need to make sure you know what’s far ahead as well as close. Maintaining a proper following distance of at least four seconds will help maintain the cushion of safety at the front of the vehicle.

Your mirrors will only give you a partial view of what’s to the side and rear of your vehicle. To assist with knowing what’s in blind spots, drivers should scan their mirrors every three to five seconds and lean in their seats to help extend the view the mirrors provide. Minimize backing as much as possible and if you do have to back, always check first to see what’s behind. Get assistance if possible (make sure you know at all times where the assistant is) and



keep your window down and distractions to a minimum so you can “hear” what’s going on as you back up. Back slowly!

Speed plays an important factor in controlling any vehicle. Slowing down when road, weather, traffic, or lighting conditions change will help maintain this control. If someone is tailgating you, you need to increase your following distance from the vehicle in front of you to allow for any emergency stop you may have to make.

Avoid distractions caused by other drivers. Focus on your own driving by continually thinking and reviewing to yourself the conditions you notice or anticipate (e.g., a parked but running vehicle ahead on the side of the road) and what you can do or will do should conditions change (e.g., driver exits vehicle, driver pulls out in front of you, etc.). In this example, you could cover the brake to minimize reaction time, slow down, and look for space to move your vehicle to the left in case the driver pulls out. Other distractions like using a cell phone or listening to the radio should be avoided. Even passive “hands free” cell phone use is being linked to causing accidents.

The information on accidents caused by others can and should be used to prevent further accidents. This is the positive aspect of accident investigation. Your own accident history can also be a source of “teachable events.”