Extended stop arms, hand signals make student travel safer

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ASHEBORO — Twenty-five Randolph County School System (RCSS) buses are now equipped with extended stop arms. The stop arms were installed, and drivers trained, last spring thanks to a grant from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

Bus Safety Solutions, a Clemmons-based company, invented and patented the Extended Stop Arm after several children were killed getting on and off the school bus in Forsyth County. The Extended Stop Arm is an aluminum frame that attaches to the original stop arm and has a stop sign on the end with LED lights. It extends 6.5 feet into the adjacent lane.

This week, Oct. 16-20, is National Bus Safety Week. The latest safety devices used to keep area students safe as they travel to and from school highlight well this year's theme, “Stop on Red.” It’s a message that bears repeating to ensure the safety of students.

Still, despite the added safety afforded by the larger visual warning sign indicating a bus is making a stop and children are present, RCSS Transportation Director Wendy Anderson said that on three occasions since school reconvened in August, the stop signs on the extended arms have been hit by passing motorists.

Anderson said people typically speed up when they see the amber lights flash so they can get by the bus before it stops — an extremely unsafe move.

“You don’t know where those children are, especially

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in the morning when it’s dark,” Anderson said. “So what we ask is that when you see a bus with the amber lights on, slow down and start looking for children.”

Once the amber lights are turned on, there is plenty of time for surrounding traffic to slow down and use caution. Anderson said that with ideal weather and road conditions, a bus travels more than 300 feet — or roughly the length of a football field — before coming to a complete stop.

According to DPI, RCSIS transported more than 7,800 students each day during the 2015-16 school year. Asheboro City Schools transported more than 1,800. In addition, Uwharrie Charter Academy runs five routes, transporting more than 400 students. Collectively, there are more than 10,000 students riding school buses daily in Randolph County.

DPI Transportation Section’s "One Day School Bus Stoparm Violation Counts” report dated June 29, 2016, reveals the one-day count of illegal passes had held steady at over 3,000 in each single day count since 2011.

“School buses are the safest way to get to school,” NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) says that students are about 70 times more likely to get to school safely when taking a school bus instead of traveling by car,” DPI Transportation Services Section Chief Kevin Harrison said. “It is incumbent on all motorists to stop;

but it is also essential in this era of distractions that the bus driver communicate with the students using the North Carolina Crossing Signal and that the students focus all their attention on the roadway and getting safely on or off the bus.”

As an additional safety precaution, DPI implemented the use of parking brakes at bus stops as well as hand signaling by drivers, effective Jan. 1. Students must now wait for the thumbs-up signal before approaching the open door of the bus or crossing in front of the bus at the end of the school day.

Buses are also equipped with video cameras both inside the bus and on stop arms, as well as GPS tracking systems, which provide real-time data and alerts regarding the location and condition of each bus.

Before hitting the road, every driver must conduct a pre-trip inspection. After the route, a safety check, in which the bus driver has to walk to the back of the bus and make sure all children have disembarked, and a post-trip inspection are completed.

Every bus is also put through a vigorous 30-day maintenance inspection. Periodic maintenance is also completed at intervals based on mileage.

“If I had a dollar for every time I heard the phrase, ‘Is it safe?’ That’s the number one phrase around here,” Anderson said. “Whether it’s the mechanics, the routing specialists or whomever it might be — that’s the number one thing we ask, because we’re not hauling boxes. We’re hauling children.”