

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Dear John Stanford and McDonald families,

The news last week that Option School Transportation (Yellow Bus) service is being cut in an attempt to balance the 2021-22 District budget has been met with understandable alarm and confusion. As your emails – and those of many other SPS families – have come pouring in, I apologize for not being able to reply directly to all of them, but hope this letter sheds some light on this troubling situation, and gives you a view into the thinking of board members (in their own words) as we’ve worked through the process. Apologies in advance for the length of this letter; I didn’t want to leave anything out!

How did we get here?

SPS began working on the 2021-22 school year budget last fall, with our first Budget Work Session held on October 28, 2020. It’s a process that lasts about 8+months, and is led by SPS Chief Financial Officer, JoLynn Berge. I’ll note here that the board does not take an actual vote on the 2021-22 District Budget until July 7, 2021. You can see the [Budget Development Calendar here](#). Chief Berge projects we are facing a \$69M shortfall for the 2021-22 school year. After applying our \$21M Unrestricted Fund Balance to it, we face a \$48M shortfall/gap we need to close.

The Budget Work Sessions have primarily focused on potential solutions for closing the budget gap, and of the many options the board has been presented, none are easy choices.

The proposed “Option School Transportation” budget cut was first introduced at the December 9, 2020 Budget Work Session, and was added to the list of proposed District Program/Level cuts at the request of Board President, Director Chandra Hampson. At the time, Director Hampson was also Chair of the board’s Audit & Finance Committee, which provides oversight of the budget development process. I will note though; the proposed Option School Transportation cut was never discussed in the Audit & Finance Committee, which I’ve attended every meeting of, even before I became a member of the committee this January.

At the December 9 work session, the proposed Option School Transportation cut was barely mentioned, and you’ll find no specific mention of it in the [December 9 Work Session Minutes](#). When the “District Level Ideas” slide (on which the proposed cut is listed) was introduced, Chief Berge simply named each of the proposed cuts, giving no additional details about the “Option School Transportation” line, except to say that it was projected to save the district \$740K.

District Level Ideas

Option School Transportation	\$ 740,000
Fall Enrollment Reserve	\$ 4,000,000
School mitigation Reserve	\$ 2,000,000
Infrastructure improvement resources	\$ 2,000,000
Curriculum Funds not yet committed	\$ 954,212
Central Office Reductions	\$ 3,500,000
	\$ 13,194,212



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Most of the conversation at that meeting centered around potentially using Capital Fund dollars to fill the gap, and about the “Reductions to School Funding Allocations,” which several board members, myself included, voiced strong reluctance toward making. Director Zachary DeWolf commented on his desire to “focus on the things that will have the least impact to student learning.” Director Brandon Hersey (now Chair of the Audit & Finance Committee) commented on how “... we are making these decisions, but who’s going to have to live with this are our teachers and our students. So I just want to make sure that we are including them as much in these conversations as possible.” Director Eden Mack (who later resigned on January 7), stated her preference to increase the number of dollars we transfer over from the Capital Fund, and Director Liza Rankin commented on how “the impact to the student is of course the most critical function and, on some level, all of these things do impact our students, so that’s what makes it hard,” adding that “I’d be really against anything like wholesale slashing of a certain position or program without diving into that more.”

I expressed relief that using capital funds was an option supported by the numbers and by Director Mack (then Chair of the board Operations Committee), adding that “we do want to keep the impacts out of classes ... so when I look at those school level options, they’re all a little disturbing; when you look at cutting a 1/3 of our clerical staff or 1/2 of our librarians, or cutting equity dollars .. that’s really not palatable,” adding that I’d prefer “looking towards how we can utilize capital to fill those gaps.”

The one board member to specifically mention the proposed Option School Transportation cut at this meeting was our longest-running board member, Director Leslie Harris, who said, “These numbers are a little too vague for my taste,” adding that, “When we talk about Option School Transportation, I need an explanation...”

While not mentioning the Option School Transportation cut specifically, Director Hampson commented that we need a “better understanding of where are the areas where there’s even worth having a conversation, so we can protect as much as we can. And yet also be equitable in terms of how we do do cuts. I do believe it gives us the opportunity to protect those funding pieces that are heavily equity-focused and continues to allow us to make decisions that keep that front and center. We shouldn’t be making cuts that reduce our ability to make strides in our ability to provide an equitable education.”

In a conversation I had with Chief Berge on Friday, she said that the same presentation we were given on December 9 was also [shared with principals on the Weighted Staffing Standards Work Group](#), that month; and then shared with all principals on a January 5, 2021 Teams call. She says the only principal to raise concerns at that meeting, about the proposed Option School Transportation cut, was [TOPS K-8](#) Principal Amy Schwentor. [Here is an email](#) Principal Schwentor later sent the Superintendent, Chiefs and Board, on January 26. It is signed by 13 school principals.

At the [January 7 Budget Work Session](#), we again looked at the potential areas to reduce expenditures, and areas from which we could transfer money into our General Fund (such as from the Capital Fund or from the Economic Stabilization Fund – aka. Rainy Day Fund). Chief Berge gave us feedback received from the principals’ union, the Principals Association of Seattle Schools (PASS), which had surveyed its members on the budget development and proposed

cuts. According to Chief Berge, they had three pieces of feedback to pass along to the board, and none of them mentioned the proposed Option School Transportation cuts.

Once again, the proposed Option School Transportation cut was only briefly noted by staff at this Work Session, and only when they read off the items from the [“2021-22 District Level Recommendation”](#) slide. No further details or information on the line were given, until questions from the board began, and Director Harris asked, **“Does that not widen inequity for Option Schools for those that do not have the means or opportunity to drive their children to school, if we eliminate bus service?”** To answer this, Chief Berge deferred to Director Hampson, who shared, “My thoughts about option school transportation is that I don’t think it plays out, from an equity standpoint, in terms of the necessity for it; so it’s something that I had asked to see looked at.” She noted that she did not think it resulted in any significant dollar savings, and when Chief Berge noted the projected \$740K savings, Director Hampson continued, “So my expectation was actually that it was going to be much higher when we looked at it, if we’re trying to quilt together different pots of money. I believe that our Option schools represent a lot of our inequitable pathways, in terms of who has access to them, and that the transportation associated with that is particularly expensive and so I was interested in seeing how we could potentially save money there, by not damaging the existing programs, but by limiting the extent of the resources utilized to provide access to them.”

Director Harris responded by saying, “And to that I would suggest a deeper, larger conversation. Lord knows I appreciate Director/President Hampson’s input; I feel significantly different.”

The Board had no further conversations on the proposed Option School Transportation cut, until the [January 20 Budget Work Session](#). In this work session, Budget Director Linda Sebring went over the Budget Development Process and budget gap-closing recommendation once again, noting that, “this is the plan that we are moving forward with based on your feedback that we get today.”

In this presentation, staff finally included a slide specifically on “Option School Yellow Bus Transportation,” which was the first time these details were shared with the board.

Option School Yellow Bus Transportation

- Fifteen Option Schools
- One high school only uses Orca Cards so not impacted
- All except one school are Tier 3 and 4.
- Modified proposal to maintain yellow bus transportation for only Tier 1 or 2 schools and eliminate it for the Tier 3 and 4 schools.
- Modified potential savings of \$550K.
- We are working on optimizing other routes to save at least an additional \$190K for the total of \$740K.



Chief Berge presented the above slide, noting that the proposal had now been modified to maintain bus service for our one [Equity Tier 1 Option School \(South Shore PK-8\)](#). She also noted that Equity Tier 2 Option Schools would also maintain bus service, though we do not currently have any Equity Tier 2 Option Schools. The remaining 14 Option Schools are all Equity Tier 3 or 4 (JSIS and McDonald are both Equity Tier 4). The modified savings was now projected to be only \$550K (after removing South Shore PK-8 from the cut list). Chief Berge added that “we are working with Transportation on optimizing other routes to save at least the additional \$190K difference, to meet the total budget savings of \$740K.”

A couple things to note:

- 1) As of this meeting, this one slide was the only Option School Transportation data or numbers the board was ever given in this process, by which we were expected to make this decision.
- 2) As of this meeting, Licton Spring K-8 was not excluded from the cuts list; meaning they were to lose bus service too, even though they had been granted grandfathered bus service when the (previous) Board elected to move LSK8 to the Webster building, in October 2019. They have since been removed from the cuts list. An updated (lower) savings figure has not yet been shared with our board.
- 3) From what I can gather, as of this meeting, the district never engaged specifically with our Option School principals; our Option School families; our Transportation Director; or our Equity Partnerships and Engagement Chief. I don’t suggest to know what any of them/you would have said about the proposed cut; only that it appears none were authentically engaged with on the matter.

After a total of 1 minute and 15 seconds spent going over the proposed Option School Transportation cut slide, Chief Berge asked if we were okay moving forward with this.

Director Hersey had no additional comments or questions. Director Hampson asked about the nurses, counselor and librarians figures that had been shared earlier in the presentation, ending her comments with “I feel comfortable with where we’re headed and with what we’ve laid out,” adding that “It’s felt like a good start to a collaborative process with community.”

Director Harris homed in on the proposed Option School Transportation cuts, asking “I’m wondering about the reach out on the transportation to Option School leadership and community?”

Chief Berge admitted that her department had not done any, adding that “this was an idea we’re talking about with the board and we would have to formulate a communication to them, particularly with open enrollment coming up, about this change.”

Director Harris followed by asking, if we do not supply transportation to the Option Schools, “which we’ve promised folks, are we breaking trust and feeding into privilege in the Option Schools?”

Again, Chief Berge deferred to Director Hampson, who said, “the issue that we have is the extent to which our Option Schools, such as they are, are inequitably accessible as it is and the

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extent to which we're providing/paying for transportation that is pretty costly, to students that are not Furthest from Educational Justice to go to Option Schools that we don't have any evidence, necessarily, that are creating outcomes that are different from Neighborhood schools. I don't support our current model. I think the entire model is inequitable and when you add transportation on top of that, in a really difficult budgetary environment, it feels like an appropriate service to pull back on."

Director Rankin followed up by also asking about the equity issue with eliminating busing to Option Schools, saying, "Knowing accessibility and utilization of Option Schools is inequitable, I would still be curious to know ... does it make it even less accessible for Student Furthest From Educational Justice that may only now be able to access them through transportation?" adding, "I'm curious about solutions for that, that don't have an unintended consequence of further limiting access to those schools when we should be doing the opposite."

For my comments and questions, I started by echoing Director Harris and Rankin's concerns about the unintended consequences of making the school even more inaccessible. I then asked for Chief Berge to list the names of all our Option Schools because even that basic information was never given to us. She then did, and they are:

Cedar Park
Center School
Cleveland High School
Hazel Wolf K-8 STEM
John Stanford International
Licton Springs K-8
McDonald International
Orca K-8
Pathfinder K-8
Queen Anne
Salmon Bay K-8
Thornton Creek
TOPS K-8
Louisa Boren STEM K-8
South Shore PK-8

In asking for clarification on the bus service to John Stanford (which she told me has 2 yellow buses) and McDonald (which she said has 3), Linda Sebring explained that "all Special Education students will continue to receive yellow bus or other transportation, this is not proposing in any way to change that."

However, in my conversation with Chief Berge on Friday, she clarified that not all Special Education students may continue to receive transportation. She specified that only those who have transportation services in their IEP would maintain district provided transportation (bus, cab, etc.).

The January 20 Work Session ended with the big ask – if this proposal (the entire slate of proposed cuts and funding transfers) should move forward?

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But here's the thing – it had already been 'moving forward.' So, for at least two of us who had been openly tentative about the proposed Option School Transportation cut – Director Rankin and myself – I believe we saw this more as another stop in the ongoing conversation, and not a de facto final decision. This is a sentiment Director Rankin shared in her [letter to the Hazel Wolf community](#).

In Director Harris' final feedback of the work session, she directly stated, "I am not comfortable for reasons already stated, and it would seem to me that with respect to the Option Schools transportation issue, and school sign ups impending, we need to get the word out to folks. This is a huge break of trust ... and I'd like us to reconsider that."

Hoping to find an alternative to cutting Option School Transportation (and the 6-8 ELA Curriculum), I began my comments by asking about increasing the amount of dollars pulled from the Economic Stabilization/Rainy-Day Fund. The proposal before us was to pull \$19M of the \$38.7M in the fund. I asked if we could pull \$740K more from it, to save Option School Transportation; or \$2.3M more from it, to save 6-8 ELA Curriculum? Chief Berge conceded that, "You could always decide that you're going to spend more of the economic stabilization fund than any of these items."

Unfortunately, no other board members expressed interest in that idea, and Director Hersey specifically said he'd have "grave concerns" about depleting that fund any lower, as projections show we will be likely be needing to pull from it in subsequent years, as well.

Seeing there was little appetite for alternatives, and again believing that we'd have further opportunities to explore whether or not to cut Option School Transportation, I gave a reluctant nod to the slate of cuts, saying "My concerns with [the cuts] doesn't go away but I do also see we need to move forward. I do hope there is still exploration, even past this, as that's what it sounded like you [Chief Berge] just said is possible." I added, "it's hard because Open Enrollment is about to begin and we have told people that there's transportation for Option Schools, and if there's not going to be ... that does break trust." I added, "We have to just be good communicators I think; be really excellent communicators in these changes and what they mean to these parties that they affect. I really just need a commitment from us that that's going to happen because we'd need to be crystal clear with everybody as to why we're making these seemingly bad choices and why they are the best of the bad choices I guess."

And while Chief Berge then made that commitment, saying she stands ready to visit with PTAs, to answer questions and have that dialog, Director Hampson commented, "I just want to note that the idea to make a decision around Option Schools, particularly when there are Dual Language programming at some of those schools, that there is a compensatory piece to this budget which is really critical, which is a focus on Dual Language in neighborhood schools, where students are, in the languages that are their home languages, rather than expecting that kids are going to bus to a district that is – and us pay for that – that is so far away from where they are. And so, as we're making these budget decisions, the equity concerns are absolutely central. And that doesn't mean that every time that we make one – just as in the very difficult decisions we're making around the Student Assignment Plan and the boundaries – that we're not going to impact any students that are furthest from educational justice. There are always going to be impact, but the long game ... needs to be in equity minded and make sure we're

solvent to be able to provide those service and so that's why these decisions are so hard and yet so key."

Six days later, on January 26, a communication went out to school leaders that "the board directed staff to move forward with the elimination of yellow bus transportation for option schools in equity tiers 3 and 4." The board was not sent a copy of that communication, and I only found out about it via alarmed emails from parents and posts of Facebook. Many are calling this a thinly veiled attempt to eliminate Option Schools. I'm not sure they're wrong.

Whatever the motivation to cut Option School Transportation, there are many reasons I do not agree with this action:

- 1) Absolutely no formal or authentic engagement was done with the Option School communities or Option School principals.
- 2) There was no Racial Equity Analysis done on the proposed transportation cut.
- 3) There was no research done into the health impact of this cut on Option School buildings and students, which would be inundated each morning and afternoon with dozens more single-passenger cars and the exhaust fumes they bring with them.
- 4) There was no research done on the impact on neighborhood schools, which would likely need to absorb the students leaving their Option School, and will need to be prepared to offer whichever academic, health or developmental services these students need.
- 5) There was no research done on the impact on families – especially low-income and single-parent households – for which bus transportation enables them to maintain a life/work balance.
- 6) A proposal to cut transportation services not being discussed in the context of Transportation Service Standards or taken through the appropriate processes is illegitimate and contrary to the board's governance and decision making processes.
- 7) And even if all of the above were done, communicating this 'decision,' only one week before Open Enrollment and one week before many schools hold open houses, is grossly insufficient notice.

I believe that springing this on schools and families, given all the unmet steps listed above, further erodes trust in our district. A dollar amount south of \$550K (which the true cost savings of this cut will be once Licton Spring K-8 is added back in for service) is barely a rounding error in a \$1B budget and I do not believe introducing this as an insurmountable budgetary concern is valid. For more information on the SPS Transportation budget and how it is funded, I'll refer you to an [informational piece](#) written by Mary Ellen Russell, Chair of the School Traffic Safety Committee.

Where do we go from here?

On Monday morning, February 1, at the [February Audit & Finance Committee Meeting](#), I understand we will be laying out an agenda for a forthcoming Board Work Session on Transportation. Chief Berge tells me she is aiming to hold the Transportation Work Session sometime in the next two weeks and that we will be looking at expanding transportation cuts beyond just Option Schools.

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Additionally, Director Hampson has shared, via email, that staff has agreed to extend Open Enrollment an additional week, to Friday, Feb 26, meaning that Open Enrollment will last a total of 4 weeks. She also wrote, “we hope this buys families and us some time while we get a bit more clarity and further along in the return to school planning.”

None of this implies the communicated decision to cut Option School Transportation will be reversed, but I am hopeful – if we are truly looking for cost-savings measures – there is still room for finding creative solutions. These could be:

- 1) Maintaining transportation for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) recipients (if it’s determined we can access that data)*.
- 2) Creating an opt-in/out system, whereas those who can arrange their own transportation opt-out and are not unnecessarily allocated seats on yellow buses.
- 3) Creating a fee-based system, where able families are asked to pay a small transportation fee, and those who cannot pay the fee receive waivers.
- 4) Re-work the Walk Boundary Maps throughout the district to slightly increase the distance kids are expected to walk to school, from 1 mile to 1.1 miles. Asking this of students in the neighborhoods with safer street conditions would reduce the amount of busing needed.

In the past week, I have requested data on the numbers of FRL students attending each impacted Option School; the number of FRL students receiving bus transportation; the projected savings if we were to maintain bus service for FRL students at the impacted Option Schools; and I asked to know how this proposed cut would affect Option schools' abilities to offer Before and After School Activity Bus Service. The response from Chief Berge can be seen [here](#)*.

I’d be remiss to leave out the most far-reaching potential solution of all – lobby our [state legislators](#) to fully fund public schools! Our underfunding by the state existed long before COVID, and though there are a few emergency school funding “solutions” being considered in Olympia right now, we may not stand to benefit from them if the state simultaneously uses our share of the federal COVID relief dollars to supplant the state’s relief dollars. Chief Berge tells our board this is a real possibility and is what the state is currently considering.

I do believe Seattle Public Schools is facing an unpredictable and unsustainable financial future. I also believe we will not see an end to our perpetual financial deficits without considerable cost reductions or substantial increases to our revenue. We will continue to face hard, ‘best of the bad choices’ decisions. And as with all our decisions, we should indeed keep equity at the center of them.

To close, here are excerpts from my Board Comments, given at our [January 27 Regular Board Meeting](#):

“All morning many of us have fielded dozens and dozens of emails from concerned parents about, what feels like, equitable access to their school buildings. The loss of the Option School busing is hitting a lot of families and schools really hard, and very quickly. This was very sudden

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and I think it's safe to say ... there are lots of processes that we didn't go through for this decision."

"I completely own that I did not grasp how quickly movements were going to be made. I really regret that and I own that there were many questions I did not ask; granted there are six of us and no one else, as far as I understand, was gathering the data we needed to make a truly data-informed decision regarding the busing. Had we done that, we might have come to the same conclusion; I really don't know. But, I know I would feel better and I think a lot of families would feel better that we went through the processes that we claim are important."

"[There's] lots of anxiety and lots of fear out there, because bus service, it's not just the difference between a kid getting to and from school; bus service makes it possible for parents to keep their jobs, or to attend to getting their other children, younger or older, to their own schools. It hits on so many levels. The loss of school busing at any school – not just Option Schools – greatly impacts the students who we look to be prioritizing."

"I feel there were a lot of failings and I'll own those too, because as a board member, I had the opportunity to be asking more pointed questions earlier on. All of us did, we had that opportunity and unfortunately that didn't get done; at least, not to the extent that I feel, personally, would have made us better informed and would have made [for] a better-informed decision."

"I hope that we can take a step back from the communications that have gone out and do engage with our principals and the families that we need to be engaging with and rethink this."

I stand ready to work with my fellow board directors to reach a decision that protects our most vulnerable students, while giving all families the peace of mind and reliability you need. And, as always, I welcome your calls, emails or [meeting requests](#).

Yours in service,

– Director Lisa Rivera-Smith

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