



PROBLEM SOLVED.

### **Fatal Crash Investigation Summary**

On Friday, February 6, 2009, 10-year-old student Christopher Beltz was struck and killed by a Washington Township school district bus in the parking lot of Spring Mill Elementary School. Immediately after the accident, a number of agencies investigated the circumstances surrounding the accident. Phenix Investigations, Inc., was engaged by the Washington Township School District.

Phenix Investigations, Inc., was requested to collect all available evidence and testimony surrounding the fatal accident and to also assess the district's overall issues with transportation, security, employment, and school management, which may have contributed to the death of Christopher Beltz. This investigation included dozens of interviews, analysis of GPS data from a number of district buses, an examination of district transportation policies and procedures, inspection of driving and employment records, communicating with a number of other agencies, and other means.

Based on the totality of information collected, investigators concluded that several factors directly contributed to the fatal accident on February 6. While these factors all combined to contribute to the accident, investigators determined that some factors bear greater weight than others in the cause of the accident.

Phenix Investigations, Inc., determined the primary factors that led to the accident on February 6 were the actions taken by Washington Township bus driver Ingeborg Willis. Willis dropped off Beltz in the staff parking lot at Spring Mill Elementary School on the morning Beltz was struck. Investigators determined that Willis regularly dropped Beltz off in the staff parking, which is an unauthorized drop-off location. If Willis had dropped Beltz off at the curbside in the bus lane at Spring Mill Elementary School, investigators determined that Beltz would not have been struck by Sally Fontaine's bus as she was parked in the bus lane.

During the course of the investigation, investigators also determined that Willis received a moving violation while driving a Washington Township bus, was involved with a school district lawsuit partly due to her actions while driving a bus, and investigators also determined that Willis falsified her employment applications with the school district and

that she provided conflicting testimony in a number of different interviews surrounding the accident.

Investigators also determined a number of secondary factors that played a role in the accident of February 6. Investigators determined that these factors all collectively contributed to the accident in varying degrees.

The transportation and traffic flow procedures in place at Spring Mill Elementary School at the time of the accident were found to be inadequate. Investigators determined that the Spring Mill principal and assistant principal routinely supervised the arrival and departure transportation procedures for the Spring Mill students before and after school. The administrators did not supervise the arrival and departure of the shuttle buses. Both administrators told investigators that they assumed the drivers and the teachers who received the students were using common sense in their procedures.

Due to the lack of oversight, the bus drivers and the special needs staff at Spring Mill developed an ad hoc procedure to drop the students off at a location not originally cleared through the principal, assistant principal, or the transportation department. Investigators also observed that elementary school students were outside of the building without adult supervision on numerous occasions.

The physical design of the Spring Mill parking lot, bus lanes, and other factors also influenced the ad hoc changes made by the bus drivers. The bus lane on the north wide of the building is narrow and several drivers often parked in the staff parking lot so that they would be able to leave immediately after dropping off their student instead of waiting for other buses to vacate the bus lane.

As a result of the investigation, Phenix Investigations, Inc., recommended a number of changes to help the district improve safety, security, communications, and accountability within the school district. Some of these recommendations include:

- Evaluate and publish annually a transportation map and plan for each MSDWT school
- Conduct on-site training for all bus drivers to include specific instruction on the proper procedures at each school the driver serves and clarification that no routes can be changed without the approval of the District's Director of Transportation.
- Consistent training should be conducted for all District teachers, staff, drivers and paraprofessionals to ensure that all employees are aware of safety procedures and security issues.
- Revamp all employee policies to ensure that only qualified applicants with clean driving and employment records are hired by the district.
- Improve employee discipline procedures to ensure that all employees are held accountable for their actions.