

SCAN OF SELECTED ONTARIO SCHOOL BOARDS: STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND SAFE ARRIVAL POLICY

Policy Summary

The Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) Student Attendance and Safe Arrival Policy (P085) ("the Policy") was adopted on June 18, 2014 and has not been revised since adoption. The Policy replaced the now archived Safe Arrival for Elementary Schools Policy (P050).

Two operational procedures are associated with the Policy: Student Attendance and Safe Arrival Procedures (Elementary) (PR707A) and Student Attendance and Safe Arrival Procedures (Secondary) (PR707B). Both procedures were adopted on June 17, 2014 and have not been revised since adoption. These procedures replaced the now archived Safe Arrival for Elementary Schools Procedure (PR521).

The Policy and associated procedures satisfy the Ontario Ministry of Education's ("the Ministry") Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No.123 regarding safe arrivals. The Ministry issued PPM No. 123 on February 2, 1999 and requested that school boards "develop a policy statement applying to each elementary school within their jurisdiction for the development and implementation of a safe-arrival program." Currently, there is still no directive from the Ministry for school boards to implement safe arrival programs in secondary schools.

This scan reviews fifteen Ontario school boards' (see list below) safe arrival programs and outlines eleven key similarities and differences with the TDSB's current practices.

School Boards Scanned

The school boards scanned are as follows:

Bluewater DSB, Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB, Durham DSB, Hamilton-Wentworth DSB, Ottawa-Carleton DSB, Peel Region DSB, Renfrew DSB, Simcoe County DSB, Toronto Catholic DSB, Toronto DSB, Thames Valley DSB, Upper Canada DSB, Upper Grand DSB, Waterloo Region DSB, and York Region DSB.

Key Similarities and Differences

1. Secondary Schools

Of the fifteen school boards reviewed, only four mention secondary school safe arrival procedures. Waterloo Region DSB (WRDSB) explicitly details step by step procedures for secondary schools to follow. WRDSB also states that phone calls for unexplained absences at secondary schools are completed after school hours. Renfrew DSB and Upper Canada DSB simply state that "secondary schools are encouraged to implement

similar programs [to that of elementary schools]”. The TDSB is the only school board to have a procedure (PR707B) entirely dedicated to secondary school attendance and safe arrival.

2. Centralized vs. Decentralized Procedures

Of the fifteen school boards scanned, the TDSB’s procedures are the most detailed with step-by-step instructions listed. The majority of the other fourteen school boards give decision making power to individual schools and principals, referencing PPM No. 123 which states, “the design of specific procedures reflects local needs and the particular circumstances of the school and the community”.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

Nine out of the fifteen school boards’ policies and procedures have similar formats; the procedures list the responsibilities of all individuals involved in safe arrival programs. These lists typically include: parents/guardians, students, principals, teachers, school staff (i.e., office administrators), school councils, and volunteers. Instead, the TDSB procedures (PR707A and PR707B) are organized by function (e.g., Safe Arrival Program Procedures and Reporting, Tracking Absences and Lateness, etc.) stating within those subsections key individuals involved in the stated tasks.

4. Volunteers

The TDSB does not include the use of volunteers in its student attendance and safe arrival policy and procedures. Eight of the other fourteen school boards scanned do include volunteers in their programs, and six school boards outline their roles in the processes in greater detail. The Ministry’s PPM No. 123 states that, “Parents and volunteers can make a tremendous contribution to the delivery of these programs. Efforts should be made to develop this potential and to enlist the aid of parents and volunteers to reduce demands on the time of school administrative staff.”

5. Departure/Dismissal of Students

York Region DSB (YRDSB) and Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB (DPCDSB) are the only school boards to include any protocols about dismissing students, at the end of, or at any point before the end of the school day. YRDSB outlines the responsibilities of students, parents/guardians, school staff, principals and school bus drivers in its departures protocol. DPCDSB’s safe dismissal processes are unique to each school and established by individual principals. DPCDSB’s procedure does indicate that each school “will maintain a log for signing students out before the end of the instructional day. The log will identify the person signing the student out as well as the date, time and the reason”.

6. Student Age

The TDSB's Student Attendance and Safe Arrival Policy and Procedures (P085, PR707A and PR707B) do not include varying provisions for students of certain ages. However, the TDSB Severe Weather: Schools and Administrative Office/Sites Procedure (PR519) does outline different courses of action for students of specific ages. Subsection 3.3 Early Closure: Cancellation of classes, cancellation of programs run by TDSB, early closure of schools, administrative offices or sites during the school day (a) states, "(iii) No student in JK to Grade 5 will be sent home until parents have been notified and the principal is assured that suitable arrangements have been made for the child's supervision. (iv) Parents of students in Grade 6 to 12 may designate in writing that their child will be permitted to be dismissed early or remain at school until picked up (Form 519A, Section I). (v) Students over 18 years of age may use their discretion."

7. Inclement Weather

The majority of school boards scanned mentioned flexibility in their safe arrival programs, particularly on school days when high volumes of lateness/absence could be expected (e.g., inclement weather, school bus cancellations). Four school boards' safe arrival programs explicitly state inclement weather provisions for when schools are closed or buses are cancelled, in which case the safe arrival program will only apply to non-bus students. The Ministry's PPM No.123 also mentions flexibility regarding weather: "Programs should take into account both normal, recurring circumstances and unusual events and conditions. For example, regular procedures could be modified on days when pupils are likely to arrive late because of inclement weather or bus cancellations."

8. School Messenger Technology

Thirteen of the fifteen school boards scanned, including the TDSB, use School Messenger technologies in their safe arrival programs. School Messenger is rarely referenced in the reviewed policies and procedures, but it is mentioned on many of the school boards' websites, as well as individual schools' websites. School Messenger is a web and app based software platform that notifies parents/guardians of student absences via recorded calls, emails, texts, push notifications and desktop alerts. School Messenger also allows for parents/guardians to select their language of choice.

9. Occasional Teachers

Many of the reviewed school boards indicate how safe arrival procedures are to be implemented when occasional teachers are in the classroom. Most school boards utilize some form of technology (i.e., web attendance [Trillium]) but occasional teachers do not have the authorization to access these resources, so occasional teachers are supplied

with paper copies of class attendances. The TDSB's procedures do not reference any varying protocols for occasional teachers.

10. Student Attendance

It is also worth noting that the TDSB is the only school board to include substantive procedures regarding student attendance management within its safe arrival policy and procedures. No other board mentions prolonged absences, problematic attendance or professional support services.

11. Reporting Time

On March 9, 2020 the TDSB Director of Education issued a letter to secondary school students' parents/guardians regarding safe arrival procedures, and stated that "first phone calls and/or automated calls begin no later than 75 minutes after the start of school if your child is absent without permission." Most of the school boards scanned indicate "timely" and "prompt" reporting procedures, but do not specific quantifiable time metrics. Thames Valley DSB is the only other school board to state explicit times, specifying that "attendance is taken and submitted within 15 minutes after morning bell and after every nutritional break", but the time of calls to parents/guardians is not mentioned.