



Transportation

THE ISSUE

Changes to funding arrangements along with significant bus driver recruitment and retention issues leave students and families at risk of not having transportation to school.

The City of Ottawa is one of the largest municipalities in Ontario in both population and geographic area. This makes the delivery of transportation of OCDSB students much more complex. It is not simply about transporting students to and from school. It is about equitable access, particularly for students residing in rural communities. Access to reliable and safe student transportation allows parents/caregivers to make decisions about programs based on their child's learning needs, rather than transportation barriers. It is also vital for families who may not have a vehicle or require specialized support for their child to be transported to school.

Recent changes to provincial funding for student transportation are expected to have a significant impact on the OCDSB's budget. For the 2023-2024 school year, the OCDSB received \$48.9 million in provincial funding. The actual cost to provide service is estimated to be \$51.8 million. This \$2.9 million gap not only takes money away from other priorities, but the gap is expected to grow exponentially in the coming years. This is due to the fact that \$13.9 million of the provincial funding was transitional and will only be in place until 2027. With the loss of the transitional funding, this deficit could climb to \$17 million. The Ottawa Student Transportation Authority (OSTA) has already had to suspend or eliminate a number of programs and services affecting transportation for OCDSB students. Without additional transportation funding, students will be adversely impacted.

\$17M

*Potential decrease
funding in
OCDSB student
transportation
budget under new
provincial funding
model*

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Revised funding framework:** Any policy or funding framework must consider the unique student transportation circumstances of the community. For the OCDSB this includes the geographic size of the district, the complexity of program offerings, the number of students who require specialized support, and the availability of service providers in the region.
- 2 Increased investments:** Investments should include recognition of inflationary increases, rising fuel costs, geographic area, and industry pressures.
- 3 School bus driver recruitment action plan:** Provincial strategy needed to attract and retain school bus drivers.



MORE INFORMATION

School bus transportation for students with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board is conducted through a consortium called the Ottawa Student Transportation Authority (OSTA). OSTA provides service to students of both the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and the Ottawa Catholic School Board. OSTA manages transportation to over 230 schools across a large geographic area covering 2,760 square kilometres. OSTA delivers transportation services to more than 124,000 students at both its member school boards using yellow buses, wheelchair buses, school purpose vans and School Active Transportation programs.

Student transportation is funded by the Ministry of Education. For the 2023-24 school year, the Ministry of Education implemented a new funding framework for the Student Transportation Grant. The new funding framework for Student Transportation applies a needs-based Common Reference Standards and is based on a routing simulation that optimizes the number of vehicles to provide services for eligible students. According to the Ministry, these changes were made to encourage consistency and improve equitable access.

In a school district that covers 2,760 square kilometres, equitable access is something that requires very careful planning. For many students living away from the downtown core and public transit services, school buses or vans are their only means of transportation to school. The OCDSB has approximately 8,000 students who reside outside of the Urban Transit Area, and well beyond the walkable distance to school. Without reliable transportation, students are denied access to learning.

In recent years, student transportation providers across Ontario have been experiencing challenges with school bus driver recruitment and retention. Driver shortages have forced transportation providers to cancel bus routes, which has had a significant impact on students and their families. These operational realities, combined with a new provincial transportation funding model, has the potential to deny students, and in particular students in rural communities, safe and equitable access to school.



2,760
km²

The City of Ottawa is the second largest city in Ontario by population and one of the largest municipalities according to geographic size. OCDSB students live in urban and rural communities in a school district covering 2,760 square kilometres. Student transportation needs vary greatly across this area.