

September 8, 2020

Driver Shortage

The school bus industry has been struggling with a driver shortage for more than 5 years and the global COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the problem for this school year. The average age of a school bus driver in the Thunder Bay area is 57 with many drivers in their 60s and a few even in their 70s. With the risk for severe illness from COVID-19 increasing with age putting older adults at the highest risk, some have chosen not to return, or are delaying their return to work over concerns for their health. While Thunder Bay is considered a low risk area for the spread of COVID-19 and enhanced school bus cleaning protocols have been put in place in addition to drivers being provided PPE and school buses restricted to no more than 50 students per 72 passenger bus, some drivers are still not comfortable returning to work. We respect their right to make this decision regarding their safety. Unfortunately, we are now faced with the unfortunate situation of having to suspend some bus routes at the start of the school year pending driver availability.

Student Transportation Services of Thunder Bay has been in regular contact with our contracted school bus operators, First Student and Iron Range, since the pandemic forced the closure of all schools in the province last March to ensure operational readiness to return to providing student transportation services should school return at any time since. Both operators have and continue to recruit and train new drivers during this time and confirmed a full roster of drivers available as of the end of July. By mid-August, they were getting reports of a few drivers, both existing and newly trained who would not be available for the start of the school year. First Student and Iron Range both felt however, they could cover these few routes with their compliment of spare drivers and others in training. During the last week of August, the number of drivers not returning quickly swelled to 30 out of 172 routes between the two bus companies, surpassing the number of routes either could adequately cover after pulling from their entire spare driver and new driver resources.

STSTB worked tirelessly over the past week with our bus operators to try to mitigate the situation by investigating what school routes of any unassigned runs could be covered by other drivers or staff members with bus licenses that could drive routes in the short term. By the end of the week, we had reduced the number of bus runs without a driver to 12. We did not choose which runs would not be covered; rather they are assigned by driver's choice based on seniority as per their collective agreements. The routes left unassigned are those that the available pool of drivers did not choose to drive.

Some routes were confirmed as not being able to be serviced by last Thursday afternoon and those families were contacted by that evening. The remaining routes were not confirmed until Friday and STSTB made every effort to reach out to those families as quickly as possible via phone message as well as website and social media posts.

We are continuing to look at the routes that had to be suspended due to the driver shortage and are working hard towards finding a solution to offer school bus transportation to the affected families as quickly as possible. However, all families currently using student transportation services are advised that service suspensions of additional routes are possible. Known suspensions of service will be posted each evening by 6PM for the following day. There may be routes cancelled for the day early in the morning due to illness or other causes so parents are strongly encouraged to view 'Reported Delays' at www.ststb.ca evening and morning.