



REPORT TO

CORPORATE SERVICES, STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PROPERTY COMMITTEE

**STUDENT TRANSPORTATION SERVICES
EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES AND EMPTY SEAT POLICY FOR 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR**

“Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it....Proverbs 13:11

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M. Loberto, Superintendent, Planning and Development Services

RECOMMENDATION REPORT

Vision:

At Toronto Catholic we transform the world through witness, faith, innovation and action.

Mission:

The Toronto Catholic District School Board is an inclusive learning community uniting home, parish and school and rooted in the love of Christ.

We educate students to grow in grace and knowledge to lead lives of faith, hope and charity.

Brendan Browne, PhD
Director of Education

D. Koenig
Associate Director
of Academic Affairs

L. Noronha
Associate Director of Facilities,
Business and Community
Development, and
Chief Financial Officer



A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report recommends that the Board approve a hybrid approach to accommodating extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests for student transportation services for the 2020-2021 school year. Currently, only eligible students are receiving student transportation, as all ineligible riders who previously received approved service were removed on bus routes in advance of the start of the school year. This was done in order to support greater physical distancing on school buses, and facilitate enhanced COVID-19 cleaning and disinfecting protocols.

Currently, there are 2,371 combined extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests for access to TCDSB student transportation services. Given the importance of student transportation access to the system, the report advises that the Board proceed with a hybrid approach, developed in consultation with the Toronto Student Transportation Group (TSTG), which will accommodate potentially up to 70% of these requests on TCDSB bus routes subject to not exceeding the threshold of one student per seat on a school bus. It is likely that this capacity will be reduced when taking into account the geographic location of bus routes and school specific needs.

This approach provides service to a significant number of students currently not receiving transportation while balancing physical distancing and health and safety requirements. If approved, students can begin to be accommodated by mid-October.

The cumulative staff time required to prepare this report was 8 hours.

B. BACKGROUND

1. *During the phased start-up of student transportation for the 2020-2021 school year, only TCDSB students who were eligible to receive service were placed on bus routes.* All students with special education needs were provided with transportation beginning on September 14, 2020. Eligible JK to Grade 8 students based on transportation policy, including those that met the distance criteria of residing more than 1.5km from the school, hazard criteria, or fell within Board approved transportation areas, began to receive service on September 21, 2020.

2. ***In order to implement COVID-19 protocols, all ineligible students who previously had approved access did not receive student transportation services, including those who had been accommodated under the Extenuating Circumstances policy and Empty Seat procedure.*** A decision on accommodating extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests was deferred in order to allow for greater physical distancing on school buses, and assist the TSTG and bus operators to effectively plan bus routes and assigned seating arrangements in light of the enhanced COVID-19 health and safety protocols.
3. ***Extenuating Circumstances requests are typically approved once, with the student continuing to receive student transportation services.*** As outlined in TCDSB Transportation Policy S.T.01, students who are not eligible for transportation under the distance policy can petition the school principal for approval of transportation for exceptional reasons, which include but are not limited to personal hardship, family circumstances, and where adequate parental supervision cannot be provided while on route to or from school.
4. ***Empty Seat requests are required to be submitted on an annual basis, with students being added to buses in October if space is available on existing bus routes.*** The TCDSB revised its empty seat procedure in June 2019, requiring the parent of students not eligible to receive transportation service to apply for an empty seat on an existing bus route at the beginning of the school year. There is no guarantee of service, as it is dependent on the availability of space on the bus.
5. ***Prior to the start of the school year, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) the TCDSB's partner in the TSTG, suspended the provision of empty seat transportation service for 2020-2021.***
6. ***As of October 2, 2020, there are 2,371 combined extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests for access to TCDSB student transportation services.*** This includes 1,061 extenuating circumstances requests and 1,310 empty seat requests.

C. EVIDENCE/RESEARCH/ANALYSIS

1. *The provision of student transportation is an important consideration in ensuring accessibility to TCDSB schools for families.* There are typically several TDSB schools located in the same geographic area as one TCDSB school, and as such, TCDSB students have a much greater distance to travel than those attending TDSB schools. As result of the fewer number of Catholic schools and the distance between them, parents rely heavily on student transportation.
2. *There are three potential options for consideration to accommodate extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests for the 2020-2021 school year.*
 - **Suspending the accommodation of these requests for the duration of the school year, consistent with the TDSB;**
 - **Seeking to accommodate all requests as in previous years,** which in addition to creating significant safety concerns with respect to reduced physical distancing on buses and multiple students per seat, would require modifications to bus route planning, potentially impacting the quality of service delivery for TCDSB students. Furthermore, it would also entail re-assigning seats being held for eligible students currently enrolled at St. Anne Catholic Academy, who have the option to return to in-person learning on November 1; and
 - **A hybrid approach, developed in consultation with the TSTG, which allows for the accommodation of as many of extenuating circumstance and empty seat requests as possible subject to not exceeding the threshold of one student per seat on a school bus.** These students would only be accommodated on TCDSB bus routes, and maintaining the ratio of one student per seat supports public health physical distancing and safety guidelines. The empty seat applications would be accommodated based on date and time stamp priority, whereas the TSTG would work with school administrators on a reprioritization of extenuating circumstance requests.

3. *The hybrid approach, as outlined above, can potentially accommodate up to 70% of students, however this capacity is likely to be reduced based on bus route location and local needs.* There are currently 174 TCDSB bus runs which are operating at less than one student per seat. As such, TSTG could potentially provide transportation service to up to 1,665 additional students, however the geographic location of the requests and school specific numbers will reduce the number of students which can be accommodated.

TSTG is continuing to review the available capacity to safely accommodate additional students within the established cap of one student per seat.

4. *Should the Board approve proceeding with the hybrid approach to accommodate extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests for the 2020-2021 school year, TSTG anticipates that service could begin by mid-October.*
5. *A TSTG communication advising families of the Board direction on this matter will be jointly developed with TCDSB staff.*

D. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That the Board approve the hybrid approach to accommodating student transportation services for extenuating circumstances and empty seat requests for the 2020-2021 school year as outlined in the body of this report.