

# Area school buses to max out at three kids per seat, or one family per bench

*Catherine Whitnall*

Area school boards are hoping fewer students and extra funding from the province will help contribute to addressing concerns for parents and drivers when school resumes in September.

Recently, the province announced an extra \$70 million for student transportation. The funding included \$44.5 million in support of the Driver Retention Program and \$25.5 million for route protection and to help reduce the number of students on buses.

“(Bus) drivers don’t get paid a lot of money, and the extra they would get from the retention program can make a difference,” said Trillium Lakelands District School Board superintendent of business Tim Ellis of the program that offers \$1,000 twice a year to eligible school bus drivers. “It may be enough of a carrot to bring them back, but we certainly understand their hesitation. Many drivers are older and in that high-risk category.”

What also might make a difference is the roughly 2,000 Trillium Lakelands students that are staying home. Ellis did not know how many are walking students, or how many parents have opted to use alternative transportation.

“So we may not even need as many buses as we would normally,” said Ellis, countering, even if extra buses were needed, there isn’t time. “The ability to simply bring more buses in is not an option to build capacity.”

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Efforts to meet COVID-19 pandemic health and safety protocols and guidelines to keep both students and drivers safe are being made by companies such as Student Transportation Services of Central Ontario, which provides busing for the Kawartha Pine Ridge and Peterborough, Victoria, Northumberland & Clarington Catholic district school boards.

Along with enhanced cleaning, all drivers will receive personal protective equipment, and all students are being asked to wear a mask. A supply of masks will be kept on board for emergency.

Student seating will be limited to one family per bench seat to a maximum of three to a seat. Single child families will be grouped together with classmates where possible. Students will also be loaded from back to front when being picked up, and unloaded from front to back when being dropped off to help limit close contact between students.

Seat assignments are mandatory and will be enforced by principals.

In the event a student has symptoms associated with COVID-19, or think they have been exposed to COVID-19, they will not be allowed on the bus. Parents must screen their child for any symptoms prior to sending them to board the bus, however, if a child gets sick at school or exhibits symptoms, they will not be transported on the bus after school. Drivers will keep a daily log of students riders as part of contact tracing protocols.



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