

At the breaking point: Alberta's student transportation system

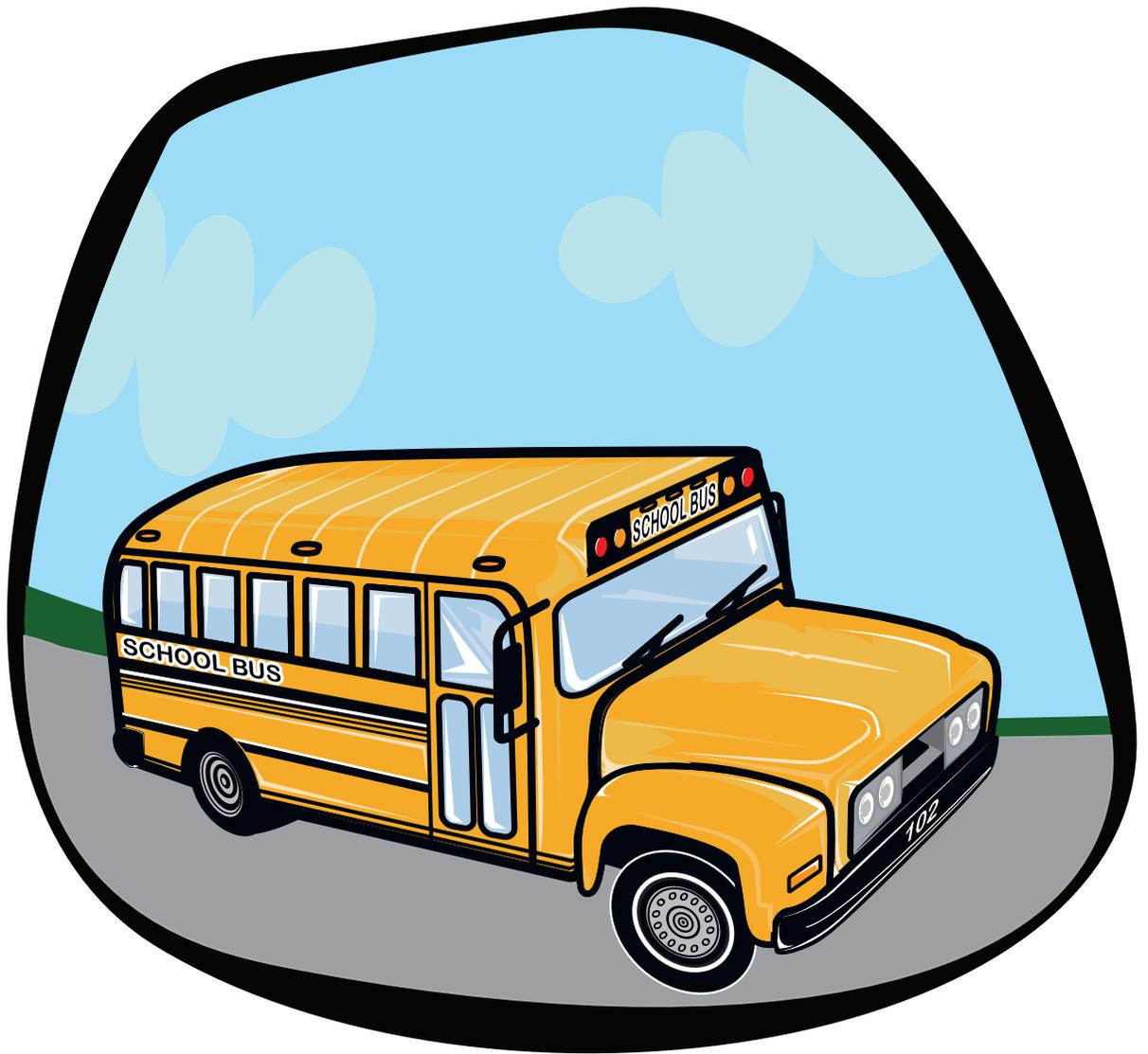


Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction and Purpose	3
Background	3
Information Sources	4
Transportation System Overview	5
The Provincial Legislative Framework	5
Governance and Operational Framework	6
Provincial Funding Framework	7
Transportation System Pressure Points	10
Driver Recruitment and Retention	10
The 2.4 km Walk Limit Standard	12
School Choice and its Impact on Transportation	16
Concerns Regarding the Current Allocation Structures	22
Transportation Fees	28
Promising Practices	32
Conclusion	34

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Executive Summary

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), in its three year strategic plan, has identified student transportation as one of its three advocacy priorities for 2007-2010.

The purpose of this report is to briefly describe Alberta's student transportation system and the key issues that it is facing as a support to the transportation advocacy initiatives of the ASBA and individual school boards.

This report provides a brief overview of Alberta's student transportation system and elaborates on the top five priority pressure points that are of concern to the majority of Alberta's school boards, namely:

- Driver Recruitment and Retention
- The 2.4 km Walk Limit Standard
- School Choice and its Impact on Transportation
- Concerns Regarding the Current Allocation Structures
- Transportation Fees

With reference to these pressure points, Alberta's school boards find themselves squeezed between the cost pressures of driver recruitment and retention, the 2.4 km walk standard and school choice on the one hand and revenue pressures as evidenced by concerns about the current allocation frameworks and transportation fees on the other.

This report also identifies a number of promising practices used by Alberta's school boards as they attempt to deliver efficient student transportation services that are responsive to the needs of their communities.

The report concludes that the ASBA studies to date as well as the September 2007 school board transportation survey all point to overall funding shortfall pressures faced by the majority of school boards in the province as they attempt to deliver service acceptable to their communities. In response, boards have raised transportation fees by approximately 60 per cent in the last three years and/or have borrowed from other areas of board operation to fund their transportation system. These pressures, if left unresolved, will push Alberta's student transportation system past its breaking point.

Introduction and Purpose

Background

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), in its three year strategic plan, has identified student transportation as one of its three advocacy priorities for 2007-2010. This priority placement is a reflection of the many concerns expressed by Alberta's school boards regarding key transportation pressure points that, if left unaddressed, threaten to bring Alberta's student transportation system past its breaking point. Quite simply, student transportation has become "the stone in everybody's shoe".

The purpose of this report is to briefly describe Alberta's student transportation system and the key issues that it is facing as a support to the transportation advocacy initiatives of the ASBA and individual school boards.

To this end, this report will examine the top five (5) priority issues that are of concern to the majority of Alberta's school boards. This report recognizes that there are a number of issues unique to Alberta's metro, urban, rural, separate and francophone boards that limit the effectiveness of their operation. The scope and focus of this report, however, are the issues common to Alberta school jurisdictions and their communities. In addition, this report will briefly examine some of the promising practices used by school jurisdictions that improve the efficiency of their transportation systems.

Information Sources

Obtaining accurate and timely information regarding Alberta's student transportation system is a challenging task. The minister's advisory committee on the funding framework recognizes this difficulty.

The subcommittee has identified a number of challenges, one being the collection and availability of comparable transportation data. The subcommittee noted that there is no common information base among jurisdictions (January 23, 2006).

The information contained in this report represents a compilation from many different sources including:

- Transportation data tracked by Alberta Education;
- ASBA's Metro Report (2005), Small Urban Boards Study (2006), Small Rural Schools: A Policy Perspective (2001), submission to Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) and resolutions passed at the fall annual assembly;
- The Alberta School Act, both present and historical;
- A transportation focus group consisting of representatives from the Student Transportation Association of Alberta (STAA) and the Alberta School Bus Contractors Association; and
- A transportation survey completed by 63 of Alberta's school boards for a response rate of 95 per cent.

Transportation System Overview

The Provincial Legislative Framework

The legislative framework for student transportation in Alberta is provided by section 51 of the Alberta School Act and the Student Transportation Regulation (250/98).

Section 51 of the School Act reads:

51(1) Subject to the regulations, a board shall provide for the transportation of a student to and from the site of the school in which the board has enrolled the student if the student resides

(a) at a distance from the site of that school to be determined by the regulations,

(b) within the attendance area established by the board under section 13, and

(c) within the boundaries of the district or division.

(2) The board is deemed to have complied with subsection (1) when transportation is provided on a route that is not more than 2.4 km from the residence of the student.

(3) Subject to the regulations, a board may charge the parent of a student receiving transportation provided by the board any fee determined by the board whether or not the transportation is provided under subsection (1).

Transportation Regulation 250/98 specifies the minimum distance from school. Section 2 of the regulation reads:

For the purposes of section 51(1)(a) of the Act, a board shall provide for the transportation of a student to and from the site of the school in which the board has enrolled the student if the student resides 2.4 km or more from the school.

The Transportation Regulation also requires boards to transport special education students to the school to which they have been directed, requires parents to provide transportation to a school or bus route if they live outside the designated attendance area of the school and authorizes the charging of a transportation fee within certain limits based on a cost recovery principle.

Both the School Act and the Transportation Regulation reference the walk limit or service standard of 2.4 km. This walk limit establishes the legislated definition of the student eligible to receive board provided transportation services.

This walk limit is of significant concern to Alberta's school boards and will be dealt with more fully under the issues section of this report.

Governance and Operational Framework

Pursuant to section 51 of Alberta's School Act, Alberta's school boards and charter schools are required to provide the governance and oversight for student transportation services to eligible students. Boards establish their transportation policies and service standards, hire staff to implement these policies and monitor service delivery.

The Alberta government, during the educational restructuring initiatives of the mid 90's, briefly considered the establishment of regional transportation authorities to oversee the provision of regional student transportation. It abandoned this notion after consultations with ASBA and individual school boards. Alberta's Learning Commission (2003) recommended (Recommendation 83) that Alberta's school boards explore the provision of some joint services as an efficiency and service delivery measure. A number of rural school boards are currently providing "cooperative" transportation services.

At the operational level, a number of organizations exist that are devoted to improving the safety, efficiency and profile of student transportation services in Alberta and to advancing the general welfare of association members. These organizations are:

- Student Transportation Association of Alberta (STAA)

The STAA membership eligibility is defined as any person engaged in an administrative position or employed by a government agency, with responsibility for student transportation service.

- Alberta School Bus Contractors Association (ASBCA)

The ASBCA is comprised of bus contractors engaged by Alberta's school boards. It was formed in 1959 and, like the STAA, has dedicated itself to the improvement and development of student transportation in the province of Alberta.

- Alberta Student Transportation Advisory Council (ASTAC)

The ASTAC was founded in 1993 and consists of six members from the STAA as well as six members from the ASBCA. ASTAC hosts an annual joint convention of STAA and ASBCA members devoted to furthering the training of members and enhancing student transportation safety.

Minister of Education, Gene Zwozdesky (2006) congratulated ASTAC at the conclusion of its annual conference. Minister Zwozdesky wrote:

The contribution of the ASTAC in promoting student transportation safety throughout the province is commendable. The Association's work, through the School Bus Safety Committee, and the input you provide to the Canadian D250 standards for busses, local and provincial safety campaigns, and driver drug/alcohol screening programs is very much appreciated.

The Provincial Funding Framework

The provincial transportation funding framework is a complex funding allocation scheme structured around funding to school jurisdictions based on jurisdiction type and transported student characteristics. The funding framework is underpinned by a cost model that is intended to reflect the actual cost of providing mandated transportation services in the various school jurisdictions of the province.

The funding framework is an allocation method only as the Funding Manual for School Authorities notes that school jurisdictions have the flexibility to use the transportation funds to best meet their local needs pursuant to board policies and service standards.

The purpose of this report is not to elaborate on the allocation formulas but rather to provide an overview that provides context to the question of allocation pressure points discussed later in this report. Readers interested in a complete description of the allocation formulas are asked to reference the Alberta Education Funding Manual available at <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/funding/manual.aspx>.

The transportation funding framework is structured around funding to metro urban jurisdictions (Calgary and Edmonton public and separate), urban jurisdictions and rural jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions like francophone regional authorities and some combination urban/rural jurisdictions are eligible for components of both rural and urban funding.

In addition to jurisdiction type, the allocation methods are also structured around the concepts of eligible transported passenger and the transportation of special education students. A fuel escalation clause applies to all three funding frameworks.

In summary, the transportation funding allocation methods currently in place in Alberta are:

1. Metro Urban Framework

The Metro Urban Funding framework is currently under review and, as such, changes to the allocation method are expected in the future.

The metro framework is currently structured around a block allocation based on the number of **expected** eligible passengers. The number of expected eligible passengers is based on a formula that considers benchmark school size, the number of schools by level, the number of funded students and ECS funded children, the residential area, and the number of funded students with severe disabilities based on the jurisdiction profile. The formula does not explicitly consider the provincial walk standard of 2.4 km although Alberta Education maintains that funding to metro jurisdictions is sufficient to provide service to eligible passengers outside the 2.4 km walk limit.

As well, commencing in 2001-2002, an additional grant of \$5 million was allocated to the metro boards over and above the amount provided by the allocation formula.

Effective the 2007 school year, metro boards were provided with funding to implement a computerized transportation software program like Edulog or Versa Track. It is anticipated that the implementation of these software programs will provide for a transported student information base that can be used as the foundation for a simplified revised metro allocation formula that considers actual eligible transported students rather than expected.

2. Urban Transportation Funding

The urban transportation funding framework, unlike the metro, is based on multiplying the **actual** number of transported eligible transported students (Grades 1 to 12) and children (kindergarten) by the urban per student transportation rate. The urban transportation framework also includes inter-school transportation support for “program reasons” and “program considerations”. Urban jurisdictions, since the early 2000’s, have been using computerized software programs to track and record transported student data.

A key benchmark consideration for urban jurisdictions is a municipal population of 10,000 as this provides the demarcation point between the urban transportation funding formula and the rural transportation funding formula. This demarcation point, as will be discussed later in this report, is the source of considerable discontent and concern amongst urban boards.

3. Rural Transportation Funding

The core rural transportation funding framework is based on the number of eligible transported passengers/children (ECS), a jurisdiction population density factor and the distance each eligible student resides from the school in their attendance area. In addition, the rural transportation funding framework includes a student “weighting” factor where students in junior/senior high grades are weighted at 1.5 those in elementary grades. This “bum” factor is intended to compensate for the fact that older students are bigger and therefore can comfortably only fit two per seat on a yellow bus rather than three for elementary students.

Like the urban transportation support, the rural transportation allocation formula includes a provision for interschool transportation support for “program reasons” and “program considerations”.

The rural transportation allocation formula also includes a provision for “cooperative transportation” intended to provide an incentive for joint transportation services in rural regions.

4. Special Transportation Funding

Special transportation funding is provided to rural, urban and metro school jurisdictions for students and children (kindergarten) with disabilities riding on a bus designated only for the transportation of those students because the severity of their disability prevents them from using regular transportation services. Location of the program or school (the 2.4 km standard) in relation to the student’s residence is not a consideration in the funding provided.

Transportation System Pressure Points

Alberta's student transportation system is large and complex. Approximately half (50 per cent) of Alberta's 600,000 students are transported daily to school by school board operated yellow busses, contracted service provider or municipal transportation service. In rural Alberta alone, school busses travel an annual route distance of 68 million km, enough to circle the earth almost 3000 times. Alberta's student transportation safety record is enviable, with very few recorded fatalities resulting from school bus accidents.

Despite an enviable safety and operational record, significant clouds of concern are brewing on Alberta's student transportation horizon. If left unaddressed, these issues will continue to grow and undermine a strong transportation system. The balance of this report will outline the five (5) priority pressure points being faced by Alberta's student transportation system today.

Driver Recruitment and Retention

The challenge of driver recruitment and retention is one of the common issues identified by most Alberta school boards in the September 2007 survey. A few excerpts from the survey help to illustrate the depth of concern being expressed by many school boards:

- > Issue #1 Labour shortage. The CBE has decreased the number of bus routes significantly in each of the last 2 years and has also provided additional increases to the contracted carriers to go directly to driver's wages. Despite these efforts, there are a number of bus routes that cannot be covered. This is obviously a complex problem that goes beyond school transportation; however, slowing the pace of the outward growth and building schools in communities where the young families live would reduce the reliance on bussing.
- > Issue #1. Driver recruiting and retention - although we can afford the equipment to transport our students, we have a very difficult time to hire and retain drivers - partly because we can only afford to pay a certain amount. We have increased this as of late and offered other incentives but the "Alberta Advantage" and trying to compete with the private sector is very difficult. If we had more drivers available we could also reduce our ride times. The only resolution would be to have the capability to substantially increase pay to make it more attractive as a part time job.
- > Issue #1. Shortage of bus drivers - affects reliability of service... The district has increased driver salaries in our contracts with carriers over the past five years by \$20 per day to attract and retain drivers. This has seen some success but the problem is not yet entirely solved. Carriers are still short of the drivers the district requires.

> Issue #1. Insufficient drivers. Supply is too low and we offered 3 “one time increases” last year. No contractor wants to bid the Grande Prairie routes. We may not have any buses next year in the City and that is a real possibility.

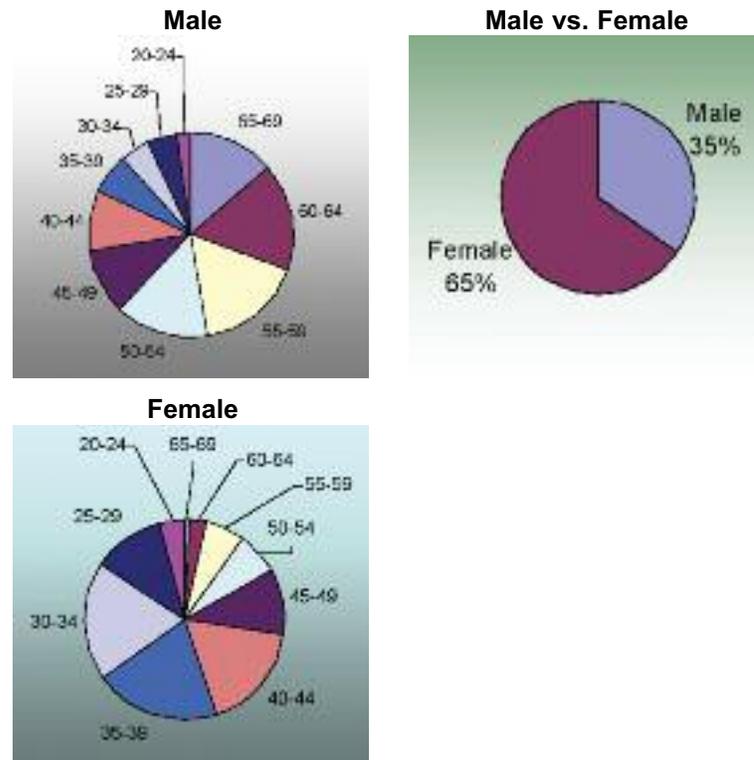
ASTAC has also identified driver recruitment and retention as a key provincial transportation issue. In a letter to then Minister of Education, Gene Zwozdesky (December 2005), the Council wrote:

With a strong economy in Alberta, it has made school bus drivers a scarce resource and in some large urban areas, we are facing as much as a 25% shortage of operators. Without drivers some children, at some point, may not get to school. Drivers and transportation personnel are working all the miracles they can but the magic seems to be running out and ride times are getting longer. We are setting ourselves up for a failure, and a crisis, which makes for unhappy parents, educators, trustees, transportation service personnel and most importantly children.

When asked to comment on why driver recruitment and retention is such a growing issue, transportation focus group participants pointed to three causes: an aging driver workforce and an inability to attract younger drivers, the need for competitive salaries, and lack of bus driver role status.

Diversified, (see Figure 1) Edmonton’s largest student transportation carrier, provides the following bus driver demographic profile:

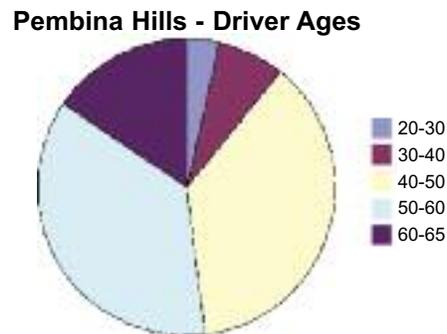
Figure 1



Diversified employs 865 drivers. Its bus driver demographics indicate that over one third of all its drivers are over age 50 with a full two thirds of its male drivers over the age of 50.

An example from rural Alberta (see Figure 2) illustrates a parallel bus driver demographic. Pembina Hills Regional School Division (with a mandatory bus driver retirement age of 65) employs 83 bus drivers. Of these, 52 per cent are over the age of 50.

Figure 2



With regard to daily salary, the transportation focus group opinion was that the average bus driver gross salary in Alberta ranges from \$40 - \$60 per day. Some drivers receive benefits, others do not.

In summary, Alberta's school boards are of the view that the current salary and working conditions for bus drivers, combined with a perceived lack of role status, are such that recruitment and retention is becoming increasingly difficult. While they would like to be able to address this issue, they find themselves financially unable to do so without negatively affecting other aspects of school board operations.

The 2.4 KM Walk Limit Standard

Alberta Education, in both the current School Act and Transportation Regulation 250/98, references 2.4 km as the distance to a school beyond which school boards are required to provide transportation to a student. In addition, the existing transportation funding framework is based on this standard.

The 2.4 km standard in use today is the "line in the sand" issue for both school boards and Alberta Education with regard to those students eligible for transportation funding.

History of the 2.4 km Standard

Discussions with Alberta Education officials reveal that the 2.4 km standard "has been around as far back as anyone can remember".

A review of the various iterations of Alberta's School Act indicates that the 2.4 km (one and a half mile) standard may well have its roots in the Northwest Territories Ordinance of 1901. Section 142 of the 1901 School Ordinance reads:

In every district where there are at least fifteen children between the ages of seven and fourteen inclusive resident within a radius of one mile and a half from the school house it shall be compulsory for the board of such district to keep the school open for the whole year. C.O., c. 75, s. 225.

While section 142 of the 1901 School Ordinance does not specifically address conveyance, it does address the issue of walk limit expectation, namely, one mile and a half (2.4 km).

School Board provided transportation to school was introduced to Alberta with the creation of consolidated districts. Section 40v of the 1919 School Amendment Act reads:

In addition to the powers, duties and liabilities conferred and imposed by the preceding section, the board of trustees of any consolidated school district shall supply and operate vans or conveyances for the conveyance to and from school of all pupils residing on any quarter section therein whose nearest boundary is more than one and one half miles distant in a direct line from the school site of the consolidated district...

This one and a half mile (2.4 km) benchmark appears in the various versions of Alberta's School Act. For example:

Part X (conveyance of school children in consolidated districts) of the 1931 Alberta School Act is identical to the 1919 provision:

In addition to the powers, duties and liabilities conferred and imposed by the preceding section, the board of trustees of any consolidated school district shall supply and operate vans or conveyances for the conveyance to and from school of all pupils residing on any quarter section therein whose nearest boundary is more than one and one half miles distant in a direct line from the school site of the consolidated district...

Section 156(2) of the 1970 School Act reads;

The board shall be deemed to have complied with subsection (1) when transport is provided on a route that is not more than 1 1/2 miles from the residence of the pupil's parent.

Section 34 (2) of the 1988 School Act reads;

The board shall be deemed to have complied with subsection (1) when transportation is provided on a route that is not more than 2.4 km from the residence of the student's parent.

Section 34 of the 1988 School Act is identical to section 51 (2) of the current School Act of Alberta.

The ASBA Position Regarding the 2.4 km Standard

The ASBA and its member boards have long held that the 2.4 km walk limit standard is unreasonable in today's society. Its policy statement 5.D.01 reads:

The Alberta School Boards Association believes the minimum distance limit for transportation funding for K-6 students should be reduced to 1.6 km (1 mile) from the designated school.

The ASBA 2006 Small Urban Boards study sees the 2.4 km limit as unreasonable in the current urban environment. The report was adopted at the 2006 ASBA assembly with the recommendation:

Reduce the 2.4 km requirement for eligibility for transportation funding to 1 km. The 2.4 km requirement does not take into account safety concerns and parental expectations in today's environment. In urban settings a walk limit of 1 km is much more reasonable and would better meet the needs and expectations of parents and students.

The 2006 resolution does not parallel the 2003 resolution and could be seen to replace the earlier resolution regarding student walk limits.

Why School Boards Find the 2.4 km Standard Problematic

The September 2007 school board transportation survey deals explicitly with the question of walk limits. Question 16 asks: "Does your board have policy/administrative procedure that establish walk limits?" In response, 21 boards answered "no" while 41 answered "yes". In summary, the vast majority of Alberta's school boards have established student walk limits that are significantly less than the 2.4 km provincial standard. A number of boards differentiate walk limits based on the age level of the student and safety concerns like the presence of major highways. Walk limits range from gate service for some rural students and special education and medically fragile students to a variety of distances from 250 m, 400 m and 800 m.

Some comments regarding the 2.4 km provincial standard made by school boards illustrate their concerns:

- > Provincial walk boundaries should be lowered to 1.6 kms. Given the climate (days below zero degrees Celsius), northern latitude (hours of darkness), and society (safety concerns) we live in combined with health issues (heavy backpacks) it is evident a 2.4 km walk boundary is excessive for ECS to grade nine students.
- > The 2.4 km distance that is funded (and thus the expectation for walk distance) is an unrealistic distance for students in kindergarten to grade 5.

- > Walking distance to bus stops (although the distance may range from only 300 to 450 metres) is "unacceptable" to parents. In the majority of families, both parents work and are not able to supervise their younger children as they walk to or from the bus stop to home. Therefore, they push to have a stop a block away from their home, for safety reasons, and don't understand why we cannot do this, in most cases. The district set an eligible bus ridership distance of 1.2 km. Even at this distance, the district gets many complaints from parents. If the district were to comply with the Alberta government's walk distance of 2.4 km, there would be a huge political fight from parents. Parents are pushing for stops at their child's daycares/day homes rather than their home address.

- > We believe that this distance factor needs to be revisited by Alberta Ed. The minimum 2.4km distance should not be the only factor considered when funding students in rural Alberta. We believe that things such as safety, proximity to a school, traffic issues (i.e. walking on a highway) and how far a student should walk at -35C should be considered. Whenever we have asked the questions we have been told that there is enough funding provided to accommodate the ineligible students that we transport. We are also told that it would cost too much because of the impact that a reduction in this distance would have in the urban areas. In large urban areas parents may have other options available to them that rural parents do not. For example: public transit systems, cabs or car pooling. We believe that the rural and urban scenarios should be separate when it comes to addressing the minimum eligible distance.

- > Distance of 2.4 km is a long distance for students to walk. - This is a safety issue especially in the winter when students are walking in cold weather. Some parents do not have a vehicle to transport their child/children. Some children are too young to ride the City Transit System on their own. Older children that could access the City Transit System may not be able to afford the cost. - Some children must walk on their own and in the winter months it is dark in the morning. - Parents are calling with concerns regarding the distance. How might this issue be resolved? - Alberta Education should revisit the 2.4 km distance for funding.

- > Disconnect between funding and expectations. The School Act and funding is based on the expectation that students should walk up to 2.4 km to their designated school. The city has changed and so have parent expectations and anxieties. Single parent families or families with both parents working are now the norm and adequate daycare is not available. These situations increase pressures to provide bussing to students in closer proximity to schools than ever before. In addition, choice has become a priority and the expectation is that bussing will be provided as part of those choices.

The above comments are just some of the many concerns raised by school boards about the 2.4 km walk standard in the September 2007 survey.

In short, Alberta's school boards see the 2.4 km provincial standard as an artifact of history. Very few use it as an operational guideline as most have established walk distances significantly shorter than 2.4 km because of the expectations of parents and concerns about student safety.

The 2.4 km walk standard is important for transportation funding purposes in that it defines those students that are eligible for transportation funding. The September 2007 survey for example, asked: "Does your jurisdiction provide transportation to ineligible students?" Of the 63 responses received, 55 boards (87 per cent) provide transportation to ineligible students.

Alberta's school boards want a more realistic and current benchmark for funding and walk limit purposes.

School Choice and Its Impact on Transportation

The provision of and access to Choice is generally acknowledged as a cornerstone of western democratic and economic theory and practice.

The Provincial Position Regarding School Choice

Alberta Education strongly supports and promotes the notion of school choice. The Ministry has identified seven principles that are meant to underpin the delivery of education in the province. These are: student centred, accessible, collaborative, accountable, responsive, innovative and equitable. The "responsive" principle reads:

The education system is flexible, anticipates student needs and provides opportunities for parent and student choice.

This principle is reflected in goal three of Alberta Education's Business Plan, "Highly Responsive and Responsible Ministry", in Ministerial Order No. 004/98 (Education Delivery), in Alberta's School Act (responsibility to resident students, charter schools and alternative programs), in the 2003 Learning Commission Report and in Alberta Education communications about Alberta's K-12 Education system.

Choice and variety is embedded in Ministerial order 004/98 which states:

Schools must engage students in a variety of activities that enable them to acquire the expected learnings. Schools have authority to deploy resources and may use any instructional technique acceptable to the community as long as the standards are achieved. Schools, teachers and students are encouraged to take advantage of various delivery options, including the use of technology, distance learning and the workplace.

Choice is supported by a school board's obligation to students outlined in section 45(3) of Alberta's School Act.

A board shall enroll a resident student of the board or of another board in the school operated by the board that is requested by the parent of the student if, in the opinion of the board asked to enroll the student, there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student.

Choice is further supported by Alberta's School Act through the provision of Charter Schools (Division 3) and Alternative Programs (section 21), provisions unique to Canada.

The Alberta Commission on Learning Report (2003) devotes an entire section to the discussion of the positive attributes of School Choice. The Commission Report recommends:

25. Continue to provide high quality choices while, at the same time, preserving and enhancing public schools.

In support of this recommendation the Commission Report states:

While Albertans are strong supporters of the public education system, they also clearly value their ability to make choices among public and separate schools, francophone schools, charter and private schools, distance learning and home schooling. The availability of choice has had many benefits, including encouraging the public system to be more responsive to the expectations of parents. This is reinforced by the fact that provincial grants follow the students to the schools of their choice.

The Alberta Education Website, in describing Alberta's education system, highlights the question of School Choice:

About School Choice

When it comes to selecting a school, parents and students can choose from a wide range of options. They can select from public schools, Catholic schools, Francophone schools, private schools, and charter schools. They can also access a number of unique and innovative programs - including home education, online/virtual schools, outreach programs and alternative programs. Parents can also opt to home school their children.

Choice is one of the important principles Alberta's education system is built on.

The above excerpts illustrate how deeply embedded the principle of school choice is in Alberta and how strongly Alberta Education supports its provision.

The Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta, in a recent 2006 ruling (No. 0601-08606) commented on this legislative support for choice:

While the legislative scheme references geographic boundaries, it also emphasizes choice and flexibility... This legislative scheme, in my opinion, seeks to ensure that the education system respects the choices of parents regarding the education of their children.

ASBA's Position Regarding School Choice

Most of Alberta's school jurisdictions have embraced the notion of choice in schools and program delivery. Partly because of this, the issue of school choice and the related questions of program delivery, access, transportation and funding are significant pressure points for Alberta school jurisdictions.

Alberta Education, although it supports and encourages school choice, does not fund this principle for Alberta's school boards. The ASBA's position, presented to the 2003 Learning Commission, is that the province should fund what it mandates. With regard to funding for transportation to a school of choice, ASBA's presentation to the Learning Commission highlights the double standard in place for transportation funding for choice. It reads:

Currently, students who choose to attend a "program of choice" offered in a jurisdiction school, other than their neighbourhood school, are responsible for their transportation costs. Conversely, students who opt to attend a charter school have their transportation costs covered. Students in the public education system should have the right to enrol in "programs of choice" offered by their own school. The transportation costs associated with a student exercising this right should be covered by the government.

Similarly, the ASBA Metro Study (2005) recommended:

4. The province reconsider its position on the funding of transportation services to programs of choice and the additional cost of transporting students to these sites be recognized.

And the Small Urban Boards Study (2006) recommendation 2 echoed:

ii. Support the costs of transporting students to programs of choice where boards have determined that choice is in the best interests of the student.

The Small Urban Boards Study qualifies funding for transportation to a school of choice with the notion that such choice, as determined by the local school board "is in the best interests of the student". This position is echoed by some rural school boards who are concerned that their support of school choice, in some instances, can have negative impacts on smaller community schools.

What Are School Boards Doing and Saying Regarding School Choice?

For purposes of this report, comments regarding school choice are focused around the issue of transportation of students to a school of choice.

The September 2007 ASBA transportation survey asked a number of questions related to transportation to a school of choice. Based on the responses from Alberta's school boards, the following observations can be made:

- Approximately 61 per cent of school boards in Alberta have school board policy/procedure that supports choice of school attendance.
- Approximately 73 per cent of school board transportation policies/procedures support school of choice attendance, at least in some circumstances.
- Of those boards that support school choice through their transportation policies, 45 per cent do so at no additional cost to the student, 40 per cent implement a user pay system, and 15 per cent charge a general transportation fee to all students transported.
- Of those boards that charge a user fee for transportation to a school of choice, 67% assess the same fee for all students while 33% differentiate the fee based on factors like distance to the school of choice.

School board comments regarding the issue of transportation to a school of choice illustrate the “sandwich” position that school boards find themselves in. One side of the sandwich is framed by Alberta Education and parent expectations regarding the desired availability of programs and schools of choice. The other side of the sandwich is framed by provincial transportation and funding policies that do not support the creation of or transportation to schools of choice within public and separate school jurisdictions.

Some comments from the survey help illustrate this pressure point faced by school jurisdictions.

- Transportation is being provided to a specialized (Mennonite) program to a school outside of the students' attendance area. Students reside in a community within walking distance to a public school but are bussed to a designated school offering the Mennonite program 20 km away. Students would not otherwise be attending a public school.
- Choice has become a priority and the expectation is that bussing will be provided as part of those choices.
- Meeting the rising expectations of parents for service that provides short ride times and choice to schools other than the designated school.

The length to which parents will go to receive transportation to a school of choice, including legal remedies, and the competing service and financial pressures faced by school boards is graphically illustrated by the following excerpt from the Western Times (Bruce Campbell), a weekly newspaper in the Foothills School Division.

Jessica Hood's life has returned to some normalcy after a year of having to drive her children from her Gladys Ridge home to attend Okotoks schools.

Her children are now being picked up at home after the Foothills School Division voted on Sept. 19 to reinstate bussing for approximately 110 school-of-choice students.

It started for us on Monday and right now there is no difference in my children's schedule than there was two years ago (when the division eliminated pick-up and drop-off of school of choice students) — it's even the same bus driver," Hood said.

Hood, who has a child in three different Okotoks schools, said she had to switch from full-time work to part-time last year in order to get her children to school.

Hood stressed that when she inquired about where her children could go to school in 2004, she was told her children were eligible to go to Okotoks.

I didn't hear anything about school of choice," she said.

Foothills School Division began providing "school of choice bussing" again for approximately 80 students last week who were affected by school trustees' June 2006 decision to eliminate bussing for students electing to attend schools outside their geographic boundary.

Trustees voted at their Sept. 19 meeting to reinstate bussing for the estimated 110 students who were affected by the June 2006 decision. The students must still live in their same residence and be attending the same school when the 2006 decision was made.

The Sept. 19 decision was done approximately one month after Court of Queen's Bench Judge Dennis Hart ruled the board did not provide proper public consultation in its decision in June of 2006 to eliminate the bussing.

Drew Chipman, division secretary-treasurer, said in an interview Monday that eventually 110 students will now receive school of choice bussing for the 2007/08 school year.

He said the division will be altering approximately 17 bus routes to accommodate the new proposal with transportation times increasing from five to 35 minutes one-way for some students depending on the route.

Two new buses will likely be added as a result of Hart's quashing of the June 2006 decision. The division is also presently looking to hire more drivers.

The extra cost has been estimated at \$148,000 for this school year.

The division is facing a financial crunch this year in transportation because High River has gone over the 10,000 population mark — meaning the community has lost its rural designation, costing the division approximately \$165,000 in transportation revenue from the province.

Division chairman Jerry Muelaner said trustees and administration chose not to appeal Hart's decision.

"We felt we had to bring some closure to this whole issue," Muelaner said in an interview after the Sept. 19 meeting. "We thought coming out of the next election (Oct. 15), if the board wants to go into public consultation let's do it as quickly as possible.... If we had appealed it would have left the whole issue hanging."

He said all possibilities will be looked at during consultation, ranging from continued service to eliminating school of choice bussing.

Jay Lyons, who is one of 10 parents who took the school board to court over its decision to eliminate the bussing, is happy to see the bussing reinstated. Now he is hoping any public consultation is open and transparent —that there aren't any predetermined decisions.

He is also pleased to have the board acknowledge the significance of High River losing its rural designation. (Okotoks tipped over 10,000 people earlier in the decade, which cost the division approximately \$220,000).

He said the students receiving the school-of-choice bussing have been portrayed as causing the division's shortfall.

The reality is, the funding formula is broken, these guys (the division) are not getting enough funding from the province," Lyons said. "The easy solution is, there are 4,000 students getting transportation, so let's knock off the 280 students (who had their bussing eliminated in 2006)."

He stressed that none of the parents with children receiving school-of-choice bussing have ever been opposed to paying fees.

The decision of 2006 did not eliminate students going to a school outside their designated boundary. However, the division would not provide pick-up service for those students. Students had to find their own way to a bus stop within the school boundary if they chose to use the bus service.

As well, parents had to pay a transportation fee, which they are continuing to pay.

The above excerpt illustrates the sense of entitlement that parents are beginning to expect with regard to transportation to a school of choice.

Most school boards see the issue of providing schools of choice and providing transportation to schools of choice as an "unfunded mandate" that must be addressed in the provincial funding framework. Most school boards want to have local policy control over the question of access to programs and schools of choice to ensure that it is in the best interests of students and communities.

Concerns Regarding The Current Allocation Structures

Funding for student transportation is structured around the type of jurisdiction in which the student resides. As such the current transportation funding frameworks vary markedly between metro, urban and rural jurisdictions. On the 2007 transportation survey, 4 boards identified themselves as metro, 9 as urban, 25 as rural and 25 as a combination of urban and rural.

A number of boards in the transportation survey identified the current transportation funding allocation structures as inadequate to meet their needs. As well, the ASBA Metro Report (2005), and Small Urban Boards Study (2006) identified significant concerns with existing allocation structures. The ASBA Small Rural Schools study (2001) generally supported the existing rural transportation funding formula with some exceptions. The comments below summarize the funding allocation issues raised in the September 2007 board survey and the various ASBA studies.

Metro Transportation Funding Allocation

The current Metro funding framework is a block allocation based on a per student amount (\$499) multiplied by the number of estimated eligible students.

The ASBA Metro Study (2005) found that transportation funding to metro boards was not sufficient to support the metro student transportation systems as they were being operated. The report noted that all four metro boards rely heavily on transportation fees, for both eligible and ineligible riders, to fund transportation services. The report made two key recommendations with regard to student transportation funding:

1. The province immediately undertake a thorough review of the metro transportation allocation formula. It is evident that simply increasing the amount per student will not fully address the shortcomings of current formula. The difference in costs and services between the metro boards is too significant to be remedied by a uniform increase in the per student amount. The formula is no longer responsive to the needs and circumstances of the metro boards in the provision of student transportation services and a complete review is necessary.
2. The review take into account the wide range of factors that impact on the cost of the transportation system.

The Metro Study suggested that the following factors need to be considered in a new transportation funding framework:

1. Needs and requirements of special education student transportation
2. Location of magnet schools
3. Urban sprawl – need to transport students from high growth areas on the periphery of the cities into the lower growth areas in older neighbourhoods

4. Traffic complexities and impact on ride times
5. Student safety – traffic patterns, school bus drop off bypasses, major traffic routes and the nature of the areas that students must pass through
6. Need to utilize a wide range of transportation service providers – from taxis to yellow busses
7. Increasing costs of accessing public transit
8. Needs of students and demands of parents
9. Costs of securing, training and maintaining qualified drivers and other persons
10. Programs of choice
11. Small schools by necessity
12. School closures
13. Service carrier contracts

All of the metro boards identified special education, student choice and school locations as significant issues impacting on the cost of providing transportation.

The 2003 ASBA Fall General Meeting (5.P.01) also dealt with the inequity of the student weighting factor applied to the rural funding framework but not the urban or metro. Currently, for example, eligible rural students in grades seven to twelve accessing transportation are weighted at 1.5 while the same students accessing urban and metro transportation are weighted at 1.0.

In short, the ASBA has asked Alberta Education to design an equitable funding framework, rather than relying on a simple per student block allocation, which is more sensitive to the individual needs of Alberta's four metro boards and is based on actual student data rather than predicted.

Alberta Education, through the Funding Framework Review Committee, is currently undertaking a review of metro transportation funding. As a first step in this review, all four metro boards were allocated funds to implement computerized student transportation information systems. This information, once collected, will be used to structure a new metro transportation funding framework.

Urban Transportation Funding Allocation

The urban transportation funding framework, like the metro, is based on a block allocation determined by multiplying the number of eligible students times the applicable urban rate (10,000-19,999 population = \$584; 20,000-29,999 population = \$541; 30,000 + population = \$499).

As noted above, urban boards can access both urban and rural transportation funding if they encompass both a rural and urban area.

In addition to the 2.4 km eligible student walk standard and financial support to programs of choice discussed earlier in this report, urban boards identified the following concerns regarding the current transportation allocation formula.

Student Weighting Factor

As noted above, the rural transportation funding framework weights students in Grades 7 to 12 at 1.5 and students in Grades 1 to 6 at 1.0. The urban transportation funding framework (as well as the metro) weights all eligible students in Grades 1 to 12 at 1.0. Urban boards see this as an inequitable standard and wonder why all students in Grades 7 to 12, regardless of jurisdiction attended, can't be weighted at 1.5.

Distance Travelled

The current rural transportation funding framework includes funding support based on the distance students travel to their attendance area school. Urban boards would like a similar consideration in the urban transportation funding framework. They argue that urban sprawl and rapidly growing suburbs without schools has created a number of situations where students need to travel significant distances to attend a school. These distances are not recognized in the current urban (or metro) funding frameworks. Again, urban boards see this as an inequity or double standard that needs to be addressed.

Co-operative Transportation Funding for Urban Boards

A number of urban boards would like the transportation allocation formula to include support for co-operative bussing, as is the case in the rural transportation funding framework. They argue that a financial incentive for co-operative bussing would provide greater efficiencies overall and would align with the Commission Report (2003) recommendations twenty one (21) and eighty three (83) for support to shared services. These are:

21. Encourage shared use of facilities, programs and services among school jurisdictions and with the community.

83. Provide provincial incentives and support to school jurisdictions that wish to consider joint services and amalgamations in order to improve services to their students.

Urban Population Thresholds

A number of urban boards are concerned about the population thresholds contained in the current urban funding framework, particularly the threshold of 10,000 that separates the urban funding framework from the rural (e.g. 10,000-19,999 population = \$584; 20,000-29,999 population = \$541; 30,000 + population = \$499). They argue that these thresholds are arbitrary and once reached, funding is reduced yet demands for levels of service remain unchanged. Some comments from urban boards help illustrate this concern:

> When the City of Spruce Grove hits over 20,000 people the board will receive a reduction in funding to the amount of \$43.00 per student. The

cost associated with providing these services will not go down so it is unclear why there would be a reduction in funding.

- > Hinton becoming a community of 10,000 and the accompanying very significant decrease in funding which has no logical explanation. Grande Yellowhead estimates that the funding reduction will be approximately \$300,000.00 (2006).
- > The division is facing a financial crunch this year in transportation because High River has gone over the 10,000 population mark — meaning the community has lost its rural designation, costing the division approximately \$165,000 in transportation revenue from the province.

In summary, urban boards do not see the existing urban transportation funding framework as meeting the needs of their students and communities. They would like to see a new funding framework introduced that recognizes their concerns.

Rural Transportation Funding Allocation

The rural transportation funding framework is based on the population density of the jurisdiction and the distance travelled by students to the school in their attendance areas. Like the urban framework, it has provision for transportation to adjacent schools for program reasons. It is the only funding framework (other than the Francophone provision) that recognizes a weighted load factor for students in Grades 7 to 12.

Rural school jurisdictions that participated in the 2001 ASBA study, *Small Rural Schools: A Policy Perspective*, had few concerns about government policy on student transportation. They commented on the flexibility provided in policy to transport students to small rural schools and for students in small rural schools to access programs in neighbouring schools.

Respondents to the 2007 transportation survey were not as complimentary to the rural transportation funding framework, noting concerns primarily with the population density grid, the 2.4 km walk standard, lack of funding for student choice and concerns about declining student populations.

With regard to the density grid, a number of boards suggested that large rural school jurisdictions need to have more than one density rate applied as population densities vary markedly within the jurisdiction. For example, some boards noted:

- > Consideration should be given to a funding formula that addresses significant differences in student density within Districts. Funding the areas of lowest density, significantly higher would avoid deficit situations.
- > Very large areas of our school division are very sparsely populated. The base grant amount in these areas is insufficient to provide transportation

for students. The issue could be resolved by implementing a formula that would recognize these areas of sparsity within a school division whose total population slots them in a high density grid.

- > Our District is made up two diversely different areas. The South is highly populated and the North is sparsely populated. Because of this, the present funding formula does not work. If the two were treated as separate areas for the sake of funding we could survive under the present formula.

Other boards referenced the Milne Report (2005) which also questions the equity of the current density grid and recommends a review of the grid as, in its words, “One may conclude (with apologies to George Orwell) that all rural school boards are funded equitably under the Rural Transportation funding formula, but some boards are more equitably funded than others.”

A number of school boards raised concerns about the negative funding impact a declining student population base has on their transportation operations.

- > The funding formula does not address declining enrolments in rural jurisdictions. In rural Alberta we face a steady decline in student enrolment. We find that we lose students yet bus route distances often remain the same. As a result, we receive fewer dollars to operate the routes. Our only option is to consolidate bus routes and this often results in longer bus rides for students.
- > Decrease in enrolment means decreased revenue, but expenses don't decrease proportionately. We lost over 200 students last year, but they don't disappear from the same areas so it doesn't necessarily result in less school buses. We travel greater distances for fewer students.
- > Due to the Alberta farming economy, children that graduate are no longer returning to the family farm. We are trying to overcome this problem by cutting routes where we can but the funding per student is impacting not only transportation but our schools as well.
- > Our land base is so large and more families are moving closer to the urban areas but we still have those students in the rural areas that have to be transported from the farthest corners of the division.

Special Education Transportation Funding Allocation

Metro, urban and rural boards raised concerns in the 2007 survey with existing provisions to fund transportation for special education students. These concerns were consistent with the comments and recommendations regarding transportation for special needs students raised in the ASBA Metro Report (2005) and Small Urban Boards Study (2006). Board concerns centre on the following special education transportation issues:

1. Lack of flexibility

The Alberta Education Funding Manual allocation criteria for special transportation funding stipulates:

Urban or rural school jurisdictions may receive special transportation funding for resident students and children with disabilities/delays riding on a bus designated only for the transportation of those students and children with disabilities/delays who cannot, because of the severity of their disability/delay, use the transportation services described in Sections 1.19, 1.20, or 1.22 of this manual.

The Small Urban Boards Study (2006) sees this provision as problematic:

Some of the boards included in the study group raised the issue of the restrictiveness of the provincial special education transportation funding. Funding is provided to school jurisdictions in order to address the costs associated with providing appropriate and efficient transportation for children with a disability or delay that prevents them from riding a regularly scheduled bus route. The jurisdiction is free to use the funds as they see fit. However, no student that is able to use regular transportation can ride on a bus that is funded for special education purposes. This restriction prevents other family members from boarding the bus and accompanying the disabled or delayed child to school. Special education transportation funding is provided only if the all of the passengers on the bus are unable to utilize regular transportation (p.11).

Comments made by boards on the 2007 transportation survey echo this concern:

- > The amount of funding for this service is determined on whether or not the student is transported on a dedicated special needs bus. In sparse areas these types of routes can create long ride times. To resolve this situation, students may be incorporated into regular routes. Once this is done the funding for that student is decreased, conversely, if you put a regular student that is directed out of a specific attendance boundary on a dedicated special needs bus the funding for all the special needs students are put to the lower rate. To resolve this issue funding for these types of students should not be determined by clustering students on a specific bus but based on the coding of the student.
- > With the \$5151 rate for transport by special bus or parent/agent, if you put them on a "special education bus route" and then put one non-coded student on the same bus e.g., an IOP student or Vocational Education student, then you forfeit the higher funding for all the special education students on that bus. This seems to encourage you to be inefficient and put the Voc Ed student on another ride to school!

2. Adequacy of special needs transportation funding

In addition to the above noted concern regarding lack of flexibility in the special transportation framework, a number of school boards in the 2007 transportation survey expressed concerns with the overall adequacy of special transportation funding:

- > Special Ed funding is not adequate for transporting actual severe, moderate and mild students. A variety of transportation methods are used for these students: special Ed bus, bus pass, taxi or handibus. Many students cost \$10,000 or more per year each to transport.
- > As Rocky View is adjacent to Calgary, parent expectations are such that many students are transported to Calgary for very specific educational programs. The cost of this transportation exceeds the funding available. This school year we are transporting 22 students to Calgary schools at an average cost of \$12,473 per student. Additional funding for the transportation of these students is urgently needed.
- > Many Code 50 students require special transportation and are not funded. Code 40 students require very specialized service in some cases (LPN's, bus attendants, isolated taxi service). Not funded or seriously under funded on a per student basis.
- > Special Education transportation funding is insufficient. e.g., Revenue for a student on parent provided transportation last year was \$5151. One of our parent contracts cost us \$13,254 significantly higher than the revenue.

In summary, school boards believe adjustments need to be made to the special education allocation formula to make it more flexible and believe that current allocation rates do not meet service delivery requirements.

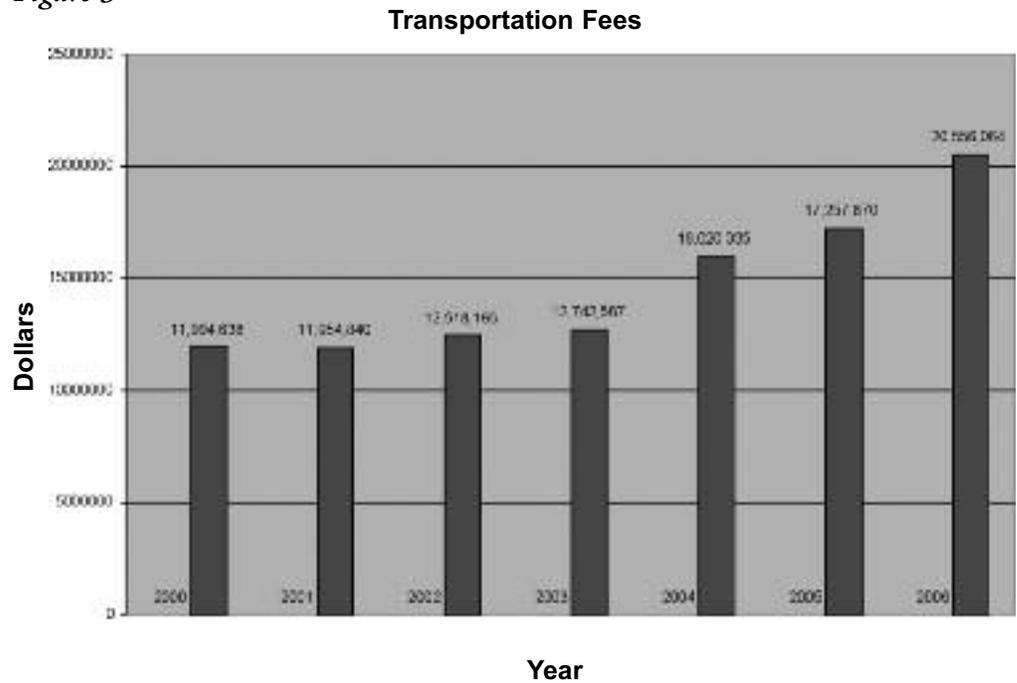
In addition, school boards would like to see adjustments made to all the allocation formulas that address their concerns in a meaningful way.

Transportation Fees

School boards charge transportation fees to offset provincial shortfalls in their transportation revenue. As such, fees are a good measure of the adequacy (or lack of) of provincial funding. A growth in user fees is a good indicator that provincial transportation revenue is simply not matching transportation service requirements.

A review of total provincial transportation fees levied by school boards over the past seven years illustrates the steep jump in transportation fees during the past three years (see Figure 3). After a period of relative stability from 2000 to 2003, transportation fees charged by Alberta's school boards have increased by 61 per cent over the past three years, or approximately 20 per cent per year.

Figure 3



The September 2007 school board transportation survey contained a number of questions that explored issues related to fees assessed by Alberta’s school boards. These are:

1. Eligible riders

Transportation for eligible riders is the basis of the provincial funding frameworks.

In response to the question “Does your jurisdiction charge a fee to eligible students?” 49 boards (78 per cent) answered “no” while 14 boards (22 per cent) answered “yes”. A further analysis of this question reveals that the boards that charge a fee to eligible transported students are metro, urban and combination boards.

Figure 4

Jurisdiction Type	No	Yes	Total
Metro		4 (100%)	4
Urban	6	2 (25%)	8
Rural	22	3 (12%)	25
Combination	21	5 (19%)	26
	49	14	63

A variety of fee structures are in place for those jurisdictions that charge fees to eligible riders. These range from a low of \$80.00 per annum to a high of \$480.00 per annum with the majority clustering in the \$175-\$200 per annum range.

Most jurisdictions that charge a fee to eligible riders have a “family maximum” provision that ranges from a low of \$210.00 per annum to a high of \$600.00 per annum with most clustering in the \$350.00 per annum range.

Metro Boards use a subsidized bus pass system and are the only type of school jurisdiction that all have an eligible rider fee.

2. Ineligible riders

In response to the question, “*Does your jurisdiction provide transportation to ineligible students?*” eight (8) school jurisdictions answered “no” while the large majority (55) answered “yes”. Ineligible students are those that are transported under the 2.4 km provincial walk limit or are transported to a school of choice rather than their neighbourhood school. The fact that a large majority of school boards transport ineligible riders is evidence that school boards are responding to the wishes of their communities for service even though provincial funding is not available for this service.

Of those boards that provide transportation to ineligible riders, eighteen (18) do so at no cost to the student, twenty-seven (27) assess a fee to ineligible students and three (3) charge a fee to all transportation users.

The main reasons for transporting ineligible students given by school boards were safety and program reasons. As noted earlier in this report, a large number of boards have their own definition of “eligible distance” or walk limit that is significantly different than the provincial standard of 2.4 km.

Adequacy of Provincial Funding

The 2007 board transportation survey asked: “*If you were to fund your transportation system solely with the funding provided by the provincial government, would your transportation system break even, lose money or make money?*” Of the 60 boards that responded to this question, only 22 boards (37 per cent) said that they would break even, three boards (5 per cent) said that they make money on their transportation system, while the majority (58 per cent) said that they would lose money.

When this question is collated with jurisdiction type, the following pattern appears:

Figure 5

Jurisdiction Type	Lose money	Make money	Break even
Metro	4 (100%)		
Urban	5 (71%)	1	2
Rural	9 (39%)	1	13
Combination	17 (68%)	1	7
Total	35 (58%)	3	22

Figure 5 illustrates that while all types of jurisdictions find it difficult to operate with provincial transportation funding available, it is the metro, urban and combination boards that appear to have the most difficulty.

The example of Peace Wapiti School Division (PWSD) illustrates the overall financial pressures faced by many Alberta school boards. Over the last ten years, PWSD has made the following route reductions in an attempt to match transportation expenses and funding.

Figure 6

School Year	# of Routes	Transfer from Sparsity & Distance Funds	(Deficit)/Surplus
98-99	136 routes	300,000.00	313,739.36
99-00	130 routes	300,000.00	626,237.06
00-01	127 routes	320,000.00	659,737.92
01-02	126 routes	250,000.00	754,890.21
02-03	126 routes	173,365.00	95,253.46
03-04	126 routes		(224,054.51)
04-05	120 routes		(681,388.42)
05-06	115 routes		(484,641.31)
06-07	112 routes		(315,730.00)
07-08	111 routes	budgeted	(*287,460.00)

*projected

In summary, Alberta's school boards are increasingly relying on transportation fees to fund their transportation operations. Boards point to rising staffing costs, bus purchases and equipment repair and maintenance as well as increasing demands for improved service as their key cost drivers.

Promising Practices

Alberta's school boards understand that they have a duty to the public to operate student transportation systems in a safe, reliable and efficient manner. A number have introduced management practices intended to cut costs and improve service. Some of these practices are described in the 2007 transportation survey:

- > We operate a regional transportation system which eliminates duplication of services and improves effectiveness and efficiency of the buses utilized. School times have been adjusted in all instances to reduce the number of buses required and improve over all ride times.
- > We utilize triple runs and staggered school start times. We utilize both large and small buses as the situation dictates. We also utilize parent provided transportation on a limited basis in certain situations.
- > Ordering of buses with fuel efficient engines and engine brakes to save on fuel and reduce brake maintenance costs.
- > Transfer stops have been placed on routes to minimize the number of busses travelling on the same roads. Larger busses to accommodate more students on the route. Hiring drivers that live along the route. Measure and placement of stops in urban areas to maximize the 400 m walk limit. Mirrored runs to reduce ride times in urban areas so route does not visit all schools. Adjusted school start time so routes may service schools in different communities.
- > The use of City operated transit system to transport Middle and High School students. We have negotiated a preferred price with the City for restricted (school hours only) bus passes as well as the unrestricted passes. We have joint bussing (shared bussing) with the local Catholic School Board to transport Special Needs students on the smaller yellow busses.
- > We eliminated double bussing from feeder schools so high school students and lower grades students share bus rides. We have been reviewed, at our request, by Alberta Finance in ensure efficient operations. We have cut routes and increased ride times.
- > Jointly tendered service with the public board, francophone board and the City - has resulted in no duplication of services and reasonable costs.
- > We do use double runs, coordinated school start times, as well we recently did away with grandfathering students, but have lost a legal challenge on the issue and are currently contemplating a full consultation with school councils and communities on transportation.
- > Buses have been doing double runs for decades. Schools worked together to coordinate class start and end times so more buses could be dual-utilized and their non-instructional days, early dismissals, etc were

aligned. Congregated bus stops for alternative programs dramatically reduced the number of bus routes. Increased use of public transit system for some Junior High students. Changed special needs students service from curb-to-curb to corner stops where appropriate.

- > Over the last year our focus has been in gaining total control of every aspect of operations. We established our own shop 6 years ago to look after our Board owned buses. This year we completed the purchase of all contracted buses. Financially it has been a very positive move for our Board.
- > We have closed schools (in my tenure 7) resulting in improved (efficiencies) but longer bus runs. We try and cooperate with other Boards to coordinate bussing. We work with Logging companies to coordinate our route times with their trucking operations. We analyze different areas each year to re-organize bus routes beyond the obvious. We plan on 5% or thereabouts, for empty seats due to student absenteeism when maximizing bus usage in urban centres. We involve our driver in some decision making about bus routes. Where practical we use non-school buses for drivers on long routes to get home between runs. We use whatever is less expensive (Contract or Division) when assigning routes.

The above are just some of the measures Alberta's school boards are taking to maximize the efficiencies of their operations. Even with these efficiency measures, a large number of school boards are having increasing difficulty making ends meet.

While it is true that local policy decisions regarding transportation service levels impact significantly on the transportation balance sheet bottom line, school boards argue that they have implemented these policy decisions as a response to local needs. The most obvious policy decision that negatively affects transportation costs is the decision to transport ineligible students. Boards point to safety issues and the archaic nature of the current 2.4 kilometre walk standard as reasons to transport "ineligible" students.

Conclusion

This report has discussed the five key pressure points facing Alberta's student transportation system, namely: driver recruitment and retention, the 2.4 km provincial walk standard, transportation to schools of choice, concerns with the present transportation funding allocation frameworks, and the increasing use of transportation fees to fund transportation operations. The first three, driver recruitment and retention, transportation to a school of choice, and transporting students who live less than 2.4 km from their home school are cost pressure points. The other two, concerns with present transportation allocation structures and increasing reliance on transportation fees are revenue adequacy pressure points.

Taken together, the transportation pressure points discussed and illustrated above all point to the funding shortfall in transportation services that Alberta's school boards find themselves in. The ASBA studies to date as well as the September 2007 board transportation survey all point to overall funding shortfall pressures faced by the majority of school boards in the province as they attempt to deliver service acceptable to their communities. In response, boards have raised transportation fees by approximately 60% in the last three years and/or have borrowed from other areas of board operation to fund their transportation system. These pressures, if left unresolved, will push Alberta's student transportation system past its breaking point.

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