

DATE: April 19, 2022

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Update on Student Transportation Operations
(Response to Request for Information #008)

ORIGINATOR: Kathy Muhlethaler, Assistant Superintendent, Operations and Learning Services

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

REFERENCE: March 8, 2022 Board meeting (Trustee Sumar)
[DEA.AR – Transportation Services](#)

ISSUE

At the March 8, 2022 Board meeting, administration was asked to provide responses to a number of questions regarding transportation services.

BACKGROUND

Student Transportation currently transports approximately 12,000 students every school day on yellow buses and provides service for approximately 9,000 students daily on Edmonton Transit. Safe, reliable and efficient transportation service is a collaborative effort between Student Transportation, parents, school staff, contracted carriers, and partners such as Edmonton Transit. While each entity holds some portion of the responsibility for children travelling safely to and from school, Student Transportation provides oversight, guidance, and support.

During the past two years, strains on the student transportation system have become apparent, most clearly in the ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers which continues to contribute to ongoing delays and the ability of contracted carriers to respond quickly when service concerns arise. The strains on the system have several contributing factors, including:

- the COVID-19 pandemic,
- overall changes in the busing industry which has created increased competition for a limited driver pool, and
- increased need to bus students longer distances to schools with space.

In short, more students are requiring busing in an increasingly complex system.

Our contract carriers have used a variety of strategies to recruit and retain new drivers, but there continues to be a gap between drivers needed and drivers available. Carriers also report pressures related to increased costs in many areas in addition to driver compensation including: fuel prices, insurance, training and other operating costs.

Since the 2019-2020 school year, Student Transportation's government funding was held constant pending the development of a new provincial funding model. While the Division anticipates an increase of 4.6 per cent to Student Transportation's funding for the 2022-2023 school year, a revised provincial funding model has not been developed. Currently, transportation costs for 2022-2023 are expected to grow more than 4.6 per cent as a result of pressures on market costs and ridership growth as it relates to sustainable capital funding. This will continue to place strain on the Student Transportation system. In order to minimize impacts to service levels and parent fees over the long term, an efficient Student Transportation system will require appropriate support.

CURRENT SITUATION

At the March 8, 2022 Board meeting, Trustee Sumar submitted the following questions regarding Student Transportation operations organized into themes:

General

1. Is the *Student Transportation Handbook* dated September 10, 2014, the most current version?

The *Student Transportation Handbook* is designed to be an internal-facing document to guide conversations around Student Transportation policies and procedures. The document was last revised in September 2014. In recent years, Student Transportation has focused on providing up-to-date information about Student Transportation through public-facing documents on epsb.ca.

2. What information is included in the annual transportation updates to the Board?

Student Transportation shares two annual updates with the Board of Trustees. The first is a ride time summary report that outlines the average, minimum and maximum one-way ride times of riders. Typically, this summary is provided in January of each school year, although it has been delayed in 2021-2022 due to the ongoing bus driver shortage and consequent late buses impacting many routes. Table 1, below, presents a ride time summary as of December 2021. The ride time summary includes the impact of routes amalgamated as a result of the ongoing bus driver shortage. Approximately 95 per cent of ride times are less than 60 minutes and 99.4 per cent of ride times are less than 80 minutes. The longest ride times are typically observed among students who live in new and developing areas geographically distant from programming.

Table 1: Summary of ride times, December 2022

Program Type	One-Way Ride (Minutes)		
	Average	Minimum	Maximum
Regular	15.7	0.5	89.0
Division Centre	34.0	0.7	94.3
Pre-Kindergarten	33.6	1.6	94.0
Alternative	32.0	1.1	106.5
Conditional (All Programs)	27.5	1.0	85.6
Totals	26.3	0.5	106.5

The second annual update is a recommendation on bus pass fees. The purpose of this report is to provide a recommendation on transportation fees for the upcoming school year. This report will be presented to the Board of Trustees before the end of May 2022.

Training

3. Aside from basic provincial licensing requirements, what other provincial and contractor training is required for bus drivers?

The provincial requirements for school bus drivers are covered through the Mandatory Entry Level Training (MELT) driver training course and is focused mainly on the safe operation of a school bus. Individual contractors provide additional supplementary training which varies depending on the type of work that drivers are required to do for different school divisions and individual company policies. Some examples include driver responsibilities, student management, and the proper use of company specific equipment. Edmonton Public Schools also requires carriers to ensure that drivers are trained in basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Historically, Edmonton Public Schools has offered Division-designed in-person professional development on positive relationship building to drivers in August prior to the start of school. This in-person professional development has been suspended since August 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Student Transportation is currently working with contract carriers and other central departments to identify forms of professional development that complements the MELT course and could be offered to drivers in future.

4. As administrative regulations do not apply to bus drivers (because they are contractors), what other division requirements do they need to abide by?

Edmonton Public Schools requires that carriers provide drivers who are properly trained and display competent professional qualities. As outlined in Administrative regulation [DEA.AR](#) Division staff, contract carriers, and parents/guardians will provide a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive environment when accessing Student Transportation services in accordance with expectations and responsibilities outlined in Board Policies (and subsequent Administrative Regulations).

Additional Division requirements that carriers are required to monitor include: criminal and child intervention records, license demerit records and participation in a company drug and alcohol policy. Carriers are also responsible for ensuring drivers are aware of their responsibilities specific to Division procedures on an ongoing basis.

Bus Routes and Delays

1. What statistics and metrics does the Division capture through yellow bus transportation services? Of this information, what is captured and reported by the yellow bus contractor? What information does the Division collect directly?

Student Transportation collects data on carrier performance on a daily basis. The data set includes the number and length of delayed routes which allows us to identify trends and work with contracted carriers to find interventions to alleviate pressures. Although carriers are required to report delayed

routes to Student Transportation, this data is verified and supplemented from a variety of sources including parent phone calls, school reports, carrier self-reporting and GPS records.

Data on designed service, including ride times, is available from the department's Transportation Management and Scheduling software. This data can also be supplemented by GPS records collected in SchoolZone.

Student Transportation also collects fleet information from yellow bus carriers as part of regular compliance processes including vehicle age, fuel type and capacity.

- 2. In the period from September 2021 to February 2022 inclusive, how many buses were late in picking students up from designated stops and dropping students to schools? How does this compare to previous school years for the same period (i.e. September to February)? Please provide a breakdown by month.**

Table 2 below shows the average delays per service day from September 2020 through March 2022.

Year	Month	Service Days**	Total Delays	Average Delays / Service Day	Average Delay (Mins)
2020	Sep	16	476	29.8	42.3
	Oct	19	335	17.6	36.3
	Nov	17	259	15.2	36.6
	*Dec	14	89	6.4	29.4
2021	*Jan	17	162	9.5	38.7
	Feb	16	187	11.7	35.1
	Mar	19	105	5.5	36.1
	Apr	17	94	5.5	36.9
	*May	14	70	5.0	38.0
	Jun	20	136	6.8	34.3
Summer					
2021	Sep	19	885	46.6	48.2
	Oct	17	500	29.4	45.6
	Nov	18	607	33.7	46.9
	Dec	12	399	33.3	42.0
2022	*Jan	15	974	64.9	57.6
	Feb	19	815	42.9	50.0
	Mar	17	526	30.9	48.1

*Period of online learning for some students

**Service days may differ from actual due to online learning or data collection

- 3. For the same period, how many instances of incorrect student drop offs were noted? Please provide a breakdown by month.**
- 4. How many transportation complaints have been registered from families in the Division over the September to February period? What is the nature of these complaints (example: late pick up, wrong drop off, behaviour, other)? How are they grouped in terms of area or location?**

Complaints from Division families cover a range of issues and are received in a variety of ways. Parents may talk to school staff, or bus drivers, make phone calls to contracted carriers, or communicate with Student Transportation, or other Division departments. Due to the variety and nature of complaints and how they are resolved (including instances of incorrect student drop offs), it is challenging to provide a consolidated summary. Many complaints are resolved by schools or carriers and do not come to the attention of Student Transportation. When an issue is unable to be resolved by school or carrier staff, Student Transportation is able to work with schools and carriers to facilitate appropriate resolutions that suit all parties.

- 5. Since the RFI response in December, how many routes are still without a permanent driver?**
 - a. How have average delays changed?**
 - b. How many routes are delayed more than the average?**

At the December 14, 2021 public Board meeting, administration provided a report to Trustees which estimated that the shortage of yellow bus drivers peaked at approximately eight per cent of routes in September 2021 and had decreased to approximately two per cent of routes in December 2021. As of the end of March 2022, approximately 4 per cent of all routes across all carriers do not have a permanent driver. The majority of these open routes are covered by spare drivers and run on time. As spare drivers are frequently used to fill routes that do not have a permanent driver, routes that become unexpectedly open due to emergent driver illness or attrition may run late until a coverage plan can be found, typically by combining or double running routes.

- 6. How many routes have been noted as having a permanent driver because the routes have been combined? Overall, how many routes have been combined?**

Overall, since September 2021, approximately 20 routes now have a permanent driver through route amalgamation. This has been a key component in reducing the number of average daily delays outlined in Table 2.

- 7. Parents are provided notices on SchoolZone when buses are delayed. Are schools provided with similar notifications? Who is responsible for reporting delayed bus information?**

Schools are notified about delayed routes at the same time as late notifications go out to parents. Carriers report delays to Student Transportation who supplement and verify information reported by parents, schools and GPS records. Student Transportation then sends out late bus notifications through SchoolZone.

8. When buses are delayed arriving at school (regardless of the reason), what staff or administrators are responsible for ushering students into the school upon arrival?

Division sites arrange supervision in the way that best meets their needs. When a bus is delayed arriving at a school, staff are notified that the bus has arrived so they can send staff out to the bus. Drivers are instructed that students should not be let off the bus without school staff supervision.

Safety

- 1. How many instances of Student Behaviour and Conduct Policy violations have been noted this school year on yellow bus or ETS transportation?**
- 2. How are these policy violations recorded when occurring on yellow bus or public transportation? Are these treated differently than if the violations had occurred on school property?**

The yellow bus is considered an extension of the classroom with respect to student conduct and school staff are informed of behaviour and conduct violations via bus driver communication reports. The vast majority of these are resolved at the school level with no involvement from Student Transportation. If schools or carriers require further support on resolving an issue they can contact Student Transportation directly. Student Transportation works collaboratively with schools and carriers to facilitate a resolution.

Edmonton Transit collects and resolves conduct issues based on their own policies and procedures. Student Transportation works closely with Edmonton Transit staff on a variety of initiatives and recently participated in the Safety and Security Survey that Edmonton Transit conducted by recruiting students and staff to participate in focus groups.

3. What safety metrics are used when evaluating a bus contractor?

Student Transportation evaluates bus contractors regularly through a number of processes. An example of one of these evaluation metrics are carrier profiles which are released by Alberta Transportation monthly. A carrier profile includes pertinent key performance indicators such as inspections, collisions and a history of driving convictions. Student Transportation conducts annual safety audits with each carrier that cover items such as driver, fleet and safety program compliance. Student Transportation also investigates and resolves any safety concerns that are identified by school staff or parents.

4. What restraints are the school and/or carrier responsible for with respect to Curb Service Transportation?

Schools are responsible for purchasing any harnesses that students require and those items remain the property of the school. Parents are responsible for placing their children in integrated car seats (Pre-Kindergarten riders) or harnesses for the ride to school and school staff are responsible for this for the ride home. Drivers are responsible for safe wheelchair securement. Carriers are responsible for properly maintaining securement systems.

Transportation Programming**1. Please provide more details on the First Riders Program, including the current status and targeted audience.**

The First Riders Program has been running annually for more than 15 years and is a cooperative effort between Edmonton Public Schools, Edmonton Catholic Schools, and Conseil Scolaire Centre-Nord, Edmonton Transit (ETS) and the contracted carriers for all school boards. The program provides support for students riding either the yellow bus or ETS for the first time. The primary attendees are usually kindergarten students who ride yellow buses and Grade 7 students transitioning to ETS, with other first-time riders able to attend. First Riders has been temporarily suspended for the last two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the suspension, Student Transportation has promoted virtual training available through our website at [epsb.ca](https://www.edmontonpublicschools.ca/epsb). Student Transportation is currently evaluating the feasibility of holding an in-person First Riders event in August 2022 in collaboration with partners.

2. Has the GPS pilot program been expanded to all routes and carriers? What has been the feedback from parents on accuracy and timeliness of information?

Yellow bus carriers are required to have GPS tracking records available for all routes operated on behalf of Edmonton Public Schools. Families who receive their bus information through SchoolZone are able to view GPS tracking information live through the *Where's My Bus?* portion of SchoolZone. Feedback from parents regarding this feature has been positive and it has become an indispensable tool. Student Transportation staff is also available to troubleshoot any issues parents are experiencing with the service and the department continues to adjust and refine the availability of GPS data in response to parent feedback. For example, one system improvement implemented as a direct result of parent feedback has been the addition of a pop-up window providing delay information when GPS information is not available.

KEY POINTS

- Student safety while travelling on Division transportation service is a priority and results from the collaboration of parents, Division staff, contracted yellow bus carriers and partners such as Edmonton Transit. While each stakeholder holds some portion of the responsibility for children travelling safely to and from school, Student Transportation provides oversight, guidance and support.
- In recent years, the Division's student Transportation system has been strained as a result of several contributing factors including: the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in the bus industry which has created increased competition for a limited driver pool, and increased need to bus students longer distances to schools with space. This has resulted in an increased number of delayed routes compared to the 2020-2021 school year.
- As of the end of March 2022, approximately four per cent of all routes across all carriers do not have a permanent driver. As spare drivers are frequently used to fill routes that do not have a permanent driver, routes that become unexpectedly open due to emergent driver illness or attrition may run late until a coverage plan can be found, typically by combining or double running routes.
- Student Transportation collects data on carrier performance on a daily basis. The data set includes the number and length of delayed routes which allows us to identify trends and work with contracted carriers to find interventions to alleviate pressures.
- Yellow bus carriers are required to have GPS tracking records available for all routes operated on behalf of Edmonton Public Schools. This information is available to families through *Where's My*

Bus? in SchoolZone and is used by Division staff in a variety of ways to improve the quality of yellow bus service.

- The provincial requirements for school bus drivers are covered through the Mandatory Entry Level Training (MELT) driver training course and is focused mainly on the safe operation of a school bus.

Individual contractors provide additional supplementary training. Edmonton Public Schools also requires carriers ensure that drivers are trained in basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

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