

Dear School Council Chairs of the York Region District School Board, Co-Chairs and other council members:

Students in your school and their parents may be currently or potentially affected by the situation described below. All council chairs or their designates are invited to a meeting, February 18, 2010, to discuss how school councils can help with this issue.

The Problem

You are no doubt aware that there is a transportation problem in the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). High school students who reside in an area considered to be transit-served are not eligible for board provided transportation to school, either in the form of a yellow school bus or a pass to ride public transit. They are expected to "find their own way to and from school." The number of students adversely affected by this situation has been growing each year, for several years, as York Region Transit expands into more areas, and the Board, accordingly, takes bussing away from more students. This board policy has become a significant burden for many families. The burden takes several forms:

1) logistical problems and safety concerns: the vagueness of the term "transit-served" illustrates how ill thought-out this policy truly is. What does this term mean? Since few people will actually live on a major transit-served artery, how far should a student have to walk to get to a bus to be considered transit-served? Should that measure be in distance or time taken? What about the need to transfer, perhaps twice in one trip, waiting in unsheltered and/or high traffic areas where safety becomes a concern? Obviously, these are questions of huge practical importance to our students and families.

2) financial concerns: \$750 per student in the family per school year --\$3,000 for 4 years of high school for each child, assuming a student finishes in 4 years; some do not. This is a significant cost for families of modest means and a great burden for low income families, many of which are headed by single parents, the disabled, new immigrants and other vulnerable individuals. This is especially true if there are 2, 3 or 4 children to put through high school. Families with 3 children will pay an extra 9,000 dollars to send their children to high school, and that applies only if the cost of transit does not go up, an unlikely scenario. That cost is just to get the child to the school and is in addition to taxes families already pay for education.

3) academic concerns: chronic lateness for first class due to unpredictable wait times for transfers, and students arriving tired, frustrated, and not as ready to learn as a student would be when taking one ride on a yellow school bus. Statements from the ministry of education regarding the safe and efficient transportation of students emphasize the ministry's goal of getting students to school "ready to learn." The current situation in our school board is not doing that for many of our students.

Equity of Access

Surely, all students should receive safe, efficient and free-of-charge access to school, no matter where they live. While all students who fall under this policy are at a disadvantage, those who are enrolled in centralized programs that are held in magnet schools, some distance away for many, are at the greatest disadvantage when it comes to getting to school on time, within a reasonable time frame, well rested, happy and ready to learn. This surely is an issue of equity of access in public education. All students in a publicly supported system should have the opportunity, without extra cost to their families and without barriers presented by safety issues and unreasonable travel times, to get to the school that hosts the program in which they are enrolled. This is a basic tenet of public education—equity of access. Students who are unfortunate enough to live outside walking distance to school and

in an area deemed by the Board to be transit-served are currently denied this equity in the YRDSB.

Funding is Provided

It is frustrating for parents and students when the ministry tells us, "The Province provides funding to Ontario's 72 district school boards for student transportation." We are also told that this funding is for both secondary and elementary students. The removal of school board provided bussing from students who reside in transit-served areas is not a ministry recommendation. These funds are provided by the ministry for transportation and, while they are not enveloped and therefore can be used for other things, we strongly believe, such a diversion should occur only if there is money left over after bussing needs are met, not when there are still students in need of a ride to school. We believe that makes sense and is the logical intention of the ministry's funding policy for transportation.

Surplus

Adding to parents' frustration is the knowledge that this board has posted a surplus in its transportation budget for the past several years, while refusing to provide bus service to many of its students.

Targets the more vulnerable families

A disturbing irony for those families who are experiencing financial difficulty, due to the added cost, is the knowledge that some students who still get a free bus because their areas are not considered transit-served reside in expensive estate homes while many who must pay to get to school live in modest homes or rented apartments in so called transit-served areas.

Councils--A Voice for Parents

The Ministry of Education mandated the formation of school councils in all public schools in order to "give parents a voice in education," and it did indeed give parents a powerful voice, perhaps more powerful than many parents realize. For instance, school boards must listen to concerns/recommendations from school councils and respond. They must also show the process by which these concerns/recommendations are addressed and give the rationale for the subsequent decision reached by the board.

Flawed Process

We believe that, not only is the Board's current transportation policy inequitable, flying in the face of what public education represents, but the process by which it came into being and by which it has been further implemented, including the most recent removal of bussing this past September, is flawed, lacking a proper consultative process with those who are most affected. We believe the Board must listen to parents and change Policy 680 to provide a ride to school for all students who reside outside walking distance to the programs in which they are enrolled.

Effectiveness and Efficiency Can Be Improved--E and E Report (May, 2008)

Our board did not get a good grade on this assessment of its "effectiveness and efficiency" - an audit of its delivery of transportation commissioned by the ministry. We believe that if our board increased its efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of transportation and used all of the funds given to it for this purpose, it would indeed be able to provide safe and efficient bus service to its students who live outside walking distance to school and thereby provide equity of access to its public education system.

We are appealing to all school councils, whether they be elementary or secondary, to send a representative to the following meeting to discuss how councils can address this expanding

problem and restore equity of access to all current and future high school students in the YRDSB. Please confirm receipt of this letter and whether or not a representative from your council will attend.

Sincerely,

The Save Our Yellow Bus Coalition