



Northern Lights

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Working Together to Help Every Student Learn and Excel

June 17, 2024

Honorable Devin Dreeshen
Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors
127 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Ave
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Demetrios Nicolaides
Minister of Education
228 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Ave
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

sent via email: <transportation.minister@gov.ab.ca>
<education.minister@gov.ab.ca>

Dear Honourable Ministers,

On behalf of the Northern Lights Public School (NLPS) Board of Trustees, I would like to express our appreciation for the work that has been done by Alberta Education and the Transportation and Economic Corridor Department over the last several years to bring forward changes to the Mandatory Entry Level Training (MELT) and driver competency programs. These changes have allowed us to implement a more adaptable training schedule and enhance training for current drivers. The roads are safer, the drivers are safer, and the students are safer. We applaud these improvements.

Divisions across the province still face concerns that need to be addressed provincially. Three years ago, the Student Transportation Task Force recommended that Alberta Education ensure the funding model is appropriate to fund legislated student transportation requirements. However, many of our concerns continue to stem from a lack of funding for student transportation. These challenges are outlined below.

Limited Access to Road Testing

NLPS has been able to expedite the training of Class 2S bus drivers by developing and operating a Driving School, but delays of four to six weeks when scheduling road tests hinders recruitment and retention of new drivers. We ask to have Bonnyville, Cold Lake, and Lac La Biche added to a regular schedule of Class 2 road exam dates.

Rising Costs

Increasing costs for equipment, parts, and fuel threaten the viability of small contract bus operators (CBO) and division owned fleets. NLPS anticipates a reduction of at least 50% of our small CBOs in the next three to five years, with most of the remaining contractors exiting the industry within 10 years. This potentially leaves school divisions vulnerable to higher rates from remaining large CBOs, or forced to purchase expensive and scarce new buses, exceeding our budgets. Any past or planned increases should be re-evaluated to ensure sustainability of the transportation system.

In recent years, insurance costs have significantly increased, which also threatens the viability of small CBOs. We propose an affordable provincial umbrella policy offering increased liability coverage (providing \$25 million in liability coverage, or that aligns with industry recommendations) that would mitigate risks without burdening CBOs. Alternatively, we suggest exploring funding increases to address this critical issue.

Disparity in Urban/Rural Funding

Students residing in smaller urban centres (in the 10k to 50k population centres), like the City of Cold Lake, receive nearly 50% less funding than students of the same age and distance in surrounding rural areas, as urban funding assumes higher student density resulting in efficient transportation systems. We propose a review that considers changing the threshold so that cities under 50,000 remain in the rural funding model to ensure equitable access to quality transportation for all students.

Northern Lights Public School Board of Trustees believes that safe and reliable student transportation is a cornerstone of a successful education system. We urge Alberta Education and the Transportation and Economic Corridor Department to work collaboratively with School Boards and industry partners to address the critical issues outlined in this letter. By working together, we can ensure a sustainable and equitable student transportation system for all students in Alberta.

Sincerely,



Karen Packard
Board Chair

CC Marilyn Dennis, ASBA President
Dennis McNeil, PSBAA President
Board Chairs
Scott Cyr, MLA Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul