



Student Transportation Task Force

Report to the Minister

Student Transportation Task Force: Report to the Minister

Alberta Education

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Current State.....	5
Challenges	6
Jurisdiction Diversity	7
Recommendations	8
Mandatory Entry Level Training	8
Service Delivery Model	9
Funding Model	10
School Bus Safety.....	12
Transportation for Students Who Require Specialized Supports and Services	14
Regional Co-Operation Between School Jurisdictions	15
Current Eligibility Criteria, Fees and Ride Times	16
Provincial Purchasing	19
First Nations Students.....	20
Imagine the Future.....	21
Appendix	22
Appendix 1 – Task Force Members.....	22
Appendix 2 – Student Transportation Audit Team – Review Criteria	24

Introduction

The Student Transportation Task Force was created to review student transportation service across the province and to provide recommendations to the Minister of Education for improvement. The task force's mandate is to provide a report that contains recommendations related, but not limited to, the following:

- School board and industry responsibility for student transportation;
- Student transportation eligibility;
- Student transportation legislation and regulation;
- Student transportation safety; and
- Student transportation co-operation among partners.

The taskforce is composed of representatives from the several stakeholder organizations, student transportation industry representatives, government representatives and five government MLAs. All other members of the Legislative Assembly were invited to attend engagement sessions in their constituencies. The following organizations were invited to provide representatives:

- Alberta School Boards Association;
- College of Alberta School Superintendents;
- Association of School Business Officials of Alberta;
- Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta;
- The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools;
- Student Transportation Association of Alberta;
- Alberta School Councils' Association;
- Rural Municipalities of Alberta; and
- Alberta Urban Municipalities Association.

These individuals represent a diverse range of experience. To achieve the task force's mandate, members sought feedback, primarily from school boards and parents. This feedback was obtained through in-person consultations, public emails and online surveys. The task force acknowledged the importance of local knowledge and held 74 meetings with school jurisdictions

and other stakeholders in Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Calgary, Red Deer, Drumheller, Stettler, Bonnyville, Edmonton, St. Paul, Edson, Grande Prairie, Peace River and Fort McMurray. More than 250 people attended these sessions, including local MLAs.

Several stakeholders submitted written submissions, and the Alberta School Boards Association provided the results of their survey. The task force chair received many emails from parents and spoke to several parents individually about their concerns. Some task force members participated in a transportation engagement session with the Minister's Youth Council.

This report summarizes the task force's observations and one special recommendation and 21 recommendations.

Current State

In Alberta, school jurisdictions transport more than 300,000 students safely to and from school every day.

Under the *Education Act* and *School Transportation Regulation*, school boards are only required to provide for the transportation of students attending their designated school for regular or special education programming who reside 2.4 kilometres or more from that school. This is measured using the shortest distance along a travelled roadway or public right-of-way, including walking paths. Parents are responsible for providing transportation for students who do not meet this criteria.

Through Budget 2020, funding for student transportation is \$310 million, \$15 million higher than the previous year. Each school jurisdiction is receiving a five per cent increase. Alberta Education allocates this funding to school boards, charter schools and independent (private) Early Childhood Services operators based on their demographic and geographic environment to provide the minimum level of service. Grades 1 to 12 independent school students and First Nations students who reside on a reserve are not eligible for transportation funding. For the 2018/19 school year, school jurisdictions reported a \$23 million deficit, with 69 per cent of school jurisdictions reporting a deficit.

School jurisdictions have the flexibility to provide enhanced transportation services beyond what is required, such as transportation to a school of choice, transportation for ineligible students and transportation to a second address. School jurisdictions are permitted to charge any fee determined by the board, except for students who are being transported on a special transportation route, regardless of the distance. School jurisdictions also have policies in place that allow fees to be waived for those who cannot afford them.

The *School Transportation Regulation* also specifies the requirement to transport students in need of a special education program, outlines parent responsibilities for transporting students who attend a school of choice, and the guidelines and policy requirements when charging transportation fees.

Currently 43 of 61 school boards (70 per cent) have entered into a co-operative transportation agreement to provide transportation services with their neighbouring school board, usually public school boards working with their Catholic or francophone counterpart where they share coterminous boundaries. More than 100,000 students are transported on co-operative transportation routes.

Of the 18 school boards (30 per cent) that are not in any co-operative agreement, 11 are rural school boards with no Catholic school board in their area to co-operate with or are urban school boards where co-operative transportation is more difficult to achieve due to the volume of students transported on full buses and attendance boundaries that are not aligned.

Challenges

Mandatory Entry Level Training

Every school jurisdiction the task force met with identified the Mandatory Entry Level Training (MELT) program as having a significant negative impact on the recruitment and training of new school bus drivers. MELT was introduced in March 2019 for Class 1 (long-haul truck drivers) and Class 2 (school bus with more than 24 passengers) drivers. Several provinces have introduced MELT-equivalent requirements for Class 1 drivers, but Alberta is the only province that requires drivers to take MELT training prior to testing for their Class 2 licence. Student safety has always been a top priority for school jurisdictions, and they have always considered school bus driver training highly important, but school jurisdictions are concerned about the increased training time and cost as a result of MELT.

Eligibility Criteria

School jurisdictions and parents have long debated the current transportation eligibility criteria. Some believe the 2.4 kilometre distance criteria is too far for younger students and that the criteria should take into consideration a student's age and whether they reside in a rural or urban area. Others stated that whatever the distance, it should be the same for all students. The task force also heard from many parents who would like the eligibility criteria to include students who attend a school of choice such as French immersion, bilingual language programs and programs with a specific focus like art, science or sports.

Parents expressed safety concerns regarding the use of walking paths when calculating the eligibility distance. They are also concerned about students who have to cross busy roads and railway tracks or travel on roads that do not have sidewalks, including many with speed limits higher than 80 kilometres per hour.

Funding

Funding was another common issue for school jurisdictions. They were appreciative of the extra five per cent provided for the 2020/21 school year but also noted that funding rates have not increased since the 2012/13 school year. Several school jurisdictions stated the current funding model also does not adequately support the costs of providing special transportation services.

Fees

Many parents emailed the task force with concerns about recent student transportation fee increases, particularly for students who attend a school of choice. They are upset school of choice transportation fees are significantly higher than the fees for students who attend their designated school for regular programming.

Rural Ride Times

Rural school jurisdictions expressed concerns about declining rural enrolment, which makes it increasingly difficult to provide efficient and cost-effective transportation for rural students. This has resulted in the elimination of rural bus routes and increased ride times. Parents and students also raised concerns about increasing ride times.

Flybys

Vehicles passing school buses while the bus's alternating red lights are flashing poses a very serious danger for students getting on and off the bus. Many school jurisdictions indicated ongoing issues with these school bus flybys.

Jurisdiction Diversity

The task force recognizes and respects the independence and autonomy of school jurisdictions. We encourage school jurisdictions to seek collaboration where possible while also protecting access to education for all regardless of background, ethnicity, gender, orientation and religion.

The task force understands the differing challenges faced by metro (Edmonton and Calgary), urban, rural, francophone and charter school jurisdictions and that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for student transportation in Alberta

Recommendations

Mandatory Entry Level Training

Bus drivers truly are everyday heroes. They are some of the most trusted adults in many children's lives, and they are the first and last adult a child sees each day on their way to and from school. We applaud the professionalism and dedication of school bus drivers, school jurisdictions and school bus contractors, including large operations and small independent carriers, in ensuring students are transported safely to and from school every day. We also recognize the challenges school jurisdictions and school bus contractors face when trying to attract and retain drivers.

School bus drivers have always received comprehensive training before operating a school bus. However, every school jurisdiction the task force met with identified the increased training requirements for Class 2 school bus drivers as a result of the Mandatory Entry Level Training (MELT) program, introduced in March 2019, as a significant barrier for attracting new school bus drivers. This was the number one issue school jurisdictions raised. MELT has resulted in increased costs to provide training for new school bus drivers, including the need to compensate new drivers upon completion of the 53.5-hour course to attract new applicants. Many school jurisdictions indicated it now takes twice as long (three to four weeks) for new drivers to complete the required training and get tested due to the increased length of the program and delays in road test availability (particularly in rural Alberta).

The task force recognizes the importance of this training program and the adjustments that have been made to improve the curriculum since it was introduced in 2019. However, school jurisdictions would like to see driver training provided over the course of the driver's first year of hire, which was the case prior to the introduction of MELT.

Special Recommendation

Given the current challenges school boards and school bus contractors are facing recruiting and retaining drivers due to COVID-19, special consideration should be given to modify/relax current MELT requirements during the pandemic to address these challenges.

Recommendation 1

Alberta Education establish a working group with Alberta Transportation to address the following issues that school jurisdictions raised:

- Curriculum and time required to complete the course;

- Cost of the delivering the program;
- Availability of training, instructors and road testing locations; and
- Driver recruitment and retention.

This working group should review the curriculum to ensure it applies to school buses. Consideration should be given to extend the time required for Class 2 school bus drivers to complete this training and to spread it out over the first year in incremental levels. The working group should also explore opportunities for current government job-training funding programs to support training costs. The availability of approved locations for advanced road tests, especially in rural and remote areas, should be increased. The written Class 2 and 4 tests should be available in French.

The working group should also explore ways to retain and attract drivers, as this is one of the largest issues facing school jurisdictions and contractors. Suggestions to improve driver retention include compensating drivers for their MELT training time after being employed for six months and providing government-funded or co-share Blue Cross health benefits for bus drivers.

Recommendation 2

Alberta Education work with other ministries, including Service Alberta, Alberta Labour and Immigration, and Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, to co-ordinate efforts to attract and recruit school bus drivers.

Alberta Education encourage school jurisdictions to use the following resources to assist with recruiting efforts:

- <https://alis.alberta.ca/occinfo/alberta-job-postings/job-alerts/>; and
- <https://www.alberta.ca/agriculture-job-connector.aspx>.

Service Delivery Model

The task force respects the autonomy of local school jurisdictions to provide transportation services that best meet the needs of their students. During our discussions with school jurisdictions throughout the province, we learned there is a wide variance in local student transportation policy and the level of service school jurisdictions provide—differing eligibility criteria, fee schedules, bus stop distance and enhanced services like yard service or transportation to secondary addresses. These variances make it difficult to establish a baseline to determine not only the effectiveness of the service being provided, but also the adequacy of the funding provided to support the minimum level of service school jurisdictions are obligated to

provide (2.4 kilometres to the student's designated school). Many school jurisdictions identified parents' expectations for service, which is well beyond what school jurisdictions are obligated to provide, as a significant challenge. The wide variety in service levels is a result of school jurisdictions trying to fill the void between what they are required to provide and the level of service parents expect.

Recommendation 3

Alberta Education establish a Student Transportation Audit Team to review the student transportation operations of school jurisdictions on a regular basis. The scope of this review would include alignment with school jurisdictions' educational mandate, funding, costs, fees, student transportation policies, co-operative transportation, route efficiency, stops, ride times and use of technology. The goal of this audit team is to identify best practices that can be shared with other school jurisdictions and evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the student transportation services they provide.

The audit team will independently verify that all available measures, as referenced above, have been utilized to the local school jurisdiction's best ability.

The audit team will provide recommendations for school jurisdictions to implement to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their student transportation operations. It will follow up and work with school jurisdictions regarding the implementation of these recommendations.

The audit team will use the information it has gathered to establish a baseline of consistent transportation services across the province and evaluate the costs associated with this baseline service. Determining a baseline will ascertain the relative performance of school jurisdictions, help evaluate the adequacy of funding, better determine the performance of board owned bus fleets versus contracted fleets, and inform the discussion around the 2.4 kilometre eligibility distance criteria. This audit team also increases accountability, transparency, facilitates the sharing of best practices and independently determines if intervention is required.

Funding Model

Through Budget 2020, funding for student transportation is \$310 million, \$15 million higher than the previous year. Each school jurisdiction is receiving a five per cent increase. For the 2018/19 school year, school jurisdictions reported a \$23 million deficit, with 69 per cent of school jurisdictions reporting a deficit.

While many school jurisdictions expressed concerns about the current student transportation funding model, they were adamant there is no one-size-fits-all solution to their concerns and that any changes to the funding model need to reflect the differences for urban, rural, metro,

francophone and charter school jurisdictions. Some of the common concerns the task force heard were inadequate funding for rural school jurisdictions, especially those in remote areas. We also heard the cost of providing specialized transportation service far exceeds the funding provided.

Francophone school boards expressed concerns about the sparsity challenges they face in both urban and rural areas and that the ride times for their students are longer than they are for students attending public schools.

The task force also recognizes the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* rights of francophone students to have access to an equivalent level of transportation service with ride times that are similar to students attending other public schools.

The level of service school jurisdictions currently provide often exceeds the legislative requirements. It is difficult to come to conclusions regarding the adequacy of the current funding model without first evaluating whether it supports the base level of service required by legislation. The majority of school jurisdictions currently have a student transportation deficit. However, it is difficult to determine how much of their deficit is a result of the additional cost of providing unfunded services that are not supported by the current model. A review of the current funding model cannot be completed until the Student Transportation Audit team completes its initial review.

Providing program choices for students such as French immersion, bilingual language programs and programs with a specific focus like art, science or sports is one of the foundations of our education system. The task force believes student transportation should be a joint relationship of choice and responsibility with co-operation between the government and parents and that neither should be the sole source of funding such choices.

Some school jurisdictions expressed concern regarding the funding application process. They find it to be too complicated and find it challenging that their funding is not confirmed until halfway through the school year.

Recommendation 4

Alberta Education ensure the funding model is appropriate to fund legislated student transportation requirements. This model should be informed by the findings of the Student Transportation Audit Team and be predictable, sustainable and equitable.

Recommendation 5

Alberta Education ensure the model takes into consideration that alternative program choices also come with a responsibility for parent and school jurisdictions to participate in the payment of those choices.

School Bus Safety

School buses are the safest way to transport children to and from school—more so than any other means of transportation. More than 300,000 Alberta students are transported safely to and from school every day on nearly 6,000 bus routes on buses that travel 97 million kilometres per year. Fatalities on school buses account for less than 0.1 per cent of all motor vehicle–related fatalities in Canada. In the last decade, between 2009 and 2018, there was one school bus passenger fatality on Canadian roads. According to Transport Canada’s February 2020 Report on School Bus Safety, children travelling to school by school bus are 72 times safer than those travelling to school by car. This is a result of the comprehensive training school bus drivers have always received and the structural safety features of the school bus that are specifically designed to safeguard children in the event of a collision.

School Bus Speed Limit

With the exception of Manitoba, all other provinces permit school buses to travel at the posted speed limit. Alberta is the only province that limits the speed limit for school buses at 90 kilometres per hour or the posted limit, whichever is lower.

Some school jurisdictions the task force met with expressed concerns about the current 90-kilometre-per-hour speed limit for school buses and that this variance creates confusion for the general motoring public and professional drivers. They indicated motorists sometimes take dangerous risks to pass school buses that are travelling up to 20 kilometres per hour below the posted speed limit to avoid being stuck behind the bus. This results in serious safety concerns for students and other drivers, as well as additional stress for the bus driver.

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), the Alberta Student Transportation Advisory Council and the Student Transportation Association of Alberta have all expressed support for reviewing the maximum speed limit in Alberta.

At ASBA’s fall 2019 general meeting, 90 per cent of school divisions, representing 77 per cent of students, supported a change to the maximum school bus speed limit. However, some industry representatives indicated they are not in favour of changing the speed limit due to safety and decreased fuel economy concerns.

Recommendation 6

Alberta Education work with Alberta Transportation to explore changing the current 90-kilometre-per-hour maximum speed limit for school buses to allow school buses to travel the posted speed limit.

The task force recognizes that regardless of what the maximum speed limit is, school buses must always be operated at a speed that is suitable for road conditions to ensure student safety.

Flybys

In rural Alberta and some municipalities, a school bus must activate its alternating red flashing lights when stopping to pick up or drop off students. Vehicles travelling in both directions are expected to stop when approaching an oncoming bus or following one. The only exceptions to this rule are when the bus is on the opposite side of a two-way highway that is physically divided by a median and most major cities in Alberta because they have a bylaw preventing their use.

Students are far more likely to be injured outside of the bus than inside. Vehicles passing school buses while the bus's alternating red lights are flashing poses a very serious danger for students getting on and off the bus. Many school jurisdictions indicated ongoing issues with these school bus flybys. Stop arm cameras record violations as they occur and are an effective measure for documenting flyby infractions. Several school jurisdictions are using these cameras, and most indicated the cameras have improved the conviction rate of violators, although some said more co-operation from local law enforcement to prosecute violators is needed. Other school jurisdictions told the task force they would like to install stop arm cameras on their buses but currently do not have the funds to equip their fleet—each camera is approximately \$4,000.

Despite the increased enforcement as a result of these cameras, flybys are still an issue. This is why Transport Canada is currently studying the effectiveness of extended stop arms that would deter motorists from passing school buses while the bus's alternating red lights are flashing.

Recommendation 7

Alberta Education work with the Government of Alberta to seek better co-operation between the province, municipalities and law enforcement/RCMP regarding consistent enforcement of flybys.

Government increase awareness and improve driver education for all Alberta drivers regarding school bus flybys.

Recommendation 8

Alberta Education work with Alberta Transportation to evaluate current and emerging technologies that assist with the enforcement and reduction of flybys, such as stop arm cameras and extendable stop arms, and explore incentives to enable these technologies in collaboration with school jurisdictions. Funding for cameras could be supported in part by the fines received as a result of flyby infractions.

Alberta Government monitor the outcome of Transport Canada's current study on extendable stop arms.

Other Safety Measures

The task force supports the ongoing work of Transport Canada's Task Force on School Bus Safety to improve the safety of students on school buses. This federal task force is currently exploring the application of several safety measures, including extended stop arms, exterior 360-degree cameras and automatic emergency braking. As well, in July 2018, Transport Canada established the technical requirements for the safe installation of seat belts on new school buses if a school jurisdiction chooses to do so.

Transportation for Students Who Require Specialized Supports and Services

The task force strongly values the importance of inclusive learning opportunities that enable students of all abilities to achieve success in school communities. It is vitally important that student transportation services in Alberta continue to ensure students who require specialized supports and services are able to access the education programs that best meet their needs.

Rising demand for costly transportation service for students who require specialized supports and services is putting a strain on transportation budgets, especially in metro areas. The task force understands the cost of transporting students to a specialized program differs depending on whether they are being transported to one congregated site or to multiple locations that are closer to where students reside. In metro areas, offering a specialized program at one location instead of multiple locations around the city will result in a significant increase in student transportation costs and longer ride times. In some metro areas, 10 to 12 per cent of transported students represents up to 50 per cent of transportation costs. The task force also understands the challenges of providing safe transportation for medically fragile students and students with severe behaviour challenges. Several school jurisdictions stated the current funding model does not adequately support the costs of providing special transportation services.

Recommendation 9

Alberta Education encourage more collaboration between educators and student transportation administrators regarding the provision of congregated special education programs and their locations. Consideration must be given to the impact program location decisions have on student transportation costs and ride times as part of the overall discussion on how to best provide special education programming and transportation services for students.

Recommendation 10

Alberta Education recognize these increasing costs when considering changes to the student transportation funding model.

Regional Co-Operation Between School Jurisdictions

The task force recognizes the degree of co-operation that currently exists between Alberta school jurisdictions. There is a false perception of empty buses from two or three school jurisdictions following each other down the same road. The reality is that more than one-third of the 300,000 students transported to and from school every day are transported on co-operative routes. Currently 43 of 61 school jurisdictions (70 per cent) have entered into a co-operative transportation agreement to provide transportation services with their neighbouring school jurisdiction, usually public school jurisdictions working with their Catholic or francophone counterpart where they share coterminous boundaries. Of the 18 school jurisdictions (30 per cent) that are not in any co-operative agreement, 11 are rural school jurisdictions with no Catholic school jurisdiction in their area to co-operate with or are urban school jurisdictions where co-operative transportation is more difficult to achieve due to the volume of students transported on full buses and attendance boundaries that are not aligned. However, the task force also believes there is an opportunity for even more co-operation between school jurisdictions, which will result in more cost-effective and efficient use of student transportation resources that will result in savings for both school jurisdictions and families.

The task force heard from many school jurisdictions that they were willing to explore further co-operation but challenges still exist in making this happen. Equal voice and equitable contributions were sometimes difficult to achieve with no moderator/arbitrator at the table. It is possible this support could be provided by Alberta Education in a way that is not mandated or adjudicated but merely facilitated. The funding model should be evaluated through the lens of “incentive” to highlight where the model lends to co-operative agreements and where it tends to cause negative competition.

Recommendation 11

Where opportunities for co-operative transportation exist, Alberta Education ensure all partner school jurisdictions meet to discuss co-operative transportation possibilities and mediate any barriers that prevent this co-operation from occurring.

Recommendation 12

Alberta Education continue to provide funding incentives to encourage co-operative transportation between school jurisdictions. Department officials should work to facilitate greater co-operation between school jurisdictions while respecting local jurisdiction autonomy.

Recommendation 13

Alberta Education draft a co-operative transportation agreement template for school jurisdictions to use when deciding to enter into a co-operative transportation arrangement. The intent is to provide a base agreement that ensures all school jurisdictions that are part of the agreement are working together as equitable partners.

Recommendation 14

Alberta Education support a two-year pilot project in the Grande Prairie area where school jurisdictions in the area would work together to develop a common regional calendar and enhance the level of co-operative transportation that already exists in this area.

During the task force engagement sessions in Grande Prairie and subsequent conversations afterwards, both Grande Prairie Public School Division and Grande Prairie Roman Catholic Separate School Division confirmed interest in participating in a regional pilot project that builds on the collaboration that already occurs between both school boards.

Current Eligibility Criteria, Fees and Ride Times

2.4 Kilometre Distance

The *Education Act* and *School Transportation Regulation* only require school jurisdictions to provide for the transportation of resident students who reside 2.4 kilometres or more from their designated school for regular or special education programming.

Many school jurisdictions expressed concern regarding the 2.4 kilometre eligibility criteria. There is a gap between the level of service school jurisdictions are required to provide and the level of service parents expect. As a result, almost all school jurisdictions provide transportation for some students who are below this distance, either for free or for a fee. Some school jurisdictions suggested the eligibility criteria should take into consideration a student's age, with possibly a lower distance for younger students and a higher distance for high school students, who are less likely to ride the bus once they can transport themselves. However, this may simply add an unnecessary layer of complexity, such as transporting students with differing grade eligibility who reside in the same household to the same school. The task force also heard concerns about the

requirement for the eligibility distance to be calculated using public walkways and back alleys. Parents have expressed safety concerns about some walk paths that are not lit and go through wooded areas. School jurisdictions and parents suggested the distance should be calculated using the shortest driving route.

School jurisdictions were very clear that changes should not be made to the eligibility criteria unless it is accompanied by additional funding to support the transportation of additional eligible students.

Recommendation 15

Alberta Education maintain the current eligibility distance criteria until the Student Transportation Audit Team has completed its initial review.

School of Choice Transportation

In spring 2020, the Government of Alberta passed the *Choice in Education Act*, which supports the idea that parents have the right to choose the kind of education they feel will be best for their children. Many parents, particularly those with children who attend a school of choice such as French immersion, bilingual language programs and programs with a specific focus like art, science or sports, would like transportation funding to support this choice. However, it is also important to recognize the opportunities and demand for programs of choice is much greater in urban areas compared to rural Alberta, where educational choice is less prevalent.

Providing choices for students in partnership with their parents will continue to be one of the foundations of our education system. However, school jurisdictions are not legally responsible for providing transportation to schools of choice, and parents are responsible for providing transportation to support this choice.

Recommendation 16

School jurisdictions continue to determine whether to provide transportation to schools of choice and what the cost of that transportation should be.

Alberta Education maintain the current eligibility requirements for students who attend a school of choice.

Safety Hazards

Safety hazards between a student's residence and their bus stop, such as having to cross a busy roadway or roads that do not have sidewalks, has long been a concern for parents. Parents would like such hazards to be taken into consideration when determining student transportation

eligibility instead of determining eligibility by distance alone. Feedback from school jurisdictions was mixed on this issue. The task force believes parents should be made aware of their responsibility for the safety of their children to and from the bus stop and while they are at the bus stop.

Recommendation 17

School jurisdictions should continue to determine local safety hazards instead of introducing provincial legislation. School jurisdictions are in the best position to make these determinations.

Alberta Education establish a stronger level of advocacy with Alberta Transportation to address these type of local safety hazards during infrastructure planning, development and maintenance.

Student Transportation Fees

School jurisdictions have the flexibility to determine transportation fees if the level of transportation service they choose to provide is greater than the funding they receive. School jurisdictions are not permitted to charge transportation fees for students who require special transportation services. The fee amount also must not exceed the net cost per student to provide the service. In 2018/19, school jurisdictions collected \$28.3 million in transportation fees.

Student transportation fees are necessary to support a level of service that parents expect but is beyond what school jurisdictions are legally required to provide. It should be noted that nearly all school jurisdictions acknowledged that parent expectations for service has significantly changed in recent years. They said there needs to be better communication and a broader understanding by parents of what is legislated under the act regarding the provision of student transportation.

Recommendation 18

School jurisdictions continue to have the autonomy to determine student transportation fees. Alberta Education maintain the current legislation regarding student transportation fees.

Alberta Education decide whether to adjust the eligibility requirements and provide funding to close this gap or direct school jurisdictions to charge fees that better reflect the actual cost of providing the extra services parents expect. The results of the Student Transportation Audit Team review will help inform what adjustments are required to close this gap.

Ride Times

Ride times have long been a concern for school jurisdictions, parents and students regardless of where students reside. This issue not only affects rural students but also metro, urban, francophone and charter school students. Francophone school boards expressed concerns about

the sparsity challenges they face in both urban and rural areas and that the ride times for their students are longer than they are for students attending public schools.

Currently there is no provincial requirement regarding a maximum student ride time on the bus. Approximately three per cent of transported students have a ride time of more than one hour to or from school every day. During the 2019/20 school year, the average one-way ride time was 38 minutes for rural students and 22 minutes for metro/urban students.

Many factors contribute to long ride times, including distance, sparsity and school location. Prescribing a provincial ride time standard would result in inefficiencies, particularly in remote rural areas that have a high sparsity of students.

The task force recognizes the importance of this issue and believes local school jurisdictions are in the best position to design school bus routes that balance reasonable ride times with efficient transportation services.

The task force also recognizes the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* rights of francophone students to have access to an equivalent level of transportation service with ride times that are similar to students attending other public schools.

Recommendation 19

School jurisdictions continue to address ride time issues as part of their route planning and evaluation responsibilities instead of introducing provincial legislation.

As part of its review, the Student Transportation Audit Team will conduct a route efficiency analysis and make suggestions regarding improvements.

Provincial Purchasing

In the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) survey, conducted in July 2020 as part of ASBA's engagement feedback for the task force, school jurisdictions indicated they are supportive of a provincial purchasing program for school buses, fuel and insurance. Currently the approach overall for these types of purchases is fragmented. Several school jurisdictions purchase diesel fuel through a program operated by the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA), but there is no co-ordinated provincial approach for school jurisdictions purchasing school buses, although RMA has recently started a procurement program for school bus purchases. The Alberta Educational Purchasing Group (AEPG) was launched in December 2019 and may be an opportunity for savings when buying school buses, parts and tires, but this has not been fully explored yet.

School jurisdictions have historically participated in a provincial education insurance consortium such as the Alberta Risk Managed Insurance Consortium and the Urban Schools Insurance Consortium. However, there are liability barriers that may prevent school buses that are used for non-school trips in the community from being included in these consortiums. The Government of Alberta should pursue further co-ordination of insurance purchasing to identify and maximize all possible cost saving opportunities.

The task force reviewed the possibility of cost savings in using purple gas or marked fuel. Manufacturers have indicated that using marked fuel would render engine warranties void. As nearly all manufacturers are outside the jurisdiction of the Government of Alberta, this cannot be addressed by legislation or regulation at this time. It may be advantageous for other ministries within the Alberta government to work with industry to address these warranty issues, but this is not within the mandate of Alberta Education. It would be more expedient to pursue options within the government's control.

Recommendation 20

Alberta Education create a program to co-ordinate the purchasing of items such as buses and fuel as one school jurisdiction collective to maximize buying power. This would be available to all school authorities (public, separate, charter, francophone and independent schools), regardless of whether transportation services are provided via board-owned fleet or commercial carrier, as long as the commercial carrier is willing to sign a purchasing agreement.

Alberta Education promote, facilitate and enhance existing purchasing programs, such as the ones offered by AEPG and the RMA.

Recommendation 21

Alberta Education work with Alberta Treasury Board and Finance to review fuel purchasing policies and practices that affect school jurisdictions. Eliminate red tape and multiple purchase and resale levels in the market.

First Nations Students

School jurisdictions are not required to provide transportation services for First Nations students who reside on a reserve, as the education of these students is a federal responsibility. However, several school jurisdictions currently have co-operative transportation agreements to provide student transportation services for First Nations students who reside on a reserve and attend provincial schools. The task force encourages school jurisdictions to work collaboratively with First Nations to provide student transportation services where it is feasible to do so.

Imagine the Future

During the consultation process, some of the topics stakeholders raised touched on areas outside of the purview of Alberta Education. One example is the significant impact traffic congestion around schools during student pick-up and drop-off times has on a community. Another example is the safety concerns communities such as the Crowsnest Pass face where the school is located on the north side of the highway but the majority of residential homes are on the south side, thus creating major safety concerns for families and students when crossing the highway by vehicle or on foot on their way to school.

One ministry alone cannot solve these issues. Rather it will take a collaborative and co-operative approach through multiple ministries. This co-operation will require not only time and co-ordinated decision making but also funding and assistance in planning cycles. Just as many of the challenges we face today are based on priorities and decisions made years ago, our decisions today will frame the challenges of the future. This will require a level of co-ordination that government has historically been unable to attain. Because of this, the task force had a discussion titled “Imagine the Future.”

Imagine a school that not only has classrooms, but places for treatment and therapy for those with specialized learning needs, a place that has housing attached to support and provide living space to reduce student transportation costs for those who have the highest need. What if seniors housing is attached to provide a more integrated society with interaction between multiple generations and a community garden to enhance learning about where our food comes from and how it is handled from field to plate.

The relationship between ministries such as Municipal Affairs, Transportation, Health, Seniors and Housing, Education, Community and Social Services and Children’s Services becomes even more significant when contemplating an idea like this. There are benefits to be had for our society, our community and the health, education and future for the people of Alberta, but there is a cost and an effort required. To reach a better future, we need to have a better vision of that future today.

Appendix

Appendix 1 – Task Force Members

MLA representatives:

- Nathan Neudorf, MLA for Lethbridge-East, Chair
- Tracy Allard, MLA for Grande Prairie
- Michaela Glasgo, MLA for Brooks-Medicine Hat
- Nate Horner, MLA for Drumheller-Stettler
- Matt Jones, MLA for Calgary-South East

Representatives from key education and community partners:

- Josée Devaney, Fédération des conseils scolaires francophones de l'Alberta
- Dexter Durfey, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta
- Trisha Estabrooks, Alberta School Boards Association
- Brenda Gibson, College of Alberta School Superintendents
- Chris Gilmour, The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools
- Jody McKinnon, Student Transportation Association of Alberta
- Kathy Rooyakkers, Rural Municipalities of Alberta
- Jacquie Surgenor, Alberta School Councils' Association

Representatives from student transportation industry groups:

- Yacine Belhadj, First Student, Inc.
- Mark Critch, Sparksman Transportation

- Brian Hauptman, Golden Arrow Buses
- Jonathan Weal, Pacific Western Transportation (Southland Transportation)

Appendix 2 – Student Transportation Audit Team – Review Criteria

Below is a list of items the task force believes the Student Transportation Audit Team should consider as part of its analysis to determine the efficiency of school jurisdiction transportation operations. This data will also be beneficial in determining a baseline that could be used to determining the adequacy of the current funding model.

1. Policies:

- Number of stop locations allowed (mom, dad, daycare, other);
- Distance from home to bus stop;
- Eligibility criteria for transportation;
- Usage of public transit; and
- Age of school buses used.

2. Revenue and expense information:

- Alberta Education revenue;
- Fee revenue;
- Other revenue;
- Cost of operations;
- Deficit/surplus;
- Operating reserves; and
- Capital reserves.

3. Transportation Statistics

- Number of students transported;
 - By rural;
 - By urban;
 - Students with special needs;

- Per cent eligible;
- Per cent choice; and
- Number of routes.

4. Route analysis:

- Length of bus routes (kilometres and time);
- Are routes overlapping;
- Use of transfer stations;
- Highway travel;
- Public transit;
- Co-operative arrangements;
- Ride times;
- Alternate transportation arrangements (parent-provided);
- Capacity;
- Students with special needs;
- To assess whether double or triple runs would be possible/manageable;
- Impact of not transporting ineligible students; and
- Impact of not transporting to school of choice.

5. Access to transportation:

- School of choice; and
- Ineligible students.

6. Fee schedule:

- Assess if fees cover the expenses incurred; and
- Assess the impact of charging fees that cover the cost of the level of service provided.

7. Safety measures:

- Cameras;
- Scan cards;
- GPS;
- Training;
- Professional development (driving and student behaviour management); and
- Other.

8. Cost of service:

- Analysis of deficit/profit areas ;
- Analysis of reserves;
- Overall costs analysis:
 - Total costs per unit (unit could be: student distance from school x number of students, kilometres travelled);
 - Costs attributable to level of service (school of choice, non-eligible students, multiple stops); and
 - Difference in cost structure between urban, rural, metro and francophone.
- Relationship between location of infrastructure and cost of transportation;
- Relationship between program location and cost of transportation to such locations (need for integrated approach);
- Reliability of service;
- Insurance costs (including contracted bus operators);
- Potential for collaboration; and
- Legal obligations under Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

9. Administration:

- Number of admin staff in transportation by role; and
- Total wages paid inclusive of benefits.

10. Maintenance:

- Number of maintenance employees;
- Breakdown of maintenance costs; and
- Total wages paid inclusive of benefits.

11. Fleet:

- Number of vehicles owned and maintained;
- Annual mileage;
- Average age of vehicle;
- Age on renewal;
- Amount allocated to depreciation each year; and
- Ratio of spare vehicles to number of routes.

12. Facility:

- Owned or leased;
- Cost of property;
- Is facility maintenance allocated to transportation and the amount; and
- Property taxes allocated to transportation.

13. Fuel cost:

- Total cost
- Number of litres by type;
 - Diesel;
 - Gasoline; and
 - Propane.

14. Driver wages/benefits:

- Number of driving employees;

- Total cost of employment:
 - Hourly rate;
 - Health and welfare benefits; and
 - Pension.
- Driver training/safety costs.

15. Special transportation costs:

- Amount spent on transportation for students with special needs;
- Transportation options (yellow bus, taxi, handi bus, parent);
- Attendants; and
- Number of students requiring specialized transportation services.