

# The Ottawa Citizen

## In Ottawa? It's a fine balance

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Ottawa-area school boards have extensive transportation safety policies for students, many minutely dictated by provincial law.

But in some cases, guidelines vary from board to board and policies can be different for extracurricular trips than they are for home-to-school transportation.

For example, large passenger vans like the one involved in the fatal New Brunswick crash are not used by either the Ottawa public or Catholic boards for school-to-home transportation.

"It should be noted that the driver has to have a special and appropriate licensing to operate the vans in question, which also makes the use of these vans much less likely," noted Michael Carson, superintendent of facilities at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Boards.

On rare occasions, if there is no alternative, both boards allow personal vehicles to be used for extracurricular activities.

For education administration, there is a fine balance between assessing risk and ensuring students get experiences outside school.

Julian Hanlon, deputy director of education at the Ottawa Catholic School Board, said that for league and playoff games, coaches are asked to choose from an approved list of carriers, an expense covered under athletics budgets.

But if a high school coach wants a team to play at other events, athletes might be asked to get to a game by public transit. Parents might volunteer to drive in the same way they'd drive teens to a non-school event like a movie.

If the coach arranges for parent volunteers, all students must have written permission. If teachers drive, they assume responsibility, said Hanlon.

"It's not our preferred method of transportation, and it doesn't happen often," he said.

"It's a fine balance between allowing programs to continue or not allowing programs to continue." Among other Ottawa-area policies and procedures: n At the public board, principals are responsible for all travel from the school, including athletic travel.

n When public board students travel out of the Ottawa-Carleton region for more than a day, the school superintendent and the director designate signs off, as well as attesting safety conditions have been met.

n In all boards, teachers and principals must use a list of board-approved carriers. Companies must meet provincial safety standards and licensing requirements. All school bus drivers get first aid training and drivers must adhere to the "hours of service regulations" when on school bus routes or charter assignments. That includes a minimum of eight hours off between shifts.

n All Ottawa school boards cancel field trips on snow days when regular school buses are cancelled.

n Winter tires are not mandatory on Ontario school buses. However, most operators run a winter grade tire on the rear year-round with all-season tires on the front. Tires must meet a minimum tread depth.

n School buses contracted to school boards must meet the Ministry of Transportation maintenance requirements. Most operators exceed this and most school buses are checked every 90 days, according to the Ottawa public board.

The Ontario School Boards' Insurance Exchange covers all school boards in the province and sends out frequent advisories on risk and safety guidelines.

The insurance exchange advises that employees, trustees, volunteers, parents and students are protected "while operating a vehicle not owned by them on board business. Further, they are protected while operating their own vehicles on board business, such as field trips." Board coverage is in excess of the vehicle owner's coverage, which kicks in first.

Boards are not required to comply with the insurance exchange recommendations, but they have a compelling reason to do so -- liability coverage is getting increasingly hard to obtain, Hanlon said.

Parents who are driving know they are assuming a level of responsibility, as do coaches.

There's no greater risk in travelling with a parent or a coach than in travelling on a school bus, Hanlon said.

"The probability (of an accident) is the same in both cases if it's handled properly."