

Full Stop

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School buses are pretty hard to miss.

They're big, ugly and yellow. They're also noisy and fully of even noisier kids. And when they are either taking on, or dropping off, school children, they have big red lights flashing and an extended stop arm.

Drivers who don't see school buses simply don't want to see them. They don't stop and exercise adequate caution because they are in a hurry, or they can't be bothered, or they simply aren't paying attention.

These people should not be tolerated.

School buses carry our most precious loved ones, our children. On today's city streets and rural roads, traffic is so heavy and moves so fast that the laws requiring all vehicles to stop for school buses are more necessary than ever. Yet motorists continue to speed by school buses, both as they slow down and when they are stopped.

Society isn't ready to use on-site firing squads on drivers who pass school buses, of course - although a few roadside executions might be one way to get the attention of the self-absorbed drivers who are too focused on getting where they must get to stop and keep our children safe.

Legislation before the General Assembly this week stops well short of summary execution, but it will lead to better compliance with the school-bus safety laws. A bill sponsored by Rep. Dale Folwell of Forsyth County has already passed the House and is before a Senate committee. It would significantly increase the penalties for those convicted of passing a stopped school bus.

Motorists may not pay attention to the school-bus law because the state doesn't do a great job of enforcing it, prosecuting it or of punishing those few people who are convicted of violating it. Though the N.C. Department of Public Instruction estimates that there are 440,000 violations of the law each year, there were only 1,139 convictions in 2005.

If Folwell's bill passes, courts will no longer be able to issue prayers for judgment continued - "PJC's" - for those charged with passing a school bus. That will mean more prosecutions. Those convicted could get up to 45 days of community service. And, if anyone is injured because of the illegal passing, the driver could face a felony prosecution with the possibility of a four-month jail sentence. That's the kind of punishment that will get motorists' attention.

This is a good bill, one that will force the system to come down harder on those who endanger children with their reckless lack of interest in state law and human lives. It is our best hope that the law won't get much use.

But it probably will, and when employed it should certainly get the attention of all motorists and eventually reduce the passing of stopped school buses.

The legislature, which is near the end of its 2006 session, should not adjourn until it passes Folwell's bill.