

Office of the Governor

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NEWS RELEASE

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Governor Conducts School Bus Safety Inspection At Depot In Neshanic

Gov. Christie Whitman demonstrated her commitment to school bus safety today when she inspected school buses with a newly-created team of Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) personnel. The DMV team last month began traveling to garages and maintenance yards across New Jersey where school buses are based and serviced as part of a new program to ensure school vehicle safety.

"Students have had the summer off, but we've been back to school during July and August to make sure the start of classes is safe and uneventful," the Governor said. "The school districts and bus companies that transport 640,000 school children each weekday share the state's commitment to ensuring safe travel to and from the classroom. Together we're working to improve the inspection process for school buses."

The inspections were conducted at Frank Valcheck Inc., a bus operator based in Neshanic, Somerset County. Under the new DMV program, school bus operators schedule inspections at their facilities, instead of driving buses to DMV inspection stations twice each year. Since the start of the in-terminal inspections on July 6, more than 14,000 school buses were inspected.

New Jersey revised the inspection process for its 16,000 school buses following a recommendation from the School Bus Safety Task Force last year. Gov. Whitman convened the task force after a series of surprise school bus inspections conducted by DMV and New Jersey State Police personnel found an unacceptably high failure rate for safety-related defects.

The new in-terminal bus inspection program improves upon the previous inspection program by providing insight into the carrier's overall operation and commitment to maintenance, allowing for interaction with the carrier's mechanics and operational personnel to facilitate immediate vehicle repairs, allowing for an audit of the carrier's maintenance records, including daily defect slips, vehicle history records and driver history and credential records, and insuring the timely inspection of all school buses.

"We're providing greater convenience to the school bus operators by coming to their garages by appointment," said Transportation Commissioner John J. Haley, Jr. "If a school bus fails inspection, the operator has an opportunity to repair it as our personnel move on to inspect the other buses at the garage. A bus can be repaired and reinspected the same day."

"The in-terminal school bus inspection program is an example of how government is working smarter," Haley said. "The bus companies no longer need to pay their drivers to bring buses to an inspection station, waiting times have been eliminated, and we've increased the ability to reduce vehicle down time by offering same day reinspection of repaired buses. The efficiencies of the new school bus inspection process are obvious."

DMV Director C. Richard Kamin noted that removing school buses from inspection stations has benefited all motorists.

"Removing 16,000 buses from the inspection lanes is allowing us to better process passenger vehicle inspections," Kamin said. "School bus inspections take longer to perform and at times result in longer waiting times for other motorists in line for inspection."

The school bus inspections include an examination of all mechanical components of the vehicle, including brakes, steering, suspension, engines and fuel systems. A school bus which is found to have a safety-related defect is placed out of service, meaning it cannot be used to transport passengers until it is repaired and inspected. If minor, non-safety defects are found, the bus is allowed to remain in

service and the operator has 30 days in which to make the repairs and receive reinspection.

Approximately 47 percent of the school buses undergoing initial inspection have been placed out of service because of safety-related defects since the start of the in-terminal program. These buses have been reinspected following repairs to correct the defects.

State Attorney General Peter Verniero, chairman of the School Bus Safety Task Force, noted that the New Jersey State Police and DMV inspectors will continue to perform unannounced school bus inspections whenever there is a question about the mechanical soundness of an operator's buses. The task force met on August 31 and will continue its mission to oversee school bus safety.

"The state's commitment to school bus safety is one of continuous vigilance," Veniero said. "We will stay proactive in protecting the state's school children."