

DATE: December 12, 2023

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Student Transportation Update

ORIGINATOR: Cliff Richard, Chief Infrastructure and Technology Officer

RESOURCE STAFF: Alison Cheesbrough, Geoff Holmes, Haydn Sanchez Avery, Christopher Wright

ISSUE

Over the past few years, Administration has been providing the Board of Trustees with a fall update regarding student transportation. The Student Transportation unit reports on various issues impacting transportation services such as the recent bus driver shortages, industry challenges, ridership changes, and initiatives to improve services for Division families. Administration is currently providing an update on the improvements experienced this school year, continuing issues and initiatives to improve service delivery.

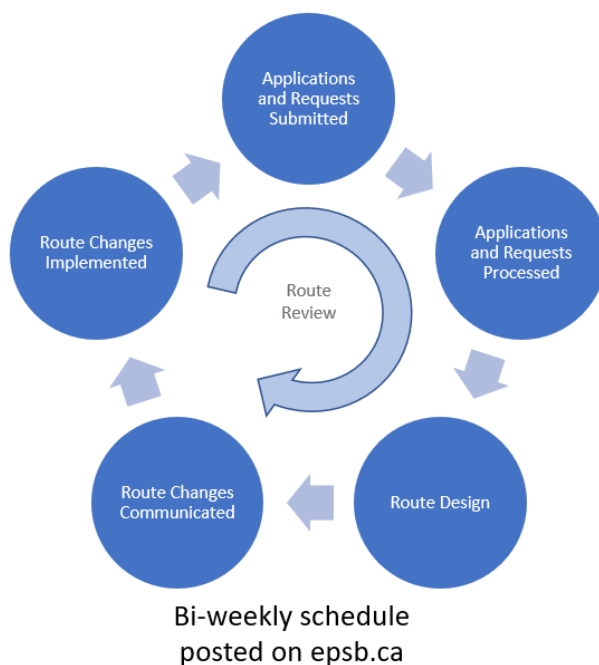
BACKGROUND

Edmonton Public Schools provides daily transportation service to nearly 16,000 students on yellow buses. Student Transportation provides oversight, guidance and support to carriers, parents and schools on issues related to Division student transportation services.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Student Transportation has observed continued increases in yellow bus ridership. In 2022–2023, ridership increased by approximately 2,500 riders. This represented an increase of 21 per cent from peak ridership the previous year and indicates that yellow bus ridership reached pre-pandemic levels. In comparison to the increase of 4.2 per cent in overall Division enrolment, the growth in demand for transportation service leading up to September 2022 outpaced enrolment growth by nearly 5:1.

Student Transportation currently designs and manages approximately 775 yellow bus routes. To effectively keep Division families informed of route changes in a predictable manner as adjustments are made in response to growth, Student Transportation has a two week cycle for implementing route changes. The schedule is published on epsb.ca and is communicated to new riders when applying for service. Parents of current riders are notified if there are changes to their route through SchoolZone at least three days in advance. Figure 1, next page, summarizes Student Transportation’s route change cycle.

Figure 1: Simplified Student Transportation route change cycle



Student Transportation has been facing an ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year. Administration has reported regularly on the shortage and initiatives to mitigate its impact on Division families, and improvements in carrier staffing levels were observed throughout the last half of the 2022–2023 school year. In April 2023, less than one per cent of routes were without a permanent driver, and carriers were able to provide substitute drivers who could cover those routes. This is a decrease from three per cent in September 2022 and has resulted in a decreased burden on students, parents and school staff. As driver staffing levels stabilized, Student Transportation was able to add approximately 20 yellow bus routes to the system between January and June 2023 to target long rides and overcrowding.

In Spring 2023, the provincial government announced a number of changes to transportation eligibility which must be implemented no later than September 1, 2024. Under these changes, students attending their designated school may be eligible for yellow bus transportation service if they are in Grades K–6 and reside at least one kilometre away, or are in Grades 7–12 and reside at least two kilometres away and Edmonton Transit Service is not available. As a result of the increased market capacity for yellow bus routes that was available at the end of the 2022–2023 school year, the Division was able to fully implement these changes in September 2023.

CURRENT SITUATION

As of September 18, 2023, the Division had approximately 15,600 yellow bus riders. This was an increase of approximately 16 per cent (2,100 riders) since the end of August. The previous high in ridership was approximately 14,500 observed in the 2019–2020 school year. As available school space is increasingly distant from where students reside, annual growth in yellow bus ridership continues to outpace overall Division enrolment growth. A summary of yellow bus ridership growth since August 2022 is contained in Table 1.

Table 1: Growth in yellow bus ridership, 2023 compared to 2022

| | | Startup Increase (August to September) | | | Annual Increase (September to September) | |
|------|-----------|---|-----------|------------|---|------------|
| Year | Month | Total Riders | Ridership | Percentage | Ridership | Percentage |
| 2022 | August | 11,900 | 2,500 | 21% | 1,400 | 10% |
| | September | 14,200 | | | | |
| 2023 | August | 13,500 | 2,100 | 16% | | |
| | September | 15,600 | | | | |

To accommodate growth in ridership, approximately 25 bus routes have been added to the system since the end of June 2023. In response to the changes in provincial eligibility requirements, approximately 400 newly eligible students have been added to yellow bus routes. This number is expected to increase to approximately 600 riders by June 2024. Of the bus routes added since the end of June, seven were targeted to serve the additional demand from eligibility changes.

Although the system has grown over the past year, Student Transportation experienced fewer delays on an increased number of routes in the early part of the current school year. Yellow bus carriers have indicated that driver staffing levels have improved in comparison to September 2022 and year-over-year route delays in the first part of September 2023 decreased by approximately 50 per cent.

Despite the improvement in overall driver staffing levels this year, carriers have indicated that a key cause of late routes in September 2023 was driver illness and staff turn-over. As carriers continue to be challenged to provide sufficient levels of on-time coverage for emergent absences, many school communities and families continue to experience localized instances of unpredictable coverage and last minute communication regarding delays. As of November 2023, carriers in the Edmonton market are indicating they will not have capacity for additional routes that would improve loads and ride times until they are better staffed for emergent absences. The situation is expected to improve as additional drivers complete training and carriers are able to expand their fleets.

Currently, approximately 93 per cent of one-way ride times are less than 60 minutes compared to 95 per cent in September 2022. A more detailed summary of ride times is contained in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of ride times, November 2022 and November 2023

| Program Type | One-Way Ride (Minutes) | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| | November 2022 | | November 2023 | |
| | Average | Maximum | Average | Maximum |
| Regular | 15.9 | 80.0 | 17.3 | 90.0 |
| Division Centre | 35.2 | 100.0 | 34.6 | 110.0 |
| Pre-Kindergarten | 33.8 | 93.0 | 34.1 | 89.0 |
| Alternative | 33.0 | 90.0 | 33.6 | 95.0 |
| Conditional (All Programs) | 28.4 | 97.0 | 29.3 | 92.0 |
| Totals | 26.3 | 100.0 | 27.0 | 110.0 |

As of November 2023, there are 23 students who have a one-way ride time that exceeds 90 minutes, which is a slight reduction from the 26 observed at the same time last year. The longest ride times continue to be experienced by students who reside in rural or new and developing areas of Edmonton attending programming which is not available near their home. Student Transportation will continue adding routes to relieve pressure as drivers become available and carriers are able to increase their capacity.

In the upcoming year, Student Transportation will continue to be responsive to the needs of the Division as enrolment and transportation ridership continue to grow:

- Student Transportation continues to collaborate with carriers to identify and implement specific strategies that could improve their growth capacity for the remainder of 2023–2024 and in preparation for September 2024.
- Improving communication to parents, including:
 - Text and phone late bus notifications. In September 2023, Student Transportation started piloting text and phone call notification of late buses. A broader roll-out of the technology is currently underway.
 - Improvements to information available to parents on epsb.ca and SchoolZone, especially for families new to Edmonton or busing who may not be familiar with our system.
- Building on a professional development session offered to contract carrier driver instructors in June 2023, Student Transportation will continue to develop and deliver professional learning opportunities for bus drivers to enhance the quality of bus service and improve driver retention.

KEY POINTS

- Yellow bus ridership grew by 16 per cent between the last week of August and September 18, 2023; annual ridership growth continues to outpace Division growth (10 per cent versus five per cent).
- In Spring 2023, the provincial government announced a number of changes to transportation eligibility; Student Transportation fully implemented these changes for September 2023 resulting in approximately 400 additional riders and seven additional routes.
- Forty-five new routes were added to the system between January and September 2023. Although the system has grown, the Division is experiencing fewer route delays.

- Contracted carriers have indicated they will not have capacity for increased work until they can be fully staffed for emergent absences. Student Transportation will strategically add routes as resources become available to address long rides and high bus loads.
- In the year ahead, Student Transportation will focus on improving communication with parents through a broader rollout of text and phone late notifications and improvements to available information on epsb.ca and SchoolZone.
- Student Transportation will continue to develop and deliver professional learning opportunities for bus drivers to enhance the quality of bus service and improve driver retention.

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