

Steering Clear: Avoiding the RFP Trap Summary



School bus transportation is one of the most valuable community services provided to families, from small rural towns to large urban centres. Each school day, more than 32,000 drivers transport millions of school aged children to and from class across Canada, ensuring they arrive safely and on-time.

Fast facts:

- Unifor represents more than 1,700 school bus workers in Canada;
- In Ontario alone, 800,000 students travel by school bus each day, across 18,000 designated bus routes;
- One-third of workers in the bus transit sector are found in school buses, yet total compensation costs for school bus workers represents one-eighth of the bus transit sector;
- There are about 150 private school bus operators in Ontario. The largest, including First Student and Stock, cover approximately 80% of bus routes.

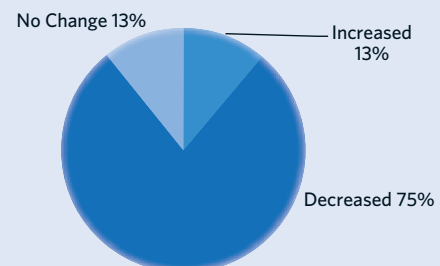
Despite this valuable service, school bus workers face insecurity on the job: substandard wages (between \$11 and \$15 per hour) as well as unstable, insufficient work hours (less than 4.5 hours on any given school day).

To make matters worse, the school bus industry is being hurt by new cost-cutting policies of the provincial government, including a poorly-designed Request for Proposal (RFP) process that guides the procurement of school bus service contracts every few years.

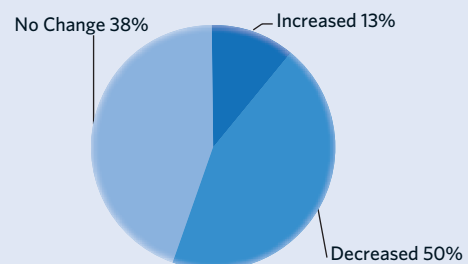
What the Workers Say

Unifor surveyed elected chairpersons from its 12 Ontario-represented workplaces, soliciting their opinions on how work standards have changed over the past five years. Here is what they had to say:

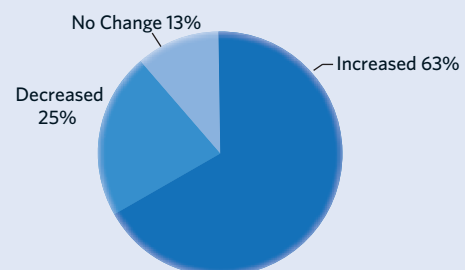
Has the quality of work increased, decreased or not changed significantly in the past 5 years?



Has the number of paid work hours increased, decreased or not changed significantly in the past 5 years?



Has the pace of work increased, decreased or not changed significantly in the past 5 years?



This competitive RFP process, managed in most cases by school board consortia (not the school boards themselves), has resulted in abandoned bus routes, yard closures and, for drivers, further downward pressure on wages, working conditions and a perpetual threat of job loss.

Toward a Higher Standard: Unifor Recommendations

Unifor believes school bus workers deserve better: fair compensation and a greater deal of respect on the job. We envision a future where school bus work is analogous to decent work – with decent wages, health benefits and stable work hours in a workplace that fosters training, personal development and respect.

In order to realize this bold future, school bus drivers must lead the way. The following recommendations offer a series of practical, and short-term, government policy solutions aimed at guarding against the downward pressure on working standards in this industry.

1. Independent Review of the RFP Process

Ontario should undertake an independent and comprehensive review of the school transportation RFP process, and its impact on the school bus industry – including wages and work standards. If this review demonstrates that the RFP process adversely affects and suppresses wages and work standards, the province should take steps to strike down or amend its competitive procurement guideline for school transport.

2. Audit the Bus Driver Wage Enhancement of 2008

The province should conduct an official audit of the one-time \$10-million Wage Enhancement to bus drivers issued in 2008. It remains unclear how – and if

– the enhancement issued by the Ministry of Education ever reached its intended beneficiaries. There has been no proper accounting of how those monies were disbursed from the recipient school boards and private operators, to the front-line drivers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, (in most cases) these funds were never received. If so, full back pay on any withheld wages must be paid to drivers.

3. Hold School Transport Consortia Accountable

Ontario must hold the 34 school transport consortia to a higher standard of public scrutiny. These consortia have been given the green light to operate outside of proper public accountability mechanisms, including the Freedom of Information Act and the provincial ombudsperson's jurisdiction. The province should require the same level of public transparency from transport consortia as any other public institution (since these entities provide service exclusively to public school boards), with full financial disclosure and regular publication of contract rates.

4. Take Wages out of Competition

In a fiercely competitive procurement process, it is safe to assume that operators will suppress drivers' wages to keep bid costs down in an effort to win routes. The province must guard against this potential downward spiral of wages in the industry by establishing an Ontario Student Transportation Employment Advisory Office. This independent office would be responsible for monitoring the terms and conditions of successful RFP bids to guard against downward pressure on wage rates and deterioration of work rules. This office could also recommend the province issue additional Wage Enhancements – a fail-safe for workers that guarantees an adequate standard of living.