

DATE: May 16, 2023

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Transportation Fees for 2023–2024

ORIGINATOR: Cliff Richard, Chief Infrastructure and Technology Officer

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

REFERENCE [Funding Manual for School Authorities 2023–2024 School Year](#)
[Student Transportation Task Force: Report to the Minister](#)
[HH.AR Lunch-time Supervision Service for Elementary and Junior High Students](#)

ISSUE

Administration submits proposed student transportation fees to the Board of Trustees for review on an annual basis. Fees were last reviewed by Trustees at the May 17, 2022, Board meeting where Trustees voted to extend the 2021–2022 fee schedule for the 2022–2023 school year.

In February 2023, the Provincial Government announced a new funding model for student transportation in Alberta. In consideration of this change in funding, Administration is recommending a decrease to fees for 2023–2024.

BACKGROUND

Student Transportation is funded from provincial transportation grants and student transportation fees. Since the 2019–2020 school year, government funding for student transportation has experienced minor increases, pending the development of a new provincial funding model. The current fee schedule was implemented for the start of the 2020–2021 school year following a survey of stakeholders regarding the future direction of transportation fees and service levels. In the years leading up to the revised fee schedule, Student Transportation experienced a number of operational deficits, peaking as high as \$5.5 million in 2017–2018. A key goal of work around the updated fee schedule was to ensure Student Transportation is not reliant on additional Division funds for operations, which the current fee schedule has helped to achieve.

In February 2023, based on recommendations from the Student Transportation Task Force, a new model was announced that provides additional funding and aligns with upcoming changes to transportation service delivery parameters. The changes in funding recognize and address many of the challenges the yellow bus transportation industry has been facing related to increased costs, greater demand for service, and a shortage of bus drivers—factors that combined to have negative impacts on many of the families served by our Division.

Along with increased funding, additional provincial support to yellow bus carriers and drivers is also provided through fuel rebates and driver training incentives. A further announcement on April 13, 2023, regarding the discontinuation of the Mandatory Entry Level Training Program (MELT) is expected to help streamline the recruitment of yellow bus drivers while maintaining high safety standards.

Throughout the 2022–2023 school year, Student Transportation staff have worked in targeted ways to alleviate the impacts of the bus driver shortage by limiting the number of drivers needed while ensuring that ride times remain reasonable. An update was provided at the November 29, 2022, public Board meeting that outlined some of these targeted strategies:

- Working with schools to facilitate small changes to school start and end times to enable buses to serve multiple schools and for programs to share bus routes. This work continues for the next school year as the Division continues to grow.
- Reviewing route allocations and, where possible, moving routes to carriers that have additional driver capacity.
- Implementing feedback from carriers about what makes routes attractive to drivers, and working on providing driver professional development.
- In addition, the model of sharing routes with Edmonton Catholic Schools is well-established and creates cost and driver savings for both divisions.

These strategies have helped to decrease the negative impacts the driver shortage has had on communication, disrupted schedules and route reliability. They have also resulted in the ability to accommodate approximately 2,500 additional riders in comparison to 2021–2022 as yellow bus ridership returned to pre-pandemic levels. As driver capacity becomes available, Student Transportation staff have been adding routes where needed to alleviate bus overloads and improve ride times. It is expected that by the end of the current school year approximately twenty additional yellow bus routes will have been added to the system in comparison to September 2022.

RELATED FACTS

- As of 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.
- Student Transportation continues to investigate new technologies such as text message notification that can help to improve communication with families when unexpected delays occur.
- Yellow bus ridership has recovered to pre-pandemic levels at over 14,000 riders, which represents an increase of approximately 20 per cent in comparison to the end of June 2022. This means that yellow bus ridership outpaced growth in overall Division enrolment by 5:1.
- Edmonton Transit Service (ETS) pass sales increased approximately 22 per cent in 2022–2023 although remain approximately 40 per cent below pre-pandemic levels.
- A new funding model for Student Transportation was announced by the Provincial Government as part of the 2023 Provincial budget. As a result of the new model, Student Transportation is expecting an increase in base grant funding of approximately \$7.3 million (22.5 per cent).
- The new funding model is aligned with upcoming changes to provincial criteria for transportation eligibility which must be implemented no later than September 1, 2024. Under these changes, students attending their designated school may be eligible for 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.
- For 2023–2024, the Provincial Government has also outlined that additional funds will be provided to school divisions through the Fuel Price Contingency Program and the School Bus Driver Grant Program. Funding from these programs will help offset costs incurred by contracted yellow bus carriers.
- The current fee schedule was implemented for the start of the 2020–2021 school year following a survey of stakeholders regarding the future direction of transportation fees and service levels.
- For students transported on ETS, Edmonton Public School Division subsidizes the cost of Edmonton

Transit passes. The cost for the Division to purchase ETS passes is expected to remain unchanged in the 2023–2024 school year.

- Administrative regulation HH.AR establishes a relationship between lunch fees and transportation fees. Under this regulation, some parents are exempted from paying lunch supervision fees if they already pay a transportation fee for their child as a yellow bus rider.

RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed 2023–2024 Student Transportation Fee Schedule be approved for implementation in September 2023, as outlined in the table below.

Proposed 2023–2024 Transportation Fees

Transportation Service	Monthly Fee 2022–2023	Proposed Monthly Fee 2023–2024
Kindergarten to Grade 12 students taking ETS	\$60	\$55
Kindergarten to Grade 12 students taking yellow bus	\$38	\$30
Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 students who need additional care or specialized supports when taking yellow bus	\$0	\$0

CONSIDERATIONS and ANALYSIS

Although the new funding model results in a large increase to Student Transportation funding, anticipated changes to eligibility criteria will also have an impact on the student transportation system by increasing the demand for services. In making this recommendation, additional considerations include:

- Demand for transportation service is expected to continue increasing as a result of changes in transportation boundaries, establishment of additional Division centre programs, and anticipated growth in overall Division enrolment.
- The Division’s yellow bus carriers have indicated they expect to have sufficient driver capacity to implement the new provincial transportation criteria effective September 2023. This would allow service to align with the funding model in the 2023–2024 Funding Manual for School Authorities.
- Initial conversations with industry indicate that changes announced regarding the discontinuation of MELT combined with the School Bus Driver Grant Program will assist with recruitment and retention of yellow bus drivers. This will help to alleviate the ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers.
- In 2023-2024, Student Transportation will closely monitor the impacts of increased service levels and the measures introduced to alleviate the driver shortage. Operational efficiencies will continue to be implemented to help mitigate any continuing issues.
- The current subsidy on ETS passes for Division students is \$13 and will increase to \$18 under the proposed new fee schedule.

Looking forward to the 2023–2024 school year, Student Transportation will continue to deploy initiatives to help create reliable and sustainable busing for Division families. The revised transportation funding model is expected to provide resources that will help to offset increasing costs and manage continued growth.

NEXT STEPS

Upon approval of the 2023–2024 fee schedule, a communications plan will be implemented to inform families.

GH:jl