

PDSB experiencing bus driver shortage due to COVID-19

By Rob Paul

With the Omicron variant leading to record highs in COVID-19 cases, Peel District School Board is feeling the effects with a bus driver shortage.

Student Transportation of Peel Region (STOPR) is dealing with increased driver absences due to COVID-19 and is experiencing bus route delays and cancellations as a result.

STOPR provides transportation for eligible students for both the Peel District School Board and the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board. STOPR transports approximately 68,000 students each day over approximately 1450 routes.

'STOPR has encountered a higher-than-normal rate of driver absence because of illness or self-isolation due to the COVID-19 Omicron variant. Therefore, we have had to cancel some routes/runs on a temporary basis,' said Malon Edwards, PDSB Manager of Communications. 'We currently have 31 routes temporarily cancelled due to COVID-19.'

'Our spare driver pool is covering other reasons for driver absence, i.e. vacations, appointments, leave of absences. Our current system was not built for a variant that has such a high rate of transmission. Prior to the Omicron variant, STOPR had not been required to cancel any routes during the pandemic. Our school bus operators are continually accepting applicants and training drivers.'

Parents have begun to feel the impact of the bus driver shortage with students being late to school and having to wait in the cold for buses to pick them up at the end of the day.

'In Dufferin County and Orangeville, there is a major shortage of bus drivers,' said parent Christine Facey. 'High school kids are getting picked up an hour late in the morning and after school ends?kids can't wait in the school for the bus.'

Despite the shortage, there hasn't been a major outcry from parents nor many reaching out to PDSB as a result of the delays, according to Stan Cameron, PDSB Trustee for Caledon.

'I have not heard from any Caledon area parents who are directly affected by a bus cancellation,' said Cameron.

For now, STOPR is encouraging families to stay plugged in through its website and to set up alerts to keep in the know on when bus routes are cancelled or are resuming?some routes could be disrupted for over a week due to the shortage.

'If a bus route/run is cancelled due to COVID-19, it will be cancelled consecutively for approximately five to 10 days,' STOPR said in a statement. 'All cancelled bus routes/runs will be posted on the STOPR website as soon as possible. It is important that parents/guardians and students are checking the STOPR website and the 'Delayed Buses' page daily, to monitor the status of their morning route/run and their afternoon route/run.'

'It is important that parents/guardians monitor both their morning and afternoon transportation as some students travel to school in the morning on one bus route/run and then travel home in the afternoon on a different bus route/run. Therefore, it is possible that your transportation may be cancelled in the morning but not in the afternoon or vice versa. We strongly encourage all parents/guardians to create an account with STOPR and sign up to receive our automatic 'transportation alerts.' These alerts will include late bus route/run information, cancellation notifications as well as an 'anticipated return to service' date for cancelled routes/runs.'

To check the status of your bus routes, visit businfo.stopr.ca/Alerts.