



October 10, 2024

Dear Superintendent Eberwein and Chair Dunford,

Thank you for the presentation and update about the status of bus applications at our September COPACS meeting.

We appreciate and acknowledge the hard work of the transportation department staff who have processed over 3,000 applications for the much-valued and appreciated SD63 bus program this school year. The bus service is not mandatory under the School Act, but is a component of the SD programming that is of incredible value, and for some families, indispensable, part of their children's education. At a [COPACS meeting](#) held on Oct 2nd to discuss and provide feedback on bus transportation which 26 individuals attended, one parent spoke of the pressure on many families with higher costs of living and both parents working. The bus is less of a 'nice to have' and more of a necessity for many.

We acknowledge that the demand for busing spaces outpaces the available spots and that with the change in eligibility requirements, that more families will be waitlisted because the eligibility criteria have been expanded to include more potential riders.

These efforts and these services are valued, and this year's start-up, which is the first since the new eligibility guidelines have come into force, is understandably a learning experience and thus COPACS wishes to outline the opportunities and need for ongoing improvements through:

- 1) Greater clarity on process, including for families with exceptional needs

The current policy prioritizes riders based on the program/school of the child, the home address and registration date for the bus. [Policy 21](#) (Item 3) states transportation may be considered to support students with “exceptional transportation needs or significant safety concerns”, however it does not state **how parents are to apply for or who determines exceptional needs**. One family shared that their daughter with a physical disability was told that she was not eligible without any further information offered regarding how they might apply for exceptional needs. We recognize that some parents and guardians are greatly impacted should they be unable to secure a spot on the bus.

- We respectfully request that need and extenuating circumstances be a consideration in approving applications and that the process for such applications be clear.

Greater clarity would be helpful when registering for bus routes to help avoid errors in bus route registrations. Families appreciated the addition of the maps and online tutorial video this year however, particularly for bus routes that have multiple buses traveling them (e.g. Bus 5 which services Bayside then Stelly’s) some families inadvertently registered for the wrong routes and are now on the waitlist while taking up a spot on a bus they aren't using.

- A suggestion is that the schedule / stops should be shown alongside the route map on the website and that the schedule / stops be part of auto-reply to parents confirming their route to help them catch errors early.
- Clarify ability to indicate Kid’s club and after school care programs as after school transportation.

- 2) That efficiencies to the operation of the current system be considered, by greater precision of enrollment days, enrolling to overcapacity or other solutions.

Parents recognize that the bus system has reached its capacity with current ridership and that greater budget allocation would take funds away from other valued educational services. COPACS commend the installation of an app that will help identifying those who registered for the bus but who are not riding it, aka ‘ghost riders’. Given this budget constraint, COPACS wishes to encourage the optimization of current available seats by asking the SD to consider:

- Recognizing the variable and changing nature of family’s schedules and how often kids are sick, might a more subtle/nuanced registration process

with **day-specific enrollment** be possible that would allow part-time riders and access to the bus for more families? Some families need or would love to have a spot even 2-3 days a week. Many of our families had similar enrollments for preschool and daycare.

- With the early registration and relatively low registration fee, parents wonder how many families may enroll in the spring with the off-chance they need a spot, and then not be in need in the fall? Could a **confirmation of ridership be instituted at the start of the school year?**
- Develop a **'standby' category of rider**, whereby waitlisted children can ride the bus in the event of an available space (if Air Canada can do it.....?). It is very frustrating for families who have been struggling to arrange school drop-offs and pick-ups to see buses running with empty seats, particularly for families whose children ride segments of routes that don't include any 'pick-ups' along the way.
- A suggestion raised was that a **process to handle "change requests"** vs late registrations be considered for families that inadvertently registered for the wrong bus.
- Another parent shared the increasingly sophisticated software tools that can be used to optimize bus routes based on addresses of interested families and destinations. COPACS wondered if the SD might, or has recently invested or investigated such a service?
- A few other questions raised at the October 2nd meeting, which COPACS would be interested in learning more about, is whether any budget is available for more drivers or buses for popular routes? Whether Transportation could use the smaller "shuttle" buses for the out of school care programs (KidsKlub & GreenGlade) like they did in the past? And, whether increasing the threshold for being a 'ghost rider' could be raised from riding 35% of the time to something higher?

3) We respectfully request a set standard for communication and transparency with parents

- Multiple parents shared that they have received little or no communication back from their application or from repeated inquiries. Some indicate that they have called, been put on hold and then sent straight to voicemail and never received a return call. Others indicate that they receive emails back the same day. This

inconsistent or non-existent communication has been frustrating and, in our opinion, not to an acceptable standard.

- The transportation policy this year includes a greater degree of clarity of cut-off dates for registration. COPACS would like to further suggest that a date for informing parents of their spot on the waitlist for their bus(es) be set so that families can plan their school year schedules accordingly and not be left in a position of uncertainty.
- The implications of missing the registration deadline for families are high. We respectfully request that a district communications for bus sign-up and a district reminder be sent with **big, bright, bold font**. Parents receive multiple emails a day and emails can easily get lost (see Appendix A for the email in spring 2024). As COPACS and PACs we can also help with communications, but feel that the email from the district could be less subtle and that a reminder would be appreciated.

4) We applaud partnerships, creative solutions and believe that as COPACS, PACs and families, we can help be part of it.

- We support the idea of partnerships with BC Transit, municipalities and active transportation agencies, grants and programming. Certain pinch points, which sounds like, from some parents, may be from North Saanich to Stelly's. One family shared that the BC transit schedules are not well aligned with the school bells and that their child would have to leave north saanich at 6:20 am and arrive at school at 7:30 am. Another family shared the difficulty they have had with the inconsistency of city bus arrival times for getting their child to school on time.
- COPACS would be open to the discussing ideas from educational partners about the role that COPACS or PACs might be able to play. Are there particular pinch points that perhaps PACs or parents could work together to carpool or supplement?
- COPACS further stresses the importance of active transportation opportunities and advocates for and fully supports SD partnerships and initiatives that encourage and facilitate children walking, rolling or riding to school. Advocating for AAA active transportation infrastructure, supporting the start-up of walking school buses or bicycle buses, 'drive to 5 signage' installation with municipal partners are all alternative ways that can support and align with the SD bus

program and potentially alleviate some of the pressures at school parking lots during drop-off/pick-up.

5) Feedback on policy implementation

- Though the opportunity to provide input into Policy 21 is closed, COPACS did receive feedback from parents about Policy 21 that we wanted to pass along.
 - Parents shared that walking limits are still too far, particularly given the lack of lighting and sidewalks.
 - We also heard from parents of french immersion students who felt that considering french learners as second priority riders is wrong. Some kids have had to withdraw from french immersion in middle or high school if they do not secure busing.
 - Routes seem to have remained unchanged for many years so opportunities to examine routes based on demographic and enrolment changes may exist.

- Lastly, we would like to request that as part of major policy changes, particularly those impacting parents significantly, that a feedback opportunity be available to help collate feedback in a consistent and structured way. One parent shared that they felt heard at the Oct 2nd COPACS meeting, which I believe is a core value for all of our partners. Would the SD consider implementing a feedback mechanism from stakeholder groups following a significant policy change, as determined by the board?

Thank you for the incredibly valuable and appreciated bus service and to the staff and drivers that get our precious children to and from school every day faithfully. You are valued and we hope that this letter, though long and detailed and in some cases critical, shows the extent to which families are invested and know this matters.

With our respects, and in service,

Megan Misovic

Chair COPACS

CC:

Trustee VanWell

Trustee Dunford
Trustee Elder
Trustee McMurphy
Trustee Silzer
Trustee Vandall
Trustee Hickman
COPACS exec members

BCC:
School PACs and COPACS reps

Appendix A: Transportation email for bus sign-up

Bus Registration for 2023/24 🔍 Inbox x



Transportation <transportation@saanichschools.ca>
to ▾

Bus Registration is now open! Please click on the link below. Registration for 2023/24 will close on June 16th 2023.

<https://saanichschools.ca/resources/studentsfamilies/transportation#Registration-2>

Thank you,

TRANSPORTATION

Saanich Schools

2125 Keating Cross Road, Saanichton, BC V8M 2A5

We acknowledge and thank the WSÁNEĆ people on whose traditional territory we live, learn, and teach. The WSÁNEĆ people have lived and worked on this land since time immemorial.



↩ Reply

➦ Forward

