

DATE: December 14, 2021

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Bus Driver Shortage
(Response to Request for Information #001)

ORIGINATOR: Kathy Muhlethaler, Assistant Superintendent

**RESOURCE
STAFF:** Alison Cheesbrough, Geoff Holmes, Christopher Wright

REFERENCE: November 9, 2021 Board meeting (Trustee Estabrooks)

ISSUE

Board Chair Estabrooks requested the following information at the November 9, 2021 public Board meeting:

1. What impact has a bus driver shortage had on our division?
2. How does this year's bus driver shortage compare to previous years?
3. What are the bus contractors doing to rectify the bus driver shortage?
4. How can we as a division help contractors find solutions to the bus driver shortage problem?

BACKGROUND

Student Transportation contracts yellow bus service to four carriers in the City of Edmonton who operate a combined total of approximately 750 routes every day (AM/PM and mid-day) on behalf of Edmonton Public Schools. Carriers recruit and train drivers throughout the summer months and by the third week of August 2021, carriers were reporting they already had enough drivers available to staff approximately 99 per cent of routes, and were expecting full staffing levels for the first day of school. Subsequently, carriers began reporting a spike in driver attrition at the end of August.

At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, approximately four per cent of all routes were without dedicated drivers. In these cases, coverage was provided by management staff and combining routes on a temporary basis. While carriers were able to hire and train additional drivers in September, they reported a second spike in driver attrition in the third week of the month causing the number of routes without dedicated drivers to increase. At the peak of the driver shortage, approximately eight per cent of all routes had no driver available. As a result, school communities experienced route delays and a higher level of driver turn-over than has been seen in previous years.

In the past 10 years, there have been other instances of short-term localized driver shortages, but the situation became more acute beginning September 2020 when approximately five per cent of routes did not have a driver available. As a result of families choosing to learn online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Student Transportation was able to combine over 30 routes that were no longer needed due to decreased ridership which significantly helped to alleviate the driver shortage.

CURRENT SITUATION

Yellow bus ridership increased approximately 48 per cent between June and September 2021. As a result of increased ridership, Student Transportation has not been able to reduce the number of routes required to the same extent as last year without significant impacts to service levels. Since September 2021, Student Transportation has temporarily eliminated a total of 15 routes to reduce the number of drivers required on a daily basis. With these design changes, approximately 94 per cent of all one-way ride times are less than 60 minutes (versus 97 per cent in June 2021). Carriers have also reported a variety of initiatives they are using to address the shortage including:

- Temporarily double running routes with delays.
- Borrowing drivers from other areas where surplus drivers are available.
- Increased focus on recruitment and training of new drivers. Strategies vary amongst carriers, but often include some mixture of expanded training programs and retention incentives.
- Ongoing discussions with Alberta Transportation about ways of improving administrative processes related to new driver testing.

By the third week of November 2021, the percentage of overall routes without a driver had fallen to less than two per cent on average as carriers were working continuously to train and hire drivers to fill vacant positions. Student Transportation also continues to look for opportunities to temporarily combine routes in response to fluctuations in yellow bus ridership.

Other local school jurisdictions are reporting similar impacts of the current driver shortage. In a recent meeting of major contract carriers and school divisions operating in Edmonton, carriers reported that a number of interrelated factors have contributed to the bus driver shortage, such as:

- growth in other industries that require drivers which are full time positions,
- availability of pandemic-related employment benefits,
- administrative processes related to new bus driver testing,
- increases in costs related to insurance, fuel and parts reduce carrier flexibility in responding to evolving market pressures for increased driver compensation,
- less job satisfaction for drivers due to changes resulting from the pandemic, such as decreased connections with their school communities as restrictions continue.

Student Transportation is committed to ongoing dialogue with carriers and other school divisions to examine ways we can support carriers to resolve the driver shortage. An immediate strategy identified is to increase ways the drivers feel they are an integral part of the school communities they serve.

To help with longer-term goals such as more competitive driver compensation, Student Transportation funding should be predictable and responsive to cost changes in the marketplace as well as Division enrolment growth geographically distant from available school space. As Student Transportation's government funding is held at the 2019-2020 level until a new funding model can be developed, any increases in carrier costs for the Division will have an impact on service levels and parent fees.

KEY POINTS**What impact has a bus driver shortage had on our Division?**

- Four per cent of total routes were without a designated driver at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. At the peak of the driver shortage in September, this increased to approximately eight per cent.

- Student Transportation has temporarily amalgamated routes where possible (15 so far) to reduce the number of drivers needed; this results in longer ride times for some students (94 per cent of one-way ride times less than 60 minutes vs. 97 per cent in June 2021).

How does this year's bus driver shortage compare to previous years?

- In September 2020, approximately five per cent of routes did not have a driver available.
- As Student Transportation saw yellow bus ridership decrease by nearly 45 per cent in 2020-2021, approximately 30 yellow bus routes were combined without impacting student ride times to address the shortage.
- Student Transportation saw ridership increase by 48 per cent between June and September 2021. This has limited Student Transportation's ability to combine routes without impacting service for students.

What are the bus contractors doing to rectify the bus driver shortage?

- Carriers have used a variety of strategies to operate routes that do not have permanent drivers including the use of management staff and combining routes with significant delays.
- Several yellow bus contractors have borrowed drivers from other areas where surplus drivers are available.
- Increased focus on recruitment and training of new drivers. Strategies vary amongst carriers, but often include some mixture of expanded training programs and retention incentives.
- Ongoing discussions with Alberta Transportation about ways of improving administrative processes related to new driver testing.

How can we as a Division help contractors find solutions to the bus driver shortage problem?

- Student Transportation continues to facilitate open dialogue with major contractors and school divisions in Edmonton regarding a coordinated approach to addressing the driver shortage.
- In the short term, carriers have indicated that assistance could be provided to help ensure that drivers feel they are an integral part of the school communities they serve as pandemic restrictions continue.
- Student Transportation government funding has been held at 2019-2020 levels pending the development of a new funding model. As carriers have indicated that increased market costs have reduced their ability to maintain competitive driver wages, the Division will need to consider how increasing carrier costs may impact service levels and parent fees.

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