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The National Transportation Safety Board yesterday joined the investigation of a school bus crash at Pennsbury High School that hurt 17 students Friday, one critically.

"They're going to be there for three days, and they're going to be going over that thing with a fine-tooth comb," Elliott Alexander, spokesman for the Pennsbury School District, said yesterday. The independent federal agency dispatched three investigators, he said.

The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania continued last night to list Ashley Zauflik, 17, in critical condition. Hospital spokesman Rick Cushman could release no further details.

Zauflik was injured when the bus hopped a curb, rumbled more than a quarter-mile across the sprawling campus in lower Bucks County, and crashed into a brick abutment. No other students were reported seriously injured.

The bus, initially impounded by Falls Township police, was returned to the district garage. There, the NTSB investigators worked alongside police and district mechanics yesterday to uncover clues to the accident.

The NTSB has a particular interest in school bus safety, the agency's Paul Schlamm said yesterday. "We have a number of investigations working in that area," he said.

In addition to examining the workings of the bus, the investigators will consider the human factor, most likely interviewing the driver and witnesses, Schlamm said. Witnesses said Friday that the brake pedal may have malfunctioned, preventing the driver from safely stopping Bus 42.

School officials said there was no indication that the unidentified driver, a seven-year employee, had been impaired by drugs or alcohol.

About 3,500 students attend Fairless Hills' Pennsbury High, which comprises two buildings. Buses shuttle them between the east and west buildings, along a two-lane road that bisects the campus.

About 2:20 p.m. Friday, Bus 42 had just picked up students at the east building and was leaving to get more at the other site when it jumped the curb. About 14 teens were hurt when the bus rolled onto a sidewalk full of students outside the east building.

The vehicle then continued at a moderate speed along the campus road as the driver spoke frantically into his walkie-talkie, witnesses said. The bus finally slammed into the abutment, near the west building, injuring three more students.

According to various reports from the scene, the driver tried to avoid striking students as he attempted to regain control of the bus.

Bus 42 belongs to the district fleet of more than 120 buses, spokesman Alexander said.

Counseling Offered

Counselors will be at Pennsbury High School's east and west guidance offices for students, parents and staff from 9 a.m. to noon tomorrow, throughout Tuesday, and as needed for the rest of the school week. Counseling is also offered by Lenape Valley Crisis Center, 215-785-9765, and the Penndel Mental Health Center, 215-752-1541.