

What the Coronavirus (COVID-19) means for student transportation workers?

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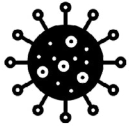
About the student transportation sector

Unifor represents nearly 3,000 student transportation drivers across Canada, the vast majority being in Ontario. During the school year, nearly 2.2 million students across the country board over 51,000 school buses and travel to school, class trips and other organized group activities. Although these drivers play a vital public service, it is becoming increasingly common that student transportation services are provided through large private companies, such as First Student or Stock Transportation, where often profits come before the needs of drivers and students.

How the student transportation sector is vulnerable to COVID-19

Student transportation drivers are directly impacted by public health decisions to close down schools. The COVID-19 crisis has already seen the temporary closure of schools in several jurisdictions across Canada. While for the most part school administrators and teaching staff have their wages and salaries protected during these closures, school bus driver wages are not guaranteed. Further, due to the part-time nature of their work, school bus drivers are largely ineligible to receive Employment Insurance (EI) benefits because they are unable to meet the hours of work requirements. Furthermore, school bus drivers are among the lowest paid transportation drivers in Canada. As such, any loss of income will have profound negative impacts on these workers and their families.

In regards to health and safety, drivers are often in close contact with students, which puts them at greater risk of contracting an illness. The same hours of work threshold that workers need to meet to receive EI sickness benefits also leave school bus drivers with little income support, especially in provinces (such as Ontario) that offer no paid sick days for workers. With chronic shortages of school bus drivers across the country, the potential of losing drivers to illness can have the potential of putting additional pressure on an already strained system.



What Local Unions in the student transportation sector should consider

Unifor has long called for greater public intervention to protect our student transportation system, ensure that students and driver safety is prioritized and that drivers are fairly compensated for the difficult work that they do. During this public health pandemic, we call on employers and the government to:

- Significantly decrease the hours of work requirements in order to make it easier for part-time and casual workers to access regular EI benefits and sickness benefits.
- Ensure private student transportation companies and school boards provide full wage protection for all school bus drivers during provincial and board mandated school closures.
- Ensure drivers who call in sick, quarantined or in self-isolation, receive full income assistance and eliminate the requirement to provide a doctor's note. Job-protected paid leave should also be provided if a worker is required to care for an ill or quarantined family member.
- School bus drivers should have access to appropriate protective gear such as gloves and masks and increased access to hand sanitizing equipment and cleaning stations. Bus companies and employers need to form external cleaning crews to ensure that all buses are rigorously cleaned and sanitized after each shift with special attention given to areas and surfaces more prone to driver and student contact. The task of cleaning should not be relegated to drivers themselves.
- Develop and implement protocols to deal with aggressive and abusive students and provide drivers with additional staff support for more demanding routes.

What the union expects from our employers and government:

- Full wage protections during mandated school closures
- Reduce hours of work requirements for all EI benefits
- Access to appropriate protective gear and hand washing stations
- Rigorous cleaning and sanitizing of school buses
- No doctor's notes to claim sick leave benefits and access to paid sick days for all workers

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

Subscribe to Unilink, the union's weekly national newsletter at unifor.org/subscribe and download the Unifor mobile app on your smartphone.

For more information, visit: www.unifor.org/covid19