

HDSB could change walking distance to high schools policy — impact on GDHS students

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More high school students with the Halton District School Board might be eligible for busing at the start of the next school year.

Trustees are expected to vote at the May 7 board meeting on a recommendation that the walking distance policy for secondary students—used to determine eligibility for board-provided transportation to their school—be lowered to 3.2 kilometres from the current 4 km benchmark for the 2014-15 school year.

The six trustees who commented on the issue at an April school board meeting all indicated they liked the idea of the change, meaning it has a good chance of passing at the May 7 meeting.

The 11-member board of trustees also will consider harmonizing policies for the transportation of French Immersion and English program students.

The recommendations came to the board following a study conducted by Halton Student Transportation Services (HSTS), the consortium that consists of the Halton public and Catholic school boards.

The two Halton boards' current home-to-school distance criteria of 4 km is higher than the provincial average of 3.2 km.

Catholic board trustees are expected to discuss similar student transportation recommendations in May.

"It is expected this reduction in walking distance will benefit both students and school communities, improving student attendance, reducing administration and the associated stress for staff and students by nearly eliminating the need to authorize optional seats on buses, and by reducing the need to provide student municipal bus passes in Oakville

and Burlington...." stated part of a trustees' report on the recommendations, which were received by the public board.

The HSTS feasibility study determined the additional cost to the Halton District School Board to reduce the walk-to distance for secondary students would be \$155,482 and result in an increase of 826 students receiving transportation services (from 2,543 to 3,369), an increase of nearly 33 per cent.

Cost estimates are based on 2013-14 HSTS contract rates.

The number of new students who would be eligible for busing would increase the most at Georgetown District High School with 189 added at an estimated cost of \$29,672 more.

"I think by doing this we are going to help a lot of students," said Oakville trustee and board chair Kelly Amos.

As for the other component of the proposed transportation changes, if the distance-to-stop-criteria for Halton public board elementary French Immersion students attending HDSB schools was reduced to the recommended 0.80 km, the estimated extra cost will be \$31,625.

It would result in no increase in the number of students receiving transportation services but bus routes may be longer for French immersion students, as buses will make more frequent stops.

Those additional costs would be shared on a proportional route by route, board-by-board basis.

"This harmonization will simplify scheduling and routing for the HSTS as well as providing flexibility for the integration of routes. It is expected access to transportation will be more convenient and equitable for families, which would be recognized by a reduction in the number of students being transported to school in private vehicles," stated the report to the public school board.



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