

September 23, 2021

Dear SOMSD Families,

The purpose of this communication is to provide you with an update on the status of the District's transportation service.

First, we want to thank you, our parents, for your patience as we've sought to resolve a myriad of transportation issues that have impacted the start of the school year. We recognize that there have been significant delays in the pick-up and drop-off of students via our routes across the District. We understand your frustration and regardless of the difficulties in managing these unforeseen challenges, our communication to parents has been insufficient. We sincerely apologize for not meeting your (or our) expectations during these turbulent times. We are working tirelessly with our Transportation Department (and our partnering bus companies) to resolve ongoing issues and to ensure safe, consistent transportation for our students.

There are a number of challenges in transportation this year, among them:

- As you may have seen reported in the news, our region and state are coping with a shortage of bus drivers. It has significantly impacted our Transportation Department (and partnering bus companies) and caused a necessity to combine and reduce routes. Unfortunately, we currently do not have substitute bus drivers (we are actively recruiting) and currently have less than the ideal number of drivers for our current routes.
- We have all available personnel driving routes in order to fill absences and gaps (including those who are normally in the Department Headquarters but have the required licensure and training).
- Damages to our fleet from Tropical Storm Ida led to fewer available buses.
- We were, unfortunately, the victim of theft as 8 of our buses were robbed of their catalytic converters, a couple of days before schools reopened.
- Due to the lack of available buses, some of our new bus drivers were unable to become acclimated to their routes, and new route designs.
- Street closures, increased traffic (as individuals in the towns begin to return to work), and overall more cars on the road as parents/guardians begin dropping their kids off at school (this is the first time since March 2020 that our entire student body is back in school), is also contributing to delays.

Our Transportation Department is working hard to alleviate all transportation-related delays that are occurring across all of our schools. It is important to note, that daily we are transporting close to 1,000 students to our various school locations. Although change seems slow, each day we are seeing improvements in the service we are able to provide to our families and we anticipate that bus-related delays will subside in the coming weeks.

Notwithstanding, our Transportation Coordinator and Business Office are committed to serving our community so we are doing all we can to maintain our operations in less than ideal circumstances, to ensure every student can come to school. At Monday's Board of Education Meeting, a resolution was approved by the Board authorizing the transfer of surplus, other unbudgeted or under-budgeted revenue to cover the cost (in conjunction with our insurance claims) of replacing school buses and maintenance vehicles damaged in Tropical Storm Ida in the very near future.

In the future, if there will be significant District-wide transportation delays during the morning or afternoon routes, the District will do its best to communicate to families as soon as possible so that you are able to make alternative arrangements if needed. For transportation delays/issues with singular routes, we will be working with your school-based leaders to use school messenger to notify impacted families.

We've provided some additional FAQs below. If you are having an issue with your child's transportation route we encourage you to first reach out to your building Principal (or school's front office) as they may have direct information on delays. They can also follow up with the Central Office to get more information. This will help us to streamline the communication of emergent concerns.

South Orange & Maplewood School District Transportation Department & Business Office

Transportation FAQs

What is the impact of the driver shortage?

Currently, the District is short drivers for schools (if and when a driver calls out this creates even more travel delays). When the District is short on drivers, routes can sometimes be combined; when routes are combined, routes will be extended and it impacts the current pick up and drop off times for students. Our transportation vendor, as well as the District, is actively seeking additional drivers; however, the driver shortage is a national problem and has been for over a year.

Did Tropical Storm Ida affect bus inventory?

Tropical Storm Ida is one of the reasons for the lack of buses (as shared in previous communications, we suffered extensive damage to our vehicles from the storm). Notwithstanding, our Transportation Coordinator and Business Office are committed to serving our community so we are making it work in less than ideal circumstances to ensure every student gets to school in a timely manner.

What can parents do?

Parents and guardians may consider carpooling or driving their students to school over the next couple of weeks as we seek to address the driver shortage and fine-tune routes and times. Your cooperation and support as we work through this challenge is appreciated. Also please note, we are not alone as our neighboring districts that provide transportation to students are facing very similar circumstances.

What is the District doing to resolve these issues?

Currently, we're working closely with our transportation vendor to assist in recruiting staff; the District is offering monetary incentives to recruit new bus drivers. Our Transportation Supervisor, along with supervisors from our transportation vendor, have been riding the bus routes to help resolve issues with bus routes (i.e. timeliness, assessing routes, etc.). In addition, at our most recent BOE meeting on Mon., September 20, the Board passed a resolution to request approval on an emergency basis to the NJ Commissioner of Education to purchase new buses in the near future.