



September 23, 2022

Dear Holmdel Public Schools Community,

I hope this finds you all well. I am following up to provide a comprehensive update with regard to the district's transportation services. This communication will provide information in three key areas: factors contributing to the challenges and complications experienced this year, interventions and actions taken by the district, and ways in which our parents/guardians and students can partner with us.

There were a number of key circumstances and factors which led to the challenges experienced this school year.

- The Transportation Department is responsible for routing and managing 104 bus routes. Historically and annually, contractors renew their routes. This year only 12% of the routes were renewed and 88% had to go out to bid. This resulted in the onboarding of several new contractors and numerous drivers who were unfamiliar with the community and routes. Driver shortages at times have necessitated the deployment of CDL licensed sub drivers-including the company owners, office staff/mechanics who are still qualified and experienced operators. It remains common for drivers to quit and “contractor-hop” for more money and sign on bonuses thus creating ongoing and fluid human resources challenges.
- Parents/guardians were not looking on powerschool prior to the first day for updated bus assignment/stop location/pick up and drop times.
- Contractors were not providing their drivers updated routes furnished to them by the district Transportation Department.
- **House stops**-students were waiting in front of their homes on the first day of school because, years prior, in response to parental petition, and even monetary tipping and gifting, the drivers were unilaterally and without managerial authorization giving house stops. The district foresaw this happening, however, the number of house stops happening throughout the district far exceeded expectations. Approximately half of the parental inquiries regarding missed buses were due to this factor. The Transportation Department placed at the top of every route sheet that a \$500 fine will be assessed to the contractor for each instance a driver goes off the route without authorization. Holmdel residents have called numerous times over the years to express frustration that they were behind buses that stopped at every driveway.
- **Cul-de-sacs and K turns** although it is not illegal to go into a cul-de-sac, it is ultimately up to the contractor to decide if they will go in. This was one of the complaints/concerns from all of our contractors regarding Holmdel routes. Also, for the safety of students and resident property, K turns are to be avoided and should not be part of a route. Buses need a qualified spotter to perform a K turn. [From CDL manual updated 2022 10.7.3 –page 141](#) We have had numerous mishaps with resident property-mailboxes, retaining walls, tree branches, grass being torn up, etc.
- **Withdrawal of longtime contractor** A large bus contractor who had worked with Holmdel Public Schools for over 20 years and which serviced over 15% of the district's routes candidly communicated to the Transportation Department that they no longer wished to serve our community. One reason they cited was challenging parental relations.
- Some of the district routes represent the third leg of a triple route for a bus that is servicing a parochial school prior to traveling to Holmdel (i.e Christian Brothers Academy)
- Approximately 48% of the district students receive courtesy bus services for 22-23. In other words, they reside within the distance maximums, after which students are statutorily entitled to bussing services. This has been a long-standing practice in the school district.

Over the course of the last several weeks the district has fielded hundreds of inquiries/requests for assistance. In my recent meeting with the building principals and Transportation Department administration, the primary, remaining challenge is the late arrival of the elementary buses to school and delayed drop off time in the afternoon. Also discussed

in my meeting and confirmed; any student that is late to school due to the arrival time of the bus will **NOT** be penalized or marked tardy.

In order to resolve and/or mitigate these challenges and understanding that some of the challenges persist, the district has taken the following actions.

- Direct interaction by the Transportation Department with parents/guardians resulting in hundreds of resolved concerns
- Regular sharing of updated bus rosters with contractors
- Utilization of the district's licensed CDL driver, trained an additional member of the staff and use of district's 54 passenger bus and van
- Building administration assessed the efficiency of bus departure from Satz Middle School and modified procedures to ensure that buses depart for elementary school runs no later than 2:50.
- Development of shared spreadsheet with the athletic department to coordinate after school buses
- Collaborate with Holmdel police traffic safety task force to perform a traffic "line of sight" assessment to determine safe stopping distances.
- Meeting with the ownership of our bus contractor to debrief opening and ensure efficient and effective collaboration moving forward

Regrettably, in the opening weeks of school, we have had several incidences of student misconduct on our buses. The district is utilizing additional "floating" monitors who are deployed to buses which are experiencing problematic behaviors. Further, our parents/guardians and students should understand that the building administration intends to exercise strong discretion for those students demonstrating multiple infractions. These infractions may result in the loss of bus privileges either temporary or for the entire year. Please reinforce with your children the necessity for proper and safe conduct on our buses.

Now that many of the contributing factors and causes have been resolved, the reason for the ongoing late arrivals to school and late arrivals at home is due in large part to the accommodation of bus stop change requests. It is important to note, that the routes/stops were developed with the use of the most updated transportation software which ensures, to the greatest extent possible, the timely transport of students to and from school. What has disrupted that timetable is the accommodation of bus stop requests by the bus drivers outside of the official chain of command of their dispatcher and/or our Transportation Department. It is important to recognize that every bus that, for example, goes down and turns around in the cul-de-sac versus picking up students midway or at the corner of an intersecting street is time added to the route. All of us ultimately play a part in ensuring that the buses get to and from school on time.

However, if the district is to request the assistance of our parents/guardians; we must be more timely and proactive in our communication with regard to any prospective challenges. This will enable the district an opportunity to gather feedback and our families time to make any necessary accommodations.

I'm hopeful that this correspondence has provided you with a clear understanding of the transportation challenges as well as the actions which the district has taken. Our lines of communication remain open as does our commitment to engage with each and every community member with respect to their questions and any ongoing concerns.

Sincerely,



Dr. J. Scott Cascone
Superintendent

