

DECEMBER 2017 • MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

# Discussion paper on a new vision for student transportation in Ontario

We invite you to provide your feedback to help us understand what's important to you about student transportation. Please send your feedback to the discussion questions in this paper to **ST.newvision@ontario.ca**.

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Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant : *Document de discussion sur une nouvelle vision du transport des élèves en Ontario, 2017*

This publication is also available on [www.ontario.ca](http://www.ontario.ca).



# A Message from the Minister of Education

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At first glance, it's a clear and simple goal: make sure that all Ontario students arrive safely at school, on time and ready to learn. As a primary student, I took the bus to school, and I remember how important this was in giving my parents peace of mind.

Every school day in Ontario, more than 800,000 students – more than two in five – rely on student transportation services to get them to and from school safely, punctually, and efficiently. Every Ontario school board provides transportation services to eligible students through funding from the provincial government.

Our student transportation system is built on a strong foundation of dedicated drivers, transportation providers, school boards, and their consortia, who jointly deliver student transportation. We recognize that in 2017, this system is faced with both challenges and opportunities that will determine its long-term success.

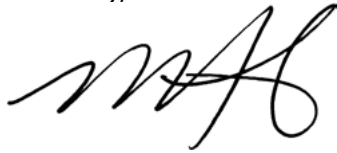
With shifting enrolment demographics, student transportation needs are changing. In addition, technology and innovation are offering new, more effective and more accessible, ways to transport students to school and to co-curricular activities. We know that we can do more to promote healthy physical activity, student safety and environmental sustainability in our system. The effect of these challenges and opportunities is magnified as the number of students being transported continues to grow.

We are responding to these challenges and opportunities with a fresh look at the overall delivery of student transportation. To begin the process, we are creating a new vision for student transportation that reflects the needs of students, families, and schools, today and in the future.

I am pleased that Joan Green and Michel Paulin have agreed to lead this engagement. Our executive co-leads have extensive experience promoting student achievement and well-being, as well as administering academic and operational education policy, including finance, facilities and transportation. Their complementary skills and expertise will guide us as we work together to create a new vision for student transportation.

Your input is crucial to our success. We want your ideas! All of our stakeholders and partners have made tremendous contributions to student transportation in Ontario. We want you to help us create a new vision for a system that is safe, responsive, equitable, and accountable.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MH', written in a cursive style.

Mitzie Hunter, MBA  
Minister

# Help Us Form a New Vision for Student Transportation

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Every day, transportation consortia and school bus operators work to improve our student transportation system. To continue to get students to where they need to be, we must consider both current challenges and emerging possibilities. In the spirit of constant improvement, our goal with this new vision is to deliver a safe, responsive, equitable and accountable student transportation system that takes advantage of everything that technology and innovation can offer in the 21st century. Transportation should be as supportive of student success and well-being as possible.

We can capitalize on what is working well now, address problems that need solutions, and imagine a bold, exciting future. In a world where ride-sharing, automation and new modes of rapid transit are transforming the ways people in Ontario move, it is time that we envision new approaches to student transportation.

Building on past work by the ministry, partners, and stakeholders, this discussion paper will support a thorough review of student transportation services. We will consider the perspectives of students, families, communities, educators, school boards and their partners. We will ask those who set policy, administer the system, and provide and use these services to reflect on the core values and all components of Ontario's student transportation services. This dialogue aims to create a shared commitment to a new, innovative and dynamic student transportation system.

This engagement will explore innovative options and suggest new approaches that can enhance the quality and effectiveness of student transportation.

A new vision will help us achieve desired outcomes in each of the following three broad areas:

### Readiness for learning:

- We will enhance the transportation environment to make sure that it supports students' preparedness for learning during the school day, and is responsive to their needs.

### Sustainability and responsibility:

- We will embrace innovation for better use of resources to support continuous improvement of the student transportation system and enhanced accountability.

### Community confidence:

- We will foster shared responsibility for safety, student well-being and support for all families in Ontario.

With your participation, this engagement will deliver:

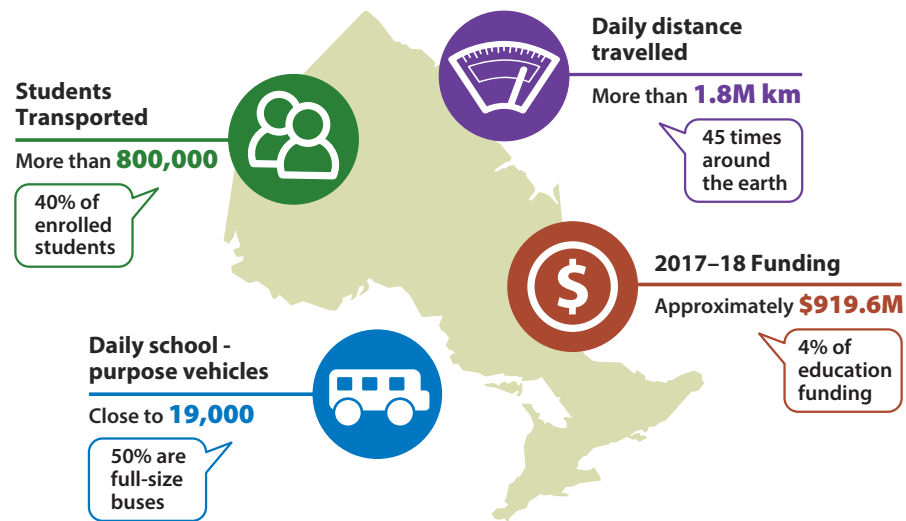
- Short-term recommendations that may be achievable within existing funding, operational and legislative frameworks; and
- Long-term recommendations that will take advantage of innovation and may require significant changes to existing funding, operational and legislative frameworks.

This discussion paper provides you with background on how student transportation is delivered today. It outlines the four pillars that are the foundation of this review, and sets out questions for your consideration. It identifies priorities and approaches that can help build a more responsive, equitable, safe and accountable transportation system.

Our final report will recommend strategies, partnerships, best practices and innovations to create a sustainable student transportation system that supports the education goals outlined in *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. We will create a new vision for student transportation that is ready for the future.



# The Current State of Student Transportation in Ontario



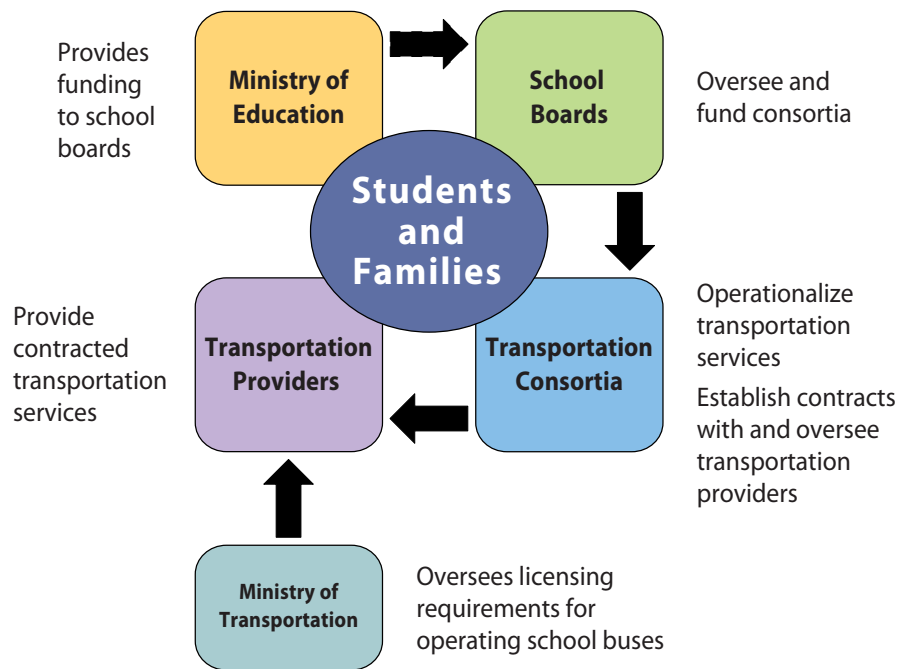
About 40 per cent of Ontario students currently receive transportation services. Within school boards, the proportion of transported students ranges from 10 to 86 per cent. Service levels vary because of differences in local geography, population density and eligibility policies.

While most transportation services are provided through school buses (79 per cent), some students are transported using aircraft to travel to and from remote locations or in vans or taxis, usually for specialized transportation needs. Some school boards use available public transit instead of private transportation providers. Others choose to provide transportation services in urban areas that are served by public transit.

School boards determine which students receive transportation, based on eligibility criteria they set, such as walking distance to school. School boards may also offer transportation for other reasons, such as specific programs, specialized student needs and transportation for students who encounter hazards within their walking distance.

## The Student Transportation Delivery Model

All Ontario school boards provide transportation services to eligible students, based on their own eligibility policies. Student transportation is delivered by several partners working together.



The **Ministry of Education** provides annual funding to school boards for student transportation services through the Student Transportation Grant. School boards develop their transportation budget based on what they expect to receive from the Ministry of Education, and allocate the grant to meet local priorities. In 2017–18, the Student Transportation Grant is projected to be \$919.6M, an increase of about 45 per cent (\$285.5M) since 2003.

The **Ministry of Transportation** is responsible for licensing and setting standards for the safe operation of school buses in Ontario through the Highway Traffic Act and its regulations.

**School boards** oversee, fund and provide resources for **transportation consortia**. School boards also set eligibility policies for transportation. School boards within the same consortium can have different eligibility policies.

The **transportation consortia** are responsible for administering policies, planning services, awarding and managing contracts with transportation providers and auditing their performance for contract compliance.

To increase efficiency in student transportation, the Ministry of Education asked all school boards to begin consolidating transportation functions into consortia in the 2006–07 school year. A transportation consortium is an organization formed by two to five school boards operating in the same geographical area. There are now 33 transportation consortia covering all but one of the 72 school boards in the province.

Transportation consortia and the Ministry of Education have worked with providers to modernize the sector and increase system effectiveness and efficiency. Changes include greater clarity about roles and responsibilities, new leading practices, better use of data and routing technology, and improved contract and performance management.

**Transportation providers** are contracted by transportation consortia and school boards for service delivery. They also provide quality assurance for vehicles, drivers and driver safety training.

# Starting Points for Discussion

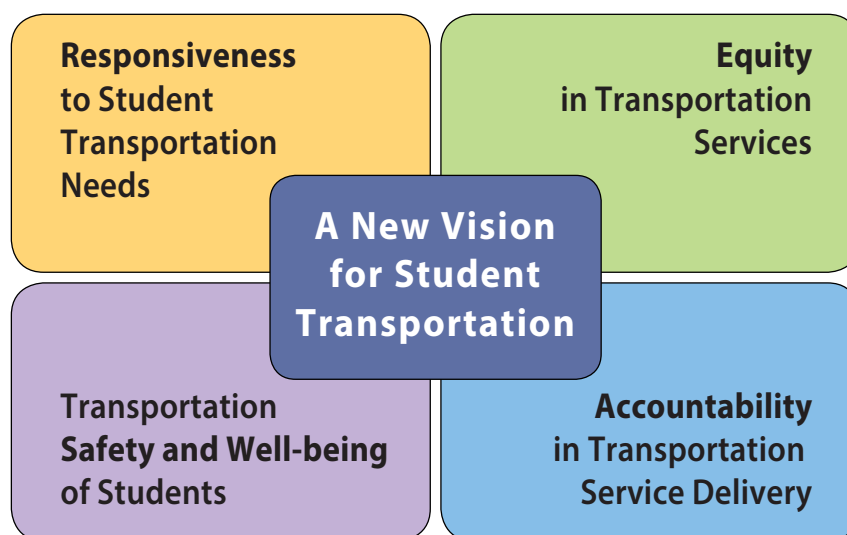
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Student transportation in Ontario faces a number of concerns that are relevant to one or more of the pillars of responsiveness, equity, safety and well-being, and accountability.

These pillars are the guiding values that define how student transportation is designed and delivered. The pillars support the achievement of the desired outcomes in the three broad areas defined above:

- readiness for learning
- sustainability and responsibility
- community confidence

The four pillars shown here are aligned with Ontario's goals for education. They will guide Ontario's new vision for student transportation.



- **Responsiveness** (*focuses on service levels*)  
Are all of the students who are being transported receiving the service they need to achieve excellence?
- **Equity** (*focuses on accessibility*)  
Are transportation services accessible to all those students who require them to be successful?
- **Safety and well-being** (*focuses on environments conducive to physical and psychological safety*)  
Are the transportation services conducive to student safety and well-being?
- **Accountability** (*focuses on quality assurance*)  
Are services being provided in an efficient and effective manner, and producing the desired outcomes?

Together, consideration of these four key pillars will guide Ontario's new student transportation policy framework and its future implementation.

We are looking for creative solutions to enhance the quality of service to our students and communities. To achieve that, our conversation must focus on viable possibilities for change and improvement, and consider the advantages offered by technology and innovation.

Concerns identified by students, families, other stakeholders and partners will provide the starting points for discussions on how we can create a new vision for student transportation. We are confident that as we address the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, new approaches and innovative ideas will emerge from our consultations.

# The Value of Public Engagement

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To make sure that our system continues to meet the needs of Ontario's students and families, we are asking for your advice and feedback on a new vision for student transportation. We want to hear your views on the issues and challenges that have affected your experience with student transportation. We also want your ideas on innovations and opportunities that will help shape the future.

The review will take place over the next year, and will include input from stakeholders such as parents, students, educators, transportation consortia and transportation providers. In addition, the co-leads of this review will meet with two reference groups: one made up of transportation experts within the education sector and one comprising advisors working in the broader transportation industry. These groups will provide insight on forward-thinking approaches for sustainable, responsive and valued services.

Public engagement offers many benefits. It will:

- Provide direct feedback from a wide range of partners and stakeholders
- Contribute to the development of a new funding approach that addresses current realities and emerging needs
- Present innovative strategies that can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the student transportation system
- Provide information on the effectiveness and efficiency of student transportation

Your feedback, combined with insights drawn from research and experiences from student transportation in other jurisdictions, will help create the new vision for student transportation in Ontario.

# Key Discussion Questions

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The work we have done in the past to improve the student transportation system has been successful because of clear communication with engaged partners and stakeholders. This is a large and diverse group that includes students, families, school boards, consortia, transportation service providers, education sector groups, school business officials, unions, ministries, agencies and municipalities.

As we create a new vision for the future, your input is essential. To get the best advice on how to move forward, we need your feedback on the following questions, which are organized according to our four pillars. When answering these questions, please consider the diverse and unique needs of children and families across the province.

Our new vision will also support our Indigenous partners, francophone communities, and families whose children have disabilities and special needs. In addition, it will take into account the range of needs of remote, northern, rural and urban communities.

The questions in this paper will begin our conversation with all stakeholders who have an interest in improving our student transportation system. There will be opportunities to contribute to this dialogue through stakeholder meetings and online written submissions.

We urge all participants to consider these and any other questions **before** they attend the engagements. Seek out other opinions. Talk to your children, neighbours, friends, teachers, principals – anyone whose informed opinion can help us transform student transportation in Ontario. We are looking for your input on the current system and we are very interested in what you think is possible if we “dream big” about what the future of student transportation in Ontario could be.

We look forward to your feedback to help guide this review. If you think there is something important we haven't addressed, we want to hear about that too!

These questions are designed to prompt discussion to help us transform student transportation in Ontario. Some suggested topics that reflect current discussions on student transportation are listed for your consideration in the boxes below. Note that there are many other innovative ideas about the scope and nature of these services that can be part of the conversation, and will help us shape a new vision.

### Responsiveness – service levels

*When answering the following questions about student transportation, consider your own experiences with: access to programs, customer service, timeliness of service, scheduling for programs outside school hours and workplace experiential learning programs.*

1. Do you think that Ontario students are well-served in the current system?
2. Which aspects of service are working well to help support students in achieving excellence?
3. What's not working?
4. How can we improve service by focusing on innovations and partnerships that will help us create a more responsive transportation system?

### Equity – accessibility

*When answering the following questions about student transportation, consider your own experiences with: provisions for students with special needs, inclusiveness of communities, comparability of service to other Ontario jurisdictions and walking distances.*

1. Do you think that all Ontario students are receiving the transportation services that they need?
2. Does the student transportation system adequately take into account the diverse needs of different types of students?



3. Do you have any specific examples of situations that show that there is an equity issue that needs to be addressed?
4. What sorts of innovations and partnerships could help us create a more equitable and accessible transportation system?

## **Some current topics for consideration**

### **Ride times**

Some school boards set maximum ride time guidelines, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. School boards may also specify exemptions to maximum ride times.

### **Special needs**

About 200,000 Ontario students are identified as having special education needs. It is important that the system continue to meet the needs of students who require specialized transportation.

### **Courtesy transportation**

Some school boards provide this to students who are not eligible for transportation based on distance or other criteria. In these cases, students are provided with transportation if they live on an existing school bus route with available seats. Criteria for access differ among school boards.

### **Support for families**

Student transportation services can significantly impact the day-to-day routines of families. Changes to pick-up and drop-off times can affect the work hours of parents and other caregivers. Students may have different pick-up and drop-off addresses due to joint custody or child care arrangements.

## Safety and well-being – safe and respectful transportation environment

*When answering the following questions about student transportation, consider your own experiences with: student behaviour, student health and activity levels, student safety training, ride times, vehicle condition and certification, driver competence and preparedness, road safety and emergency provisions.*

1. Do you believe that Ontario is doing enough to support the safety and well-being of students, staff and drivers?
2. What improvements could be made to safety and well-being for students as they are being transported to and from school?
3. Do you have any specific examples of situations where safety and well-being is being compromised? What is the biggest risk to safety and well-being?
4. How can we enhance safety and well-being in the transportation environment to ensure that it supports students' preparedness for learning during the school day?

## Accountability – quality assurance

*When answering the following questions about student transportation, consider your own experiences with: routing, efficient use of resources, transparency, continuous improvement initiatives, environmental responsibility and reliable, sustainable service.*

1. Do you believe that we are receiving good value for the money spent on student transportation?
2. How could the efficiency and affordability of the transportation system be improved? Are there innovative approaches that could help?
3. When it comes to delivering responsive, equitable, and safe student transportation, what roles and/or responsibilities do you feel Ontario, school boards and transportation providers should have?
4. What changes would create a more accountable and transparent transportation system?
5. What can we do to ensure an adequate supply of well-trained school bus drivers?

## **Some current topics for consideration**

### **Avoiding hazards**

Students who live within the walking distance threshold of their schools may be provided with transportation when safety hazards (e.g., railway tracks, high-speed roads) are identified. Criteria for defining hazards differ among school boards.

### **School bus safety training**

The types and levels of training are determined by school boards and the consortia, and vary across the province. The Ministry of Education is providing school boards with school bus rider safety videos and on-site school bus safety training.

### **Public health and the environment**

Physical inactivity among children and vehicle emission levels are growing concerns.

### **Service sustainability**

Due to increasing demand for service, labour market conditions leading to driver shortages, and investments in new technologies and more fuel-efficient vehicles, costs for transportation can be unpredictable, and differ significantly between boards.

## Moving Forward

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Your feedback will help us to create a new vision for student transportation in Ontario. Your participation will allow us to develop a deeper understanding of what we are currently doing right, and what is required to expand our horizons and enhance the value of student transportation for students and communities.

Ontario's students deserve the best transportation services we can give them. With that in mind, we hope to hear from people across the province to ensure a rich and diverse range of opinions from as many voices as possible.

The questions in this paper will begin our conversation with all stakeholders who have an interest in improving our student transportation system. There will be opportunities to contribute to this dialogue through stakeholder meetings and online written submissions.

Thank you for taking the time to reflect on these important questions and for providing your insights and suggestions. Together, we can make sure that our policies and programs provide the best possible transportation for our students wherever they live and go to school in Ontario.

## The future is now

Technology already plays a major role in student transportation in Ontario, and that role is expanding rapidly. All transportation consortia in Ontario use route planning software to plan and optimize routes, using student, school board, and geographic information system (GIS) data.

They also use technology to manage their systems and communicate with service providers and users. They often provide current information to parents (e.g., information on transportation eligibility, late bus notifications, trip cancellation information) through online portals, text messages and social media.

This is only the beginning. As in most areas of modern life, technological innovations will radically change the nature of student transportation. As you think about the questions in this discussion paper, consider how current and future innovations might shape the ways in which students can get to and from school.

Some examples:

- GPS-equipped school buses
- “where’s my bus?” apps
- “rate your ride” apps
- ride-sharing apps for caregivers
- apps that coordinate walking to school
- ride-sharing services (e.g., Uber, Lyft)
- alternative-fuel vehicles



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