

N.B. curbs van use after deadly crash

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New Brunswick has announced a temporary curb on the use of 15-passenger vans to transport students to and from school.

The curb, which extends to the end of the school year, follows a week of criticism over the safety of the extra-long vans after seven Bathurst, N.B., high school basketball players and one teacher were killed in a weekend collision with a tractor-trailer. Only one adult and one child survived the crash.

"To date there is no evidence that the type of vehicle used played any

role in the tragic motor vehicle accident involving the students and adults from Bathurst," Education Minister Kelly Lamrock said in a news release yesterday.

"However, a number of questions have been raised this week in the aftermath of the accident that has created an air of uncertainty about 15-passenger vans. Some of the questions are based on actions of other jurisdictions, while some may be outright guesses."

The curb would apply to travel to and from school. However, the provincial government said it is up to individual schools and districts to decide whether they also want to ban the vans from being used for extra-curricular activities.

"Given the sensitivity surrounding the accident in Bathurst, it is unimaginable that any parent, teacher, student council leader, coach, principal or administrator would be comfortable using this vehicle, in the current climate of doubt around the use of 15-passenger vans," Mr. Lamrock said.

"I believe that it is in the best interest of everybody who has to make decisions for safe student travel to be spared having to wrestle with this option until all the facts are known."

Mr. Lamrock added that an inter-departmental group, including the departments of education, public safety, transportation and the attorney-general, will be set up to review the safety record of the vans and suggest ways to minimize the risks to students and other passengers.

With the Washington-based Safety Forum calling them a "death trap on wheels," the long vans have been widely banned in the United States.

Over the past week, education ministries across Canada have announced reviews of the vehicles.

Saskatchewan Education Minister Ken Krawetz said he would like an assessment of current use of the vans but added that the decision to not use them any longer rests with school boards.

In B.C., one school district in Kelowna has banned the vans and another in Nanaimo is taking a "hard look" at their safety. Edmonton school officials are also reviewing their use.

Nova Scotia, however, is so far the only province that prohibits their use in transporting students at all times. The cubed vans, which were originally designed to transport cargo, are popular for passenger use because they do not require a driver with a special licence.

Some reports have suggested that the vans — unlike school buses — have minimal side-impact protection and that the roof can cave in during a rollover.

American government research shows that these extra-long vans have a rollover rate of as much as six times higher than a standard vehicle.

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