



News Release

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Province Could do More to Further Minimize Risks to Students being Transported to and from School, Auditor General Says

(TORONTO) School buses in Ontario are generally safe, but more can be done to further reduce risks to students, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says in her *2015 Annual Report*.

“Risks need to be considered and minimized in three key areas that impact the safe transport of students: bus driver competence, vehicle condition, and student behaviour on buses,” Lysyk said today following tabling of the Report.

In the 2013/14 school year, over 830,000 Ontario students were transported daily to and from publicly funded schools on approximately 19,000 school vehicles. More than 70% of the students transported were in kindergarten or elementary school. Almost all student transportation in Ontario is provided through contracts with school bus operators. Transportation grants for the 2014/15 school year totalled an estimated \$880 million.

Several parties are involved in student transportation: the Ministry of Education provides funding to school boards for transportation services; school boards are responsible for overall decisions related to student transportation, including establishing policies and eligibility criteria; transportation consortia administer transportation policies of member school boards and manage contracts with school bus operators, including monitoring service performance; school bus operators provide student transportation services and are responsible for ensuring their vehicles and drivers meet requirements set out in legislation and regulations; and the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) enforces laws and regulations that relate to the design, mechanical condition, and safe operation of vehicles and licensing requirements of bus drivers.

The Report noted that although school buses are generally considered to be safer than other modes of transportation, school vehicles have been involved in 5,600 collisions over the past five years that have resulted in property damage, personal injuries and fatalities. In 2013, the last year for which information is available, Ontario’s school vehicles were involved in more collisions proportionately than automobiles and trucks, but fewer than other types of buses. The police determined that the school bus driver was at fault in 40% of the cases.

The Report concluded that better oversight of bus operators and their drivers, better processes for ensuring the safe operation of school vehicles, better training for students in bus safety, and better tracking and analysis of collisions and incidents are needed.

Among the Report’s significant findings:

- The Ministry of Education has not set guidelines for the reporting of school vehicle collisions and incidents. Only limited information is being tracked by consortia on incidents impacting children such as late buses and mechanical breakdowns of vehicles that could be used to identify the causes and develop strategies to prevent them. There was an increase in such incidents between 2012/13 and 2013/14.

- Consortia and MTO need to make improvements to ensure that school vehicles are in good condition. For example, MTO inspections did not target those vehicles most at risk for safety violations, were not always done on time and did not always ensure that defects were fixed.
- There is little oversight of school bus operators, who are allowed to certify their own buses for mechanical fitness.
- The Ministry of Education has not mandated bus safety training for students. Only 16 of the 33 consortia had mandatory general school bus safety training.
- Ontario has no provincial standard for busing eligibility. Busing is not available on an equal basis to students across the province or even in schools within the same board.
- Funding for school transportation does not take into account local factors that significantly influence transportation costs.
- The Ministry of Education has not determined if the wide variances among boards in the cost of transporting students are justified, and reliable bus utilization data is also not available.
- Only about 50% of consortia had competitively procured their current transportation services, and the weighting of safety criteria in the procurement process varied significantly among the consortia visited.

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For more information and to view the full report, please visit www.auditor.on.ca