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The Honourable Demetrios Nicolaidis
Minister of Education and Childcare
Via email: education.minister@gov.ab.ca

Dear Minister Nicolaidis,

Impacts on Edmonton Public Schools of recent decisions on student transportation

I'd like to begin by thanking you for your work to improve student transportation in Alberta. At the beginning of our term as Trustees in 2021, complaints from families were common. Story after story related to the bus shortage, late bus times and unreliable service was common. This was frustrating for families, students and school operations. It impacted parents' work schedules and student learning time. It was also disruptive for students already in the classroom when their yellow bus peers arrived late.

We have come a long way in four years. Your championing of this early in your tenure as Minister of Education was part of this improvement. The diligence of the Edmonton Public Schools' transportation staff and the dedication of school bus operators and drivers also contributed to the solutions that have brought the student transportation experience of families at Edmonton Public Schools to something I think we can all be proud of. Bus routes are on time, families have more confidence in the system and students' learning days can begin and end consistently alongside their peers who may walk, bike or get a ride to school.

Yellow bus service is greatly valued by families with children enrolled in Edmonton Public schools. It offers a safe, reliable means of getting students to school while eliminating a burden for families whose work hours do not align with school start times, who have other caregiving duties at home, and/or who do not have access to a vehicle. As you can imagine, in a large urban setting such as Edmonton, an elementary age student may live within 1.0 to 1.6 km of school, but walking to school would require them to cross multiple major arterial roadways with six or more lanes of traffic. This is not a safe option for children in elementary school. Yellow bus transportation is an alternative that encourages students to engage in habits of personal responsibility and independence without putting them into potentially dangerous traffic situations. Yellow bus service also provides critical support to students who cannot attend their local school because it is simply too full for every child in the neighborhood to enrol. While we await the dozens of new schools needed and being built under the School Construction Accelerator Program, yellow bus service to designated overflow schools will continue to be the reality for an increasing number of families.

We are proud to offer outstanding yellow bus service, and appreciate the provincial funding we receive to support it. Student Transportation staff work to find efficiencies within a growing system to make the most of every dollar. In fact, the Division currently uses the same number of bus routes as in March 2020 (approximately 830), but accommodates 21 per cent more riders with a similar average ride time (27 versus 26 minutes).

Funding and Distance Eligibility Changes

Given the many positive strides made in student transportation, I want to alert you to the impact of recent funding and eligibility distance changes on families. Edmonton Public's Student Transportation funding profile for 2025–2026 is \$38.1 million. This is a reduction of \$4.9 million (11 per cent) in comparison to Student Transportation's original funding profile for 2024–2025. The 2025–2026 funding profile is based on the new 1.6-kilometre eligibility distance and does not include transition funding for divisions that continue to serve 1-kilometre transportation boundaries. In our Division, the change to eligibility distance will impact approximately 1,500 yellow bus riders on over 200 bus routes. As the students impacted by the change are spread over a large number of routes, the opportunity for route savings as a result of the eligibility changes are very limited. The estimated value of transition funding available for these students in 2025–2026 is approximately \$1.1 million and will not be available in future years. This leaves Edmonton Public Schools short \$3.8 million for the 2025-2026 school year, and short even more than that in the following years when the transition funding is no longer available.

The cost per yellow bus route is expected to increase by approximately 11 per cent on average in September 2025 and will have increased approximately 43 per cent since 2020. Our yellow bus ridership is projected to increase by 1,000 riders (6 per cent) in 2025–2026, and will have increased by 30 per cent since 2020.

Student Transportation will require access to \$4.1 million from other funding sources to offset the operational deficit in 2025–2026. The gap that remains between the cost of providing transportation service and the revenue from government funding and fees requires the Division to use funds that would otherwise be directed to instruction.

Using instruction funds to support transportation is neither sustainable or equitable. Furthermore, it is my understanding that a move from the weighted moving average formula to the adjusted enrolment methodology of provincial funding to school divisions was put in place, at least partially, due to concern over school divisions depleting their accumulated operating surplus, which we are required to keep between one per cent and six per cent of our total operations. To reduce the magnitude of fee increases to families, our Board approved the use of transportation surplus and accumulated operating surplus. You can see this in the chart below for 2025-2026. Option 1 is with no access to accumulated operating surplus and Option 2 is with access to surplus. Neither option is desirable and both result in a large increase for families.

Table 4: Strategies to address Student Transportation Projected 2025–2026 Deficit

Strategy	Possible Value (millions)	
	Option 1	Option 2
Continue to serve the existing 1-kilometre boundaries and maximize transition funding (only eligible for 2025–2026, not beyond)	\$1.1	\$1.1
Apply remaining accumulated transportation surplus	\$0.7	\$0.7
Increase bus fees for the 2025–2026 school year	\$6.2	\$2.8
Access to Division Surplus	-	\$3.4
Estimated total of potential strategies	\$8.0	\$8.0

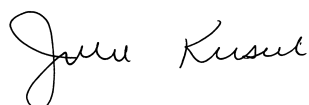
With regret, our Board approved a phased fee increase, as outlined in Option 2 above. Effective August 1, 2025, fees will go from \$30 to \$50 a month. To eliminate the continued use of Division surplus, fees will increase to \$70 in 2026–2027 and \$90 in 2027–2028. This will create a challenging situation for many families, especially with the rise in housing, utility and grocery costs that Edmonton is experiencing.

Edmonton Public Schools does not receive provincial funding to the level required to offer yellow bus service to families at an affordable rate. In fact, by the 2027-2028 school year, our Board anticipates that the monthly yellow bus fee per student for families will be \$30 more per month than the fee for an ETS (Edmonton Transit System) pass for junior high and high school students; the ETS pass is available for student use both for school transportation and for other use around the city. Yellow bus service is only available as a shuttle to and from school each day. It is a difficult position to justify \$30 more per month in fees for less usability.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this letter and to consider both the good work that has been done towards improving yellow bus service for families and the significant impacts of reducing services levels by 0.6 km combined with the reality of these significant fee increases to families.

I would be happy to discuss further and respond to any questions you may have. You can reach me directly at trustee.julie.kusiek@epsb.ca or 780-429-8087.

Sincerely,



Julie Kusiek
Board Chair

c: Marilyn Dennis, President, Alberta School Boards Association