

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL BUS SAFETY IN P.E.I.

Keeping students safe



School Bus Safety Stakeholders Meeting Summary
September 28, 2021



Stakeholder Groups

P.E.I. Home and School Federation
CUPE Local 1145, P.E.I. School Board Transportation Group
Department Education and Lifelong Learning
Department Justice and Public Safety and Attorney General
Department Transportation and Infrastructure
Provincial Crown Attorney's Office
Chief Justice of Prince Edward Island
Public Schools Branch
High School Students
Registrar Motor Vehicles
Director of Highway Safety Division
Summerside Policing Service
Charlottetown Policing Services
Royal Canadian Mounted Police
City of Charlottetown
City of Summerside

Attendees

Hon. Natalie Jameson, Minister Education and Lifelong Learning
Hon. Bloyce Thompson, Minister Justice and Public Safety and Attorney General
Hon. James Aylward, Minister Transportation and Infrastructure
Dave Gillis, Public Schools Branch, Transportation
John Flood, Registrar Motor Vehicles
Graham Miner, Director of Highway Safety Division
Sgt. Chris Gunn, Royal Canadian Mounted Police
Sgt. Jason Blacquiere, Summerside Police Service
Chief Brad MacConnell, Charlottetown Police Services
Mayor Basil Stewart, City of Summerside
Alex MacLean, Student Colonel Gray
Sean Lush, Student Colonel Gray
Heather Mullen, P.E.I. Home and School Federation
Shannon Bruyneel, P.E.I. Home and School Federation
Andrea Richard, P.E.I. Home and School Federation
Mary Kendrick, School Principal/ P.E.I. Home and School Federation
Tammy Norden, P.E.I. Home and School Federation
Shirley Smedley Jay, P.E.I. Home and School Federation
Jason MacKinnon, CUPE Local 1145, Charlottetown
Robert Geiss, CUPE Local 1145, Summerside



Background

The P.E.I. Home and School Federation is the umbrella organization of local Home and School/Parent Council organizations in 55 English language schools across Prince Edward Island.

The Federation collaborates with and acts as the voice of parents, guardians, and school educators in the education system, and exists to promote the total health and well-being of children and the highest standards of education for each child in the province.

The Federation works in partnership with other organizations which foster this ideal and assists in the development of policies related particularly to quality education for each child. The Federation works primarily by offering support to, and coordination between, Association local members and believes that the participation of parents, guardians, and school staff in the education of our children and youth is vital.

School bus safety was undertaken as a result of a meeting between the Federation and CUPE 1145 – Transportation Group, where concerns were raised about vehicles continuing to pass parked school busses almost daily, thereby, endangering the lives of children/youth as they enter and exit busses. The decision was made to bring key stakeholders together to discuss the issues and actions to prevent potential fatality.

The Federation invited key stakeholders to a meeting to discuss school bus safety. This report is about the results of the School Bus Safety Stakeholders meeting held on September 28, 2021 in Stratford, P.E.I.



School Bus Safety

Executive Summary

On September 28, 2021, a group of concerned stakeholders met to address the crucial need for action surrounding school bus safety on Prince Edward Island. With approximately 300 school buses on Island roadways each day, school bus drivers report that, nearly *daily*, other drivers pass slowing or stopped school buses while the bus signal lights are flashing. Infractions can occur in all kinds of weather, are most common in the months of September and October, are more likely to happen in cities (Charlottetown, Summerside, Kensington) or along very busy highways (e.g. Highway 2), and the drivers committing the violations cross age, cultural, and gender groups. While the back of each school bus displays clear signage indicating that the penalty for passing a bus with flashing signal lights is 12 demerit points, a 3-month license suspension, and a maximum \$5000 fine. However, stakeholders reported that, last year in Summerside, there were 200 reports of school bus passing violations and just 17 convictions. While stakeholders reported that PEI has the highest conviction rate in Canada, the maximum fine of \$5000 has never been given; as well, ticketed drivers may be convicted on lesser charges of distracted driving (e.g. cell phone use) rather than the offense of passing a school bus.

The first consensus point among the stakeholders gathered is that school bus passing violations happen without malicious intent - no one leaves their house in the morning with the intent to harm a child. Factors including driver inattention, impairment, speed, and/or lack of awareness of the meaning of bus signals were postulated as reasons for the high number of incidents of vehicles passing school buses when their lights are flashing and the bus is slowing or stopped. The second consensus point among stakeholders is that we need to know *what is happening?*, *why is this happening?*, and *how do we keep this from happening?*, before we are faced with a critical injury or death of a child.

Action Items resulting from the School Bus Safety meeting are organized according to stakeholder-derived Action Areas: Establishing a Task Force; Legislation and Highway Safety; Equipment Needs; Education and Awareness; and "Thinking Outside the Box".

Action Area 1: Establishing a Task Force

What Needs to Happen

- Codify a commitment to the process and action: focus on solutions
- Jurisdictional Scan - what is happening in other jurisdictions as well as our own?

What Needs Clarifying

- Are we missing any stakeholder groups?
- What is the budget and where does it come from?

What Might Get in Our Way?

- There is no Task Force now, it's always a challenge to start new things - setup time, people's time, budget

What Support Do We Need?

- To be effective, the Task Force requires support and representation from all of the stakeholder groups present, as well as the Judicial system
- We need better data!
 - Bus drivers give infraction reports to schools, schools submit the reports - but there is currently no follow-up. We need follow-up communication with schools.
 - Bus drivers must be willing - and supported - in following up with formal statements and court appearances
 - Highway Safety receives reports on convictions, but not the actual charges. The data on how many tickets are issued for passing buses needs to be transparently communicated - not just what the ultimate conviction is (e.g. distracted driving)
 - Hot Spots must be identified and tracked

Action Area 2: Legislation and Highway Safety

What Needs to Happen

- Consistent, Island-wide “Zero Tolerance” approach
- We must communicate that Yellow Means Stop - not speed up and get past more quickly!
- Regular, public reporting of school bus passing incidents: how many incidents and charges per week; publication of names of convicted drivers

What Needs Clarifying

- Why are school bus passing charges reduced? (e.g. distracted driving charge vs. passing a bus charge)
- Can we institute a MINIMUM charge for passing a bus (vs. the \$5000 maximum charge)?
- How often are warnings issued, instead of tickets?
- Do officers always check for prior driving convictions before a ticket is issued?
- Can legislation change to remove the possibility of officer or judicial discretion in giving tickets and fines?
- What are the barriers to bus drivers and other witnesses testifying at conviction hearings?
- Can we identify and target high risk areas and high risk drivers?

What Might Get in Our Way?

- Police need access to out-of-Province driver info (licenses) - changes to legislation

What Support Do We Need?

- Update local bylaws to improve signage at bus stops
- Judicial support - convictions must correspond to the charge, not to the accused’s reasons or ability to pay a fine
- Legislation must support enhanced Equipment needs on buses
 - E.g. If a bus is equipped with a crossing arm, and the arm crosses into the oncoming lane, legislation needs to allow this

Action Area 3: Equipment Needs

What Needs to Happen

- Need a new pilot project with cameras on buses
 - Previous pilot project (2011) used cameras that were not good quality, out of date, prone to breakage
- Jurisdictional Scan - what equipment is being used, effectively, elsewhere; and what does it cost?
- Investigate bus equipment options:
 - Radar alarms on buses to record speeds of oncoming cars
 - Motion-activated cameras
 - Cameras that record automatically when flashing lights triggered
 - Alarms bus drivers can trigger if a vehicle is seen moving when a child is crossing
- Investigate external equipment options:
 - Red light/neighbourhood watch cameras in school zones
 - Mobile speed bumps
 - Designated bus stop locations with visibility signs
 - Roadside areas just for buses, school-bus specific lanes

What Needs Clarifying

- What is the current “gold standard” for safety equipment?
- What equipment is being used, and is effective, in other jurisdictions, and what does it cost?
- Where will new equipment come from? In 2011, cameras came from BC - long shipping time, difficult to access repairs/replacements
- Are existing signs and lights effective, or do they just blend into the visual “noise” of the road?
- Are signs and lights recognizable/understandable to out-of-province travelers?

What Might Get in Our Way?

- Justifying cost of new equipment without strong data to measure its effectiveness
- Does Legislation support equipment? (taking pictures, obstructing oncoming traffic)
- Student sensory issues if alarms are used

What Support Do We Need?

- Cost cannot preclude safety

- Need budgetary support for new equipment
- Annual incident report data, so that we can measure effectiveness of new equipment
- Bus driver training to ensure that signals, cameras and alarms are triggered at appropriate times
- Stop arms obstructing oncoming traffic must have legislative clearance

Action Area 4: Education and Awareness

What Needs to Happen

- Multi-faceted approach: community, parents, students, motorists, bus drivers
- Multi-Generational awareness campaigns geared to different demographics: campaigns in the Guardian/on Compass for older cohorts; campaigns on Facebook/Instagram/ Twitter/TikTok for younger cohorts
- Messaging in multiple languages - airport signage, car rental companies need to be on board to communicate local laws to tourists

What Needs Clarifying

- Will stricter penalties for distracted driving/cell phone use while driving help?

What Might Get in Our Way?

- Requires a paradigm change, Island-wide, across generations - pay attention, slow down, and stop!

What Support Do We Need?

- Repeated, year-round messaging
- Parent, student and bus driver testimonials
- Use the power of social media - eg. citizen reporting; awareness campaigns (Ministers, police, or public figures beside or on school buses on Facebook Live, Instagram Reels)
- Ongoing, standardized bus driver training (air brakes refresher, timing of triggering signals, manoeuvring new electric buses, medical exams especially for aging drivers, training on new safety equipment, job shadowing for new drivers, emergency procedures training)
- Bus safety training component for licensed drivers; increased testing for G-level drivers
- Specific police training for speeding in school zones, by designated bus stops, not yielding at crosswalks, passing buses
- Student Education: curriculum component for young drivers; health and safety curriculum; school bus safety component in Learners course
- Data collection (number of infractions/year) to measure effectiveness of education and awareness campaigns

Action Area 5: “Thinking Outside the Box”

What Needs to Happen

- Implement a public engagement survey - why are infractions continuing to happen?
- Survey/interview convicted drivers - what happened? (Hurried? Distracted? Didn't know what to do?)

What Needs Clarifying

- Greater understanding needed of “co-causes”: Impairment? Cell phone use? Other distractions for drivers?
- Would front license plates help to record violators? (visual recording, camera recording)
- Could students carry crossing flags (similar to flagged crosswalks)?

What Might Get in Our Way?

- Need support for new and different ideas and approaches
- Need support across the board (parents, students, schools, bus drivers, other drivers, community, police, government, courts)

What Support Do We Need?

- Legislated support for tactical positioning of buses with flashing lights on - block both lanes of traffic
- Community volunteers/citizen patrol/citizen reporting

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since the writing of this School Bus Safety Stakeholder meeting summary, a school bus accident has occurred in Prince Edward Island.

On the afternoon of Friday, October 29, a Public Schools Branch school bus carrying approximately 25 K-6 students was involved in an accident with an SUV. This resulted in Charlottetown's Queen Elizabeth Hospital entering Code Orange (external disaster) protocol and one child being airlifted to the IWK in Halifax for further care. This unfortunate incident underscores the main take-away message from the School Bus Safety Stakeholders Meeting: ***urgent action is required on Prince Edward Island, on the part of all stakeholders involved in school bus transportation, to ensure the safety of Island children.***

The Prince Edward Island Home and School Federation, as the convenor of the School Bus Safety Stakeholders Meeting, calls upon each group represented at the Stakeholders Meeting, and others, to take the following actions immediately:

1. Establish A School Bus Safety Task Force

- Multi-stakeholder, Island-wide representation
- Conduct a jurisdictional scan of best practices (legislative, punitive, equipment)
- Conduct a public engagement survey to uncover root causes of infractions and to gauge public support for change
- Provide solutions and evidence-based guidance to legislative and enforcement processes

2. Establish Year-Round Information Campaigns

- Radio; TV (Compass); Print (e.g. The Guardian, Graphic, Journal Pioneer); Social Media (e.g. Facebook Live, Instagram Stories/Reels, TikTok) - multiple methods to reach multiple audience demographics with reminders to slow down and stop for buses

Establishing an Island-wide, multi-stakeholder Task Force on School Bus Safety is considered a necessary first step to collect information and needs from all school bus safety stakeholder groups (inclusive of the judicial system, policymakers and legislators in Government Agencies and Departments, law enforcement agencies, the PSB and CSLF, PEIHSF, parents, and students) on PEI, as well as, inventory best practices and lessons learned from other jurisdictions. This action will provide informed, evidence-based guidance to support the advancement of improved school bus safety measures under the auspices of:

- New and revised or strengthened legislation
- Investment in piloting and adopting new school bus equipment
- Expanding public (layperson, parent/student) and driver (Islanders, tourists, bus drivers) education and awareness programming campaigns
- Finding new and different ways to increase school bus safety on Prince Edward Island

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