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September 2, 2014

Madame Premier and Minister Sandals,

Across Ontario this morning, 800,000 students will board school buses as anxious parents stand at the curb and wave them off – worried about their children, but confident of a safe ride.

Unifor represents 1,600 of the school bus drivers across Ontario that parents rely on every school day to provide that safe ride. And today, we have released a study into the Request for Proposals procurement policies for handing out school bus contracts in this province.

The study, *Steering Clear: Avoiding the RFP Trap*, enclosed, found that the RFP process has led to abandoned bus routes, yard closures and, for drivers, further downward pressure on wages, working conditions and a perpetual threat of job loss.

Madame Premier, this can, in turn, leave parents unsure of who will be picking up their children in the morning or returning them home safely after school. Having bus drivers who are familiar with their routes and the children they are carrying is the best way to ensure children get to and from school safely. That safety, however, is undermined by a procurement policy that breeds instability in the provision of this important service.

As well, parents rely on their local school boards to address their concerns with the education of their children and the services offered. The RFP process, however, has been removed from the control of local trustees and handed to secretive school bus consortia, which operate outside the bounds of accountability we expect from our public services and are outside the jurisdiction of the Freedom of Information Act and the Ombudsman's Office. This lack of democratic control, transparency and accountability is deeply concerning.

In 2008, the province provided \$10 million as a Wage Enhancement for school bus drivers, in recognition of the low wages paid to these workers. However, there has been no accounting of how the

money was distributed, and anecdotal evidence has suggested to us that little, if any, of the money reached the drivers for which it was intended. We also find this very concerning.

We invite you to read *Steering Clear*, and call on the Ontario government to take immediate steps to address the issues raised within it:

- Commission a review of the Request for Proposal process, and included in it an analysis of its impact on service, wages and working conditions
- Instruct the Auditor General to examine the distribution of the \$10-million Wage Enhancement of 2008
- Bring transparency to school bus consortia, including bringing them under the jurisdiction of the Freedom of Information Act and the Ombudsman, and requiring the same level of public transparency as any other public institution
- Establish an Ontario Student Transportation Employment Advisory Office to monitor the terms and conditions of successful RFP bids to guard against downward pressure on wages and working condition.

With the *Steering Clear* report, Unifor begins a concerted effort to address concerns with how school bus contracts are awarded in Ontario, and the impact that process is having on the services parents have come to expect from their school boards, democratic principles at the school boards and working conditions for school bus drivers.

I trust that you will find the report informative. I would further request an opportunity to meet with both of you about this issue.

Sincerely,

Jerry Dias, Unifor National President