



**ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION**

Leading Education's Advocates

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April 4, 2018

To: The Honourable Indira Naidoo-Harris
Minister of Education
Minister Responsible for Early Years and Child Care

Re: OPSBA Response to the *"New Vision for Student Transportation in Ontario"*
Discussion Paper

OPSBA has been monitoring various aspects of student transportation for several years. The topic has been a longstanding discussion item at our Board of Directors meetings, regional trustee meetings and at our local board tables. Transportation, and all its many challenges, continues to be a complex part of education that does not appear to have a quick fix.

In addition to this discussion paper, there is the continual examination of the procurement process across the province. OPSBA has been involved in this discussion as well and is aware of the impacts the complicated process has had on small operators and drivers. The list of other transportation issues is extensive and indicative as to why many challenges remain. This includes: legal action involving consortia, an Ombudsman report with recommendations, legislation (Bill 148's minimum wage increase) that affected bus owners, the high turnover rate of bus drivers, low wages for split shift work, the additional funding provided to aid bus driver retention, declining enrolment in many regions, the recent consultations on the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline and Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline and the threat of strikes and service disruptions and more.

Student transportation is critical for many students and their families. It is more than the morning and afternoon rides to school. It includes school field trips, sporting events, other extracurricular activities, and perhaps additional service for before-and-after school care. It may also include students who use public transit operated by their local municipality and working with co-terminus boards and the local consortia for common policies. These issues are all the more challenging for our Northern and rural school boards.

This particular discussion paper is part of a larger consultation and our Association takes these opportunities seriously. However, it must be noted that the timelines are incredibly vague for any immediate action. We credit the government for creating a reference group (of which we are a member) and for conducting regional meetings (at which some member trustees attended), but the

summary report is not to be released until Fall 2018. With a provincial election occurring before this and the recent number of other ministry initiatives requesting feedback, we have concerns about the timelines of this consultation.

We encouraged our members to participate in the government's online discussion paper but we went a step further and created our own survey for trustees and Senior Business Officials at our member boards.

Both trustees and Senior Business Officials agreed the top four service issues are:

- Ride times
- Driver retention
- Funding
- Safety

Ride Times

Many boards have experienced and continue to face declining enrolment and with that, the pressure for school closures and consolidations. Many rural students travel more than one hour to school with some students on a bus close to two hours each way. Increased distances can lead to increased transportation costs, while Ministry funding does not necessarily take this into account. In order to reduce costs, some boards have decreased the number of buses leading to increased ride times for students. Boards have indicated that some students often arrive late and miss the beginning of school. At the end of the day for one of our member boards, bus delays meant hiring additional after school staff to supervise students while they waited for their ride home. Increased ride times have also had a negative impact on student participation in extracurricular activities and other events occurring outside of school hours. There was also a proposal to consider adding Wi-Fi to buses to allow students to complete homework, especially for those on long rides.

Driver Retention

When asked about the recent driver retention funding (memo B16), the vast majority of boards would like to see this program extended into the 2018-19 school year. Other comments related to the huge responsibility and increased pressure from distractions inside the bus (student behaviour) and outside (road conditions, speed of other drivers), that bus drivers endure every day. What was quite clear was the need for an increase in compensation and a pay scale that reflects the stress and responsibility of the work. It was suggested there needs to be a focus on recruitment and training. Drivers need better, more frequent training.

Funding

Boards are facing increased transportation costs but subjected to an outdated funding formula. Almost half of our boards indicated their student transportation services is operating in a financial deficit. Boards need more funding to mitigate the challenges due to minimum wage increases, heightened health and safety expectation/concerns, and rising student needs. Current funding does not support co-operative education or extracurricular activities for high school students. The government should consider incorporating the kilometres per route as well as the number of students on each route.

It was agreed that funding should be given if a school closure results in longer ride times with a move to a new school. We note that in memo B6 Grants for Student Needs (GSN) for 2018-19, that the Student Transportation Grant adjustment will be increased from two per cent to four per cent. We will be asking our member boards to track their costs as to whether this adjustment is sufficient to manage increased costs.

Safety

Our survey indicates there is a growing demand for bus monitors. This has been primarily to support children with special needs, but monitors also provide another person to supervise student behaviour, helping bus drivers by allowing them to focus on driving. Another safety aspect mentioned was traffic congestion around schools and school zones, where school buses are loading and unloading students. This was a factor in the tragic incident last January when a kindergarten student was pinned between two vehicles outside a school. Many boards want to encourage active student walking and cycling but need resources from the government (and municipalities) to support safe routes. In April 2017, OPSBA provided comment on Bill 65, Safer School Zones Act, in which we stated, "School boards share a real concern about the number of accidents and even deaths from motorists speeding through school zones. We want to ensure our schools and the areas around them are as safe as possible. School zones affect many people – young children in child care, school age children (elementary and secondary), parents, caregivers, grandparents, teachers, administrators, education workers and any visitor to a school."

We also note that the GSN included \$1.7 million for school boards to "access standardized on-site school bus ride safety training." We will follow up with the ministry as to when this training is to begin and how boards can register.

Respondents were in agreement on a number of other issues that should be addressed further. These included:

- Boards and municipalities should meet regularly to discuss student transportation and local implications. How many students are using municipal transportation and how are they supported/funded? We note that this is not always an option, especially for our rural and northern boards.
- The need for future discussion about harmonized approaches to policies and standards. It was noted that local regions have their own unique challenges that may be very different across the province, given the diverse geography. Part of this discussion could investigate perceived competition among boards.
- A province-wide commitment led by the ministry to support boards engaging in active transportation would be helpful. It was suggested the province needs to provide incentives for parents and children who live close to school and can walk, bike, etc.
- More analysis as to how students with special needs are provided with transportation.
- Calculating the number of empty, but registered seats held by students who no longer require transportation. Some parents are opting to drive their children if it is faster than their bus ride, especially in the mornings.
- The need to review the transportation impacts linked to school accommodation reviews.

Consortia

All of OPSBA's 31 member boards are part of a student transportation consortium, half of which include a trustee representative. A considerable majority of our boards indicated their consortia is being managed effectively. Most of the issues tended to be communications-based with problems in tracking and sharing bus delays to parents in a timely manner. Boards continue to express they do not have the funding to cover raises by increasing transportation contracts.

In closing, we also want to share many of the good things happening at our boards. Many have been locally responsive to the need of their communities and this can be seen by:

- Ensuring busing is available for students in French Immersion and other specialized programs;
- Consideration and support for varying family scenarios (shared and split custody);
- Improved communications such as delay and/or cancellation notices for parents and guardians;
- Installation of GPS on buses; and
- Creating and adding staff to transportation call centres.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments and we look forward to learning about the next steps in the production of the draft summary report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurie French". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Laurie French

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) represents public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario. Together our members serve the educational needs of nearly 70% of Ontario's elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA believes that the role of public education is to provide universally accessible education opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds, social or economic status, individual exceptionality, or religious affiliation.