

HWDSB

Dawn Danko
 Chair of the Board
 Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
 20 Education Court, P.O. Box 2558
 Hamilton, ON L8N 3L1

December 11, 2020

Hon. Stephen Lecce
 Minister of Education
 315 Front Street, 14th Floor Toronto, ON M7A 0B8

Delivered via electronic mail

Dear Minister Lecce:

On behalf of our Board of Trustees, I need to share our concerns regarding student transportation during our 2020-21 school reopening. This letter emerges from the numerous updates our Board of Trustees has received from our staff since September 2020.

As you may know, transportation services are provided to approximately 14,500 students at HWDSB.

Driver Shortage

This year's driver shortage is unprecedented. The recurring, annual problem is compounded by the pandemic. HWDSB is not alone in this, as we hear from colleagues across Ontario. For us, this has meant that, on any given day, we might be short dozens of drivers for the morning and afternoon runs.

Despite considerable additional funds provided by our Board and the Provincial Government, as well as a complete re-routing of our transportation system (routes), we face a driver shortage. We have implemented many measures to address this, including the ongoing driver incentive programs and unprecedented recruitment, but we do not see this matter improving in the near future.

We see this as a structural problem that the province must address. The current funding model sets boards up to fail. We are the ones who have to deliver an underfunded service, share the bad news with students and families when routes are cancelled, and apologize for problems that are systemic.

Bus Cancellations

Due to the driver shortage, we are in the unfortunately position of needing to cancel routes. Rotating cancellations began September 28, with a schedule outlined by Hamilton-Wentworth Student Transportation Services (HWSTS). We explained to our community that the cancellations were a direct result of the critical school bus driver shortage.

This is our regrettable reality this year, and we have been apologizing to all of our impacted families. Sadly, the problem was far from a surprise. We foresaw a situation like this happening, and even with our increased funding to transportation, we need the support of the provincial government. We have been raising this issue with the Ministry of Education since July.

Impact on Students

Our cancellations will have a real impact on students and their families. In total, 42 routes are involved in the rotation schedule – with nearly 900 HWDSB students impacted. We are making hard choices about which routes to cancel, so that students can be on time for their limited face-to-face learning.

This is causing considerable inconvenience and disruption to families at different points in the route rotations. We are hearing from upset families daily.

Request for an Effective Transportation Funding Model

Our consortium, Hamilton-Wentworth Student Transportation Services (HWSTS), continues to investigate other options to address the ongoing bus driver shortage, including driver incentives and driver recruitment programs. However, these efforts will not be able to fix the bigger problem.

This is why we implore the government to take action. Our Board is advising the Ontario government to review the transportation challenges across the Province, review the expectations for new contracts and associated increased costs, and develop a transportation funding model that better supports the needs of students, families and board in a sustainable manner.

We offer these recommendations with respect, but we ask that they be considered and implemented as soon as possible. As you know, many school boards are faced with having to establish new contracts this year – and the clear evidence shows that transportation costs are increasing.

We would be open to discuss this further at any time.

Sincerely,



Dawn Danko, Chair
Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

cc: Ontario Public School Boards' Association Chairs of all Ontario School Boards
All Hamilton City Councillors
All Hamilton Members of Parliament
All Hamilton Members of Provincial Parliament