

It is hard to believe but, beginning this week, nearly two million Ohio children will go back to school. The First day of class at Vermilion Schools is on August 26, 2010 and Firelands Schools begin on August 31, 2010. Half of the children will ride the bus while the remainder will walk, ride bikes, drive, or be given rides. All drivers should know the laws pertaining to school busses and school zones and drive safely in school zones and around busses.

All drivers must stop for flashing red lights on school busses, regardless of which direction they are going. Once the flashing lights are turned off and the bus begins moving the driver may then pass, if he can do so safely. When a bus has alternating flashing yellow lights on it is preparing to stop. Be ready to stop and watch for children in the roadway.

There are a number of traffic laws specifically pertaining to schools. Ohio Revised Code Section 4511.21(B)(c) defines a school zone as “that portion of a street or highway passing a school fronting upon the street or highway that is encompassed by projecting the school property lines to the fronting street or highway, and also includes that portion of a state highway”.

The speed limit in school zones in the State of Ohio is 20 mph during school recess and during the opening and closing hours of schools. Signs designating the start of the school zone are required for the speed limit to be enforceable. Drivers must be alert at all times for children and pedestrians who may step into the roadway. Crosswalks can be easily missed if you are not paying close attention. Use caution while in a school zone and look ahead to make sure pedestrians are not crossing. With the increase of cell phone use it is wise not to use the phone while in a school zone Texting while operating a motor vehicle is prohibited in the City of Vermilion.

Under Ohio law the penalty for speeding in a school zone is automatically doubled. A misdemeanor speeding offense carries a maximum possible penalty of \$150.00 plus court costs. Speeding violations in Ohio also result in points being added to a driver’s license. Points remain on your license for two years. A driver that has 12 points in a two-year period will have his license automatically suspended by the Bureau of Motor Vehicles for six months.

Today fewer than 15 percent of all school trips are made by walking or bicycling. This decline in walking and bicycling has had an adverse effect on pedestrian and bicycle safety, as it has resulted in that many more cases in the vicinity of schools. Safety issues are a big concern for parents, who cite traffic danger as a reason why their children do not bike or walk to school.

ODOT has awarded \$11 million in federal transportation funds to Safe Routes to School projects throughout Ohio. Projects are aimed at keeping children from walking in the streets or along train tracks and increasing the number of police officers monitoring school zones. Vermilion Township is working on a project to build sidewalks on State Route 60 by the schools. The State of Ohio can provide information to promote the use of non-motorized transportation, including pedestrian and bicycles. Visit the Ohio Department of Transportation website at www.dot.state.oh.us . You may view The Vermilion Local School District “Sail Safely to School Travel Plan at: <http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/TransSysDev/ProgramMgt/Projects/SafeRoutes/STP%20Examples/VermilionSTP.pdf>

School zones can be dangerous. Between 2006 and 2009, Ohio’s school zones were the location for more than 1,000 accidents. In 2008, one person was killed and 121 people were injured. In 2009, ODOT awarded \$3.7 million in federal transportation funds to 13 local communities to build multiuse paths, bike racks and sidewalks near schools, as well as improving lighting and signage near school zones.

Drivers must be aware of the presence of school buses and the fact that they make frequent stops to pick up and discharge children. The law requires all motorists, including emergency vehicles to stop for school buses. When a school bus approaches a railroad crossing the bus driver must perform many functions. They include requesting silence from the students, coming to a complete stop and making sure the crossing is clear before proceeding across it.

The approximate stopping distance at 55 mph for a school bus is 230 feet. Ohio has not had a fatality of a passenger on a school bus since 1966. When compared to other modes of transportation in this state, the school bus is more than 18 times safer. Every year, we have a number of citations for motorists who ignored the flashing red lights on a school bus. Young children do not always pay attention when they are crossing the road to be picked up or discharged from a school bus. Motorists must pay attention. It may be frustrating following a school bus that makes frequent stops but safety must be everyone's first priority.

Drivers should also be aware of pedestrians. Keep an eye on children gathered at bus stops. Watch for children who might dart across the street to catch a bus or a ride. Watch out for kids walking along the side of a road, especially if there are no sidewalks. Unfortunately, there are a number of streets in the vicinity of our schools without sidewalks. Make eye contact with pedestrians before turning in front of them.

Bicyclists ride in the same direction as traffic, so drivers should stay alert and be aware of cyclists on the side of the road. Pass with care and maintain a three-foot clearance when passing a bicycle. Traffic laws, especially at traffic signals and intersections, apply to both drivers and bicyclists. Motorists and bicyclist should share the road equally.

With the recent approval of the reinvention plan for the Vermilion Local Schools high school bussing was reinstated. This was an issue that impacted both students and parents. Without adding new busses the board has adjusted the starting and ending hours of the three schools.

The 2010-2011 school schedule is as follows: Vermilion High School starts at 7:40am and ends 2:30pm, Sailorway Middle School starts at 7:30am and ends 2:20pm and Vermilion Elementary starts at 8:50am and ends at 3:30pm. With the recent change in start times for Vermilion Elementary parents will have ability to drop the K-3 children off at Vermilion Elementary one hour before start of school for a period of 60 days. More information and bus schedules can be obtained at www.vermilionschools.org or by calling 440 204-1700.

The 2010-2011 school schedule for Firelands School District is as follows: Firelands Elementary School starts at 8:40am and ends at 3:25pm, South Amherst Middle School starts at 7:35am and ends at 2:30pm and Firelands High School starts at 7:30am and ends at 2:30pm. More information and bus schedules can be obtained at www.firelandsschools.org or by calling 440 965-5821.

We all need to work together to keep our school children safe.