



RENFREW COUNTY CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

AND

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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **Renfrew County School Boards Agree to Pilot the Staggered Bells Concept**

After carefully studying the options and input from the public, Renfrew County's school board trustees have decided to pilot the staggered bell transportation system for the 2009-2010 school year.

Acting on the recommendation of the Renfrew County Joint Transportation Committee (RCJTC), the Public and Catholic school boards for the county have voted to introduce staggered bells this September for schools in the Pembroke, Petawawa and Deep River areas.

"We have given this decision a great deal of thought, and we have listened to all of the input we have received," commented RCJTC Co-Chair Norm Hazelwood of the Renfrew County District School Board.

A limited introduction of the change in school bus schedules will allow the school boards to ensure a smooth transition for families, municipalities, bus operators and child care facilities.

The pilot area was chosen because it provides a representative sample of urban and rural areas and includes long and short bus runs.

The RCJTC will review the pilot project next February. If it proves to be efficient and effective, the boards will expand the staggered bells to other areas of the county in September 2010.

The affected schools will include the Catholic schools of Bishop Smith Catholic High School, Cathedral, Holy Name and Our Lady of Lourdes in Pembroke, St. Francis of Assisi and Our Lady Of Sorrows in Petawawa, St Mary's in Deep River, St Anthony's in Chalk River and Our Lady Of Grace in Westmeath. The public schools included in the pilot project will be: Mackenzie High School, Keys and Morison in Deep River, Fellowes High School, Champlain Discovery, Highview and Rockwood in Pembroke, Beachburg and Westmeath Public Schools, General Panet High School, General Lake, Herman Street, Pinecrest and Pine View schools in Petawawa.

The decision follows an intensive public consultation campaign that included focus groups, an independent consultant's routing plan, surveys and a series of six public meetings throughout the county. The meetings were attended by a total of 900 people and more than 1,600 surveys were returned.

Concerns raised during the public meetings included the availability and cost of childcare; scheduling social, sports and work activities for students on different bus schedules; potential effects on students' ability to learn; and travel safety and winter road maintenance.

"We are very sympathetic to the concerns and questions that have been raised," said Dave Howard, co-chair of the RCJTC for the Catholic school board. "There are a lot of valid issues that need to be addressed. This decision will give us the time and ability to lend them appropriate attention and consideration."

"Staggered bells" is the popular term for a system of different start times and end times for elementary and secondary schools. The number of buses on the road is reduced by having some school days begin as early as 8 a.m. and end at 2 p.m., and other schools begin as late as 9:30 a.m. and end at 3:30 p.m. As part of the piloting proposal, the Renfrew County school boards will make every effort to minimize the window between bell times wherever possible.

The concept of staggered bells is not new in Ontario and many boards have already implemented this system. As part of its research, the RCJTC met with the transportation manager of the Limestone, Algonquin Lakeshore Catholic and Hastings Prince Edwards district school board, where the staggered bell model has been in use for a number of years.

"We will learn from the models that are already in place, and use our own experience to develop a model that will meet the unique needs of Renfrew County," Mr. Howard concludes. "We understand that this change will not be easy for everyone, but we also have to be financially responsible and plan for the future."

The Ontario Ministry of Education is strongly encouraging and expecting school boards to implement a staggered bell delivery model. This fall, the Ministry is scheduled to assess the \$10-million dollar busing operation of the RCJTC.

It is estimated that a staggered bell system, if fully implemented, will reduce the county-wide school transportation costs by \$900,000 per year.

"We really will not have a choice on whether to introduce this," Mr. Hazelwood states. "Our choice is on when and how to make this work, and we're proceeding on that understanding."

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