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Multiple bus cancellations could happen by Thanksgiving due to driver shortages

Published on September 24, 2020 — in Education — by Kirk Winter

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Sinead Fegan, communications officer for the Trillium Lakelands District School Board, and Tim Ellis, superintendent of business, have shared publicly for the first time this week that the board's transportation suppliers are finding it difficult to recruit bus drivers for fall 2020, and that this driver shortage may create serious issues later in October.

"Yes, currently the transportation operators are having an issue with finding drivers," Fegan wrote in an email to the *Advocate*.

"The driver shortage is a provincial issue right now," Fegan added.

Superintendent of business, Tim Ellis reinforced and elaborated on Fegan's points at the monthly board meeting on Sept. 22.

"We are short of drivers and we have already had to cancel a few routes because of sick drivers," Ellis said.

"By Thanksgiving I expect the driver shortages (due to non-COVID related illnesses) to be much worse," Ellis added, "I wouldn't blame drivers one bit for quitting considering the older demographic that most come from."

"I expect by October we may need to have rolling cancellations of buses as drivers get ill," Ellis said. "This is probably going to happen."

"Our transportation partners are only covering routes now by doubling up on runs and using their qualified office staff," Ellis

concluded.

Unifor, the union representing many of the bus drivers in Ontario, is not surprised at all by what is playing out not only in Kawartha Lakes, but right across Ontario.

As early as 2016, Unifor went on record calling the way school boards procure transportation as "deeply flawed" and "a race to the bottom."

Unifor blames the previous Wynne Liberals for implementing something called the Request for Proposals system.

"This system leads to constant instability and contract flipping in the system as school bus companies try to outbid each other for the contracts," Unifor's Deb Montgomery shared.

Montgomery, a veteran school bus driver in Peel Region added, "The RPF system has turned a reliable system for getting students to and from school, offering decent jobs for drivers and consistency for parents and their children into an increasingly precarious industry offering few rewards for drivers and little stability for parents."

The pandemic has only worsened this situation, especially now that drivers are expected to sanitize buses between the morning and afternoon runs, further exposing them to the threat of COVID.

Local parents and drivers have taken to social media to voice their concerns about school buses also travelling at pre-pandemic capacities.

“Our buses are loaded as they normally would be prior to COVID-19,” Fegan acknowledged in her email.

Current provincial regulations allow as many as 72 primary and junior students on

a bus. Everyone is supposed to be wearing a mask. The only nods to driver safety so far are is the seat behind the operator is to remain open, and drivers are to be provided with PPE.

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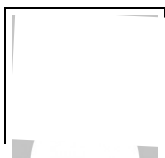
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KIRK WINTER LATEST POSTS



Kirk is a retired high school history teacher and coach who has had a lifelong interest in politics at all levels. Since retiring, Kirk has spent the last three years doing freelance writing of all kinds

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for various platforms. Kirk can often be found sitting in the press gallery at City Hall observing and reporting on the vagaries of local government.

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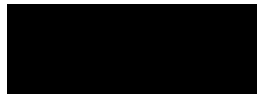
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