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GTA

# How many kids to a seat? How will drivers be protected? What we know (so far) about the plan for Ontario's school buses

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Mon., Aug. 10, 2020 | 4 min. read

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Ontario schools are set to open in just a few weeks, but there's still a lot of uncertainty for those students who rely on school buses for daily transportation.

School boards across Ontario have started to ask parents and guardians whether their kids will be opting for remote or in-class learning this fall amid the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), but families who depend on school buses, and the drivers who operate them, have concerns. School buses are often crowded, with sometimes three kids per seat. How will physical distancing be enforced? How will "classroom bubbles" impact student transportation? Will more buses be required to meet needs?

The Ontario School Bus Association told the Star it expects some of its drivers — especially those who are older than 60 — to opt out and not come back to work in September. However, there's also an expectation that the need for the buses will be much lower than before, with some parents expected to opt for remote learning or find alternative transportation means.

"Driver retention has always been an issue and it continues to be an issue. And this fall it's going to be a little bit more problematic than in most years," said Nancy Daigneault, the association's executive director.

"We're working on trying to recruit and retain as many drivers as we can, and we believe there's going to be fewer people who will opt to use the buses this year because they're concerned about COVID, so we're going to have to take it day by day."

According to some guidelines from Ontario's ministry of education, school buses will require cleaning and sanitizing twice a day — following the morning and afternoon runs. Personal protective equipment (PPE) will be provided to the drivers and they'll get some basic training on how to use it.

The initial plan was to have one student per seat on the bus, but Daigneault said that may not be possible as many regions of Ontario moved into Stage 3 of reopening, which could lead to more parents feeling safe enough to register their kids for the in-class option. That would result in the buses needing to accommodate more students.

"Right now it's all very fluid in terms of knowing how many students will be on each bus," she said, noting there have been some informal surveys over the course of the summer that suggest there could be around 30 per cent fewer students opting to take the buses this year.

The lack of adequate information on this issue is leaving parents and even school bus drivers concerned.

Katie Piccininni, whose 11-year-old son is heading into Grade 7 in the Toronto Catholic District School Board, said the government seems to be more preoccupied with asking whether kids will opt for online or in-person classes rather than ensuring the safety of students, teachers and school bus drivers.

"As parents we don't understand how school busing is going to be safe," she said. She usually drives her son to school but as a member of the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, she's heard many parents expressing frustration about the lack of details on student safety.

"It's a very stressful situation," she said. "If they don't have the details, then perhaps ... do we have to start right after Labour Day?"

Chris Hausen, 54, is a long-time school bus driver in the Kingston area. He said he usually has about 60 kids on the bus and has not seen any adequate plans on how to safely do his job during a pandemic.

"I cannot see how social distancing will be possible to follow," he said.

Driving a school bus in regular times can be overwhelming, he pointed out, with overcrowding and emotional conflicts that can occur at any time between passengers. Throwing in the responsibility to monitor the students is "unfair" for the drivers, many of whom are seniors and at a higher risk of contracting the coronavirus, he added.

Premier Doug Ford and education minister Stephen Lecce recently announced that Ontario plans to spend just over \$300 million on various school reopening initiatives. Of those funds, about \$40 million will be directed toward cleaning and sanitizing of school buses.

Each bus will have a visor separating the driver from students entering and exiting the bus, but the driver can remove the visor once the students are in their seats, Daigneault explained. Masks will be required for kids from Grade 4 and up, except for those with health conditions.

"We are trying to offer as many reassurances as possible," she said, noting a lot could change between now and the first day of school. "But parents can rest assured that when school starts the bus service will be there."

Earlier this year TDSB had announced plans to [adjust the start time at over 100 of its schools](#), an effort that was believed to cut 55 buses off the transportation fleet and save the board around \$2.5 million.

TDSB spokesperson Ryan Bird told the Star in an email that these plans are still being worked out and that a final decision on the matter will be made based on the number of students who will be returning to school as well as those who will need busing.



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