



ONTARIO'S WATCHDOG
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The Route of the Problem **Opening Remarks – Paul Dubé**

Good morning and thank you for your interest in today's release, including those of you who are watching our live webcast.

As I release this report, I am mindful of the fact that the start of the new school year is 26 days away. There are still three good weeks left in summer vacation. I'm sure if we asked students, they'd say it's far too early to be talking about getting them back to school.

But today's report is about what happens when the people responsible for those students aren't prepared well in advance. If only the Toronto school boards and their transportation group had heeded the early warning signs all around them at this time last year, they could have averted or at least mitigated the busing crisis that engulfed them last September.

If you were affected by the bus driver shortage last fall, I don't need to remind you how serious it was. Thousands of students were stranded when their buses showed up late or not at all. Parents had to scramble to arrange transportation, and some spent terrifying hours not knowing where their children were, when they were dropped at the wrong spots.

This was no mere inconvenience – there were serious cases where vulnerable children were at risk. Junior kindergarten students were dropped by substitute bus drivers at stops several kilometres from their homes – left alone on busy roadways, in complete violation of the boards' safety protocols. Children with special needs were left outside their schools without any supervision, or stuck on buses for hours at a time, leaving them tired, hungry and upset. Parents had to change their schedules without notice, sometimes at risk to their own employment.

Schools were overwhelmed with complaints and the sheer volume of families they had to contact. And even though parents were clearly desperate for information, the boards didn't issue any formal communication to them until well into the third day of school.

Now, my office has had oversight of school boards for almost two years. We are well aware that busing is a hot topic of complaint in many boards at the start of the school year, as everyone gets back into their routine and adjustments are made. But what happened in Toronto was not business as usual. It was a systemic, administrative failure on several fronts, and it was many months in the making.

Problems first surfaced after new contracts for busing services were awarded in February 2016, which meant new operators were asked to service different routes. Operators didn't know the actual routes until much later in the year, and those were repeatedly revised, which made it even more difficult for them to assign and retain drivers. We heard of one driver who simply abandoned a bus out of frustration.

I announced an investigation because it was evident that this was not a freak occurrence, but the result of systemic issues that could and should have been addressed – and corrected, so it will never be repeated.

That is the aim of any Ombudsman investigation – to spark constructive change that will prevent the same problem from recurring.

More than anything, this case was about communication failures. Communication with the bus operators broke down when they weren't told the actual routes they would be driving. Communication with parents was practically non-existent until well into the crisis, even though board officials were warned of potential problems in the week before school started.

The good news is that this year, things are being done differently. The boards and their transportation group co-operated fully with this investigation and have accepted all of my recommendations. They have already made significant progress in implementing them in time for the new school year.

For example, a new online portal to keep parents informed is now in place, and for the first time, a professional call centre will be engaged to handle questions and complaints. Even more improvements are targeted for next year, and the next time new contracts are issued for bus operators, the boards have committed to doing things differently. I will monitor and report on their progress on all of my recommendations.

I am also encouraging all school boards across Ontario to review this report and the boards' response for guidance with their own transportation issues. As we enter our third year of working with school boards, I have emphasized how our office can help local officials bring about constructive change, and I think this report is a textbook case.

Now, I'd be happy to answer your questions.