

Province provided emergency funds to Ottawa school boards contingent on consistent messaging

CAROLINE ALPHONSO > EDUCATION REPORTER

PUBLISHED 3 HOURS AGO

UPDATED 2 HOURS AGO

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

The Ontario government required two Ottawa school boards to agree to use “consistent messaging” in exchange for emergency funding for busing, according to documents obtained through an access-to-information request.

The Official Opposition New Democratic Party provided The Globe and Mail with documents that showed the government imposed conditions in exchange for \$1.8-million in additional funding for student transportation.

Typically, the government will make a decision to provide funding to a school board for a new school, for example, and then work with school staff to formulate a public announcement about the new construction project.

In this instance, the government’s funding for transportation was subject to the boards’ agreeing to certain messages being communicated.

NDP education critic Chandra Pasma, who obtained the documents, said the government changed the funding criteria to school boards for transportation, shortchanged the Ottawa boards and then “muzzled” them by providing emergency funding with strings attached.

“I think it’s an abuse of power,” Ms. Pasma said. “It is completely unacceptable.”

An e-mail in July from Michèle Giroux, the former education director at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, to trustees and staff stated “the ministry funding is subject to an agreement which includes consistent messaging by all four parties.”

Those parties included the government, the public school board, the Ottawa Catholic School Board and the Ottawa School Transportation Authority, which is responsible for student busing.

The messages contained a statement that the Ministry of Education is working closely with the two school boards “to ensure that transportation services are stable for parents, students and school communities.”

The e-mail from Ms. Giroux asked trustees and staff to “refrain from commenting” on busing services beyond the government’s messaging to “ensure accuracy and consistency.”

Isha Chaudhuri, a spokesperson for Education Minister Stephen Lecce, did not directly address why the government tied funding for student transportation to messaging.

“We worked to deliver a resolution and align the communications so the message to parents is clear, consistent and action-oriented; focused on ensuring reliable student transportation,” she said in an e-mail statement.

A shortage of bus drivers in the Ottawa area this fall has meant hundreds of families are scrambling to get their children to and from school. The government is initiating a third-party review of school transportation.

Both school boards said the funding allowed them to provide services for families.

Lyra Evans, chair of the Ottawa-Carleton public school board, said in an e-mail that she “cannot dispute that any of those specific messaging criteria were included as requirements at this time.”

“Our priority was to provide reliable transportation services to families. The funding agreement was a critical step in maintaining service delivery,” she added.

“Unfortunately, many families are adversely impacted by driver and service shortages. The agreement also provided for an independent third-party review, and we are hopeful that will assist in finding long-term solutions.”

Sign up for the Great Reads Newsletter

A selection of provocative, inspiring, and delightful stories worth your time this weekend.

SIGN UP

Follow Caroline Alphonso on Twitter: [@calphonso](#)

[Report an error](#)

[Editorial code of conduct](#)