

DATE: November 29, 2022

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

REFERENCE: [December 14, 2021 Board Meeting](#)
[April 19, 2022 Board Meeting](#)

ISSUE

Over the past year, Student Transportation has faced operational challenges related to the ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers (reported at the December 14, 2021 and April 19, 2022 public Board meetings). While the situation has improved this year, it continues to impact routes and families across the Division. Administration is currently providing an update on the issues impacting yellow bus transportation services and how the situation has evolved since April 2022.

BACKGROUND

Edmonton Public Schools provides daily transportation service to approximately 14,000 students on yellow buses. Student Transportation provides oversight, guidance, and support to carriers, parents, and schools on issues related to Division transportation service.

Student Transportation has been facing an ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers since the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. The shortage has several contributing factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in the busing industry which have 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 from fewer available drivers.

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. As well, carriers report pressures related to increased costs in many areas including wages, fuel prices, insurance, and general operating costs.

The shortage of bus drivers impacts families in a number of ways:

- Delayed routes resulting in missed classes, disrupted family and work schedules.
- Due to the last-minute nature of many delays, communication may be inconsistent or late, removing certainty about schedules.
- High turnover in bus drivers results in parents and students not having a personal connection with their driver.

The shortage of bus drivers also results in impacts on drivers and carrier employees:

- Drivers may be asked to perform double routes twice daily, sometimes at the last minute, resulting in longer hours and driver attrition.
- Drivers are on the front lines of hearing from parents who are upset and frustrated over service delays.
- Carrier management is frequently providing route coverage, resulting in less time available for timely communication or overall improvements.

Over the past year, Student Transportation has responded in the following targeted ways to help manage the impacts of the continuing bus driver shortage:

- We have worked hard to find efficiencies and limit the number of bus drivers needed while ensuring that ride times remain reasonable.
 - In preparation for September 2022, Student Transportation worked closely with schools to make small adjustments to start and end times so that buses are able to visit multiple schools and different programs can share routes. This year, changes were supported at 137 schools. This allowed the Division to accommodate three new alternative program sites, 13 new Division Centre program locations and changes to school designations without exacerbating the driver shortage.
 - Route allocations were reviewed, and, where possible, routes were moved to carriers that had additional driver capacity.
- Through carriers, feedback was collected from bus drivers about:
 - Route changes that make for attractive routes.
 - Supports that would encourage drivers to stay in the profession.
 - In response, Student Transportation was able to implement changes to many of our routes in preparation for September 2022 based on driver feedback. In the upcoming year, Student Transportation intends to explore providing further professional development opportunities to support drivers.
- In combination with the Provincial Fuel Price Contingency Program, support was provided to carriers in order to offset inflationary costs.
- A number of refinements to our late bus notification system are being investigated in order to provide better information on bus delays.

CURRENT SITUATION

Yellow bus ridership has increased by approximately 2,500 riders since the last day of school in June 2022. This represents an increase of 20 per cent from our peak ridership last year and means that yellow bus ridership has reached pre-pandemic levels at over 14,000 riders. In comparison to the increase of 4.2 per cent in overall Division enrollment, the growth in demand for transportation service is outpacing enrollment growth by nearly 5:1.

Student Transportation anticipated growth in ridership for the 2022-2023 school year and worked to accommodate these new or returning riders within our existing routes as a strategy to mitigate the impact of the driver shortage. The collaborative work with schools to harmonize bell times helped us combine routes and move resources to areas of growth. Consequently, we were able to accommodate the 20 per cent growth in ridership without additional resources. As a result, Student Transportation is currently transporting a similar number of students as in March 2020, with 13 per cent fewer bus routes.

The growth in ridership was accommodated while maintaining the proportion of one-way ride times under 60 minutes at 95 per cent. The average ride time across the division was also maintained at

approximately 26 minutes. A summary of ride time data in December 2021 and November 2022 is contained in Table 1. The longest ride times are typically observed among students who live in new and developing neighborhoods geographically distant from programming.

Table 1: Summary of ride times, December 2021 and November 2022

Program Type	One-Way Ride (Minutes)			
	December 2021		November 2022	
	Average	Maximum	Average	Maximum
Regular	15.7	89.0	15.9	80.0
Division Centre	34.0	94.3	35.2	100.0
Pre-Kindergarten	33.6	94.0	33.8	93.0
Alternative	32.0	106.5	33.0	90.0
Conditional (All Programs)	27.5	85.6	28.4	97.0
Totals	26.3	106.5	26.3	100

During the summer months of 2022, carriers were able to recruit additional drivers due to the support provided through the provincial Fuel Price Contingency Program and extended service agreements. This, combined with our ability to accommodate growth with existing resources, was reflected in a 63 per cent reduction in routes without a permanent driver in September 2022 (3 per cent of routes versus 8 per cent last year). When routes were delayed, there was an 18 per cent decrease in the average number of days they were impacted (3.8 days versus 4.5 days).

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

- Ongoing investigation of possible changes and improvements to late bus notification technology as families indicate that it is a high priority.
- Development and delivery of professional learning opportunities for bus drivers on topics identified by carriers to support staff well-being and driver retention.
- Continued evaluation of existing bus routes in order to minimize ride times for students, and strategically adding routes to areas of greatest need as additional driver capacity becomes available.

KEY POINTS

In recent years, there has been an ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers that has had a number of impacts on Division families, staff and contracted carrier employees. In response, Student Transportation has undertaken a number of initiatives:

- In September 2022, yellow bus ridership increased by 20 per cent (2,500 riders) in comparison to the last day of school in June 2022. This means that yellow bus ridership has returned to pre-pandemic levels and is currently outpacing Division enrollment growth by 5:1.
- In order to mitigate the impact of the ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers, Student Transportation accommodated ridership growth, three new alternative program sites, and 13 new Division Centre program sites without additional resources and while maintaining the proportion of one-way ride times under 60 minutes at 95 per cent and the average ride time at

26 minutes. Student Transportation is currently transporting a similar number of riders on yellow buses as in March 2020 with approximately 13 per cent fewer bus routes.

- In the upcoming year, Student Transportation will continue to be responsive to the needs of Division families and stakeholders as enrollment and transportation ridership continue to grow. This will include a number of initiatives to strategically improve ride times and support carriers to manage and resolve the ongoing shortage of yellow bus drivers.

GH:jl