

METUCHEN BOARD OF EDUCATION
Administrative Offices
16 Simpson Place
METUCHEN, NEW JERSEY 08840

January 20, 2021

Parents and Guardians,

The Metuchen Board of Education – Finance Committee has begun planning transportation for next school year (21/22). While it may seem premature to be doing so with many unknowns still remaining, in order to have busing available next year, we need to be preparing and budgeting now. We've reached a point in our preparations where we need your input. Please read this letter closely and follow on to the survey to provide your feedback.

Prior to the pandemic, there was already a bus driver shortage in NJ. As a result of the events of 2020, the problem has been exacerbated and some busing companies have either gone out of business or are facing severe income reductions as a result of lost revenue. Like many businesses and families, they are challenged. We anticipate as a result; the cost we are charged by our chosen vendor could increase significantly.

As you may know, Metuchen provides what is known as "courtesy busing". State Law only requires students who live more than 2 miles from their school be provided transportation by the school district. For most students in Metuchen this means we are not required by law to bus students but do so as a courtesy, hence the name. Our research indicates that most towns don't offer "courtesy busing" at all anymore, and the ones that do charge \$550 to \$1000 a student. While that may seem like a lot, it's less than \$3 a trip. You can't get an Uber for that amount in 2021!

In the 2019/2020 school year, the district paid \$540 per student for courtesy busing, while parents paid \$200. This meant the taxpayers subsidized the cost of busing at a cost of close to \$300,000. These are funds that do not go into the classroom or enhance your child's education. It should also be noted that only about 60% of students at Campbell or Edgar use the service. As the finance committee weighs these factors, we look for ways to maximize the use of tax dollars for the educational benefit of as many students as possible.

At this time, we are anticipating that the busing fee for the 21/22 school year could be \$500 per student. We recognize this is a potentially substantial increase. We would like to provide busing to families who need it and want to do our part to reduce traffic in town and make the drop off and pick-ups as easy as possible. We do not seek to end courtesy busing but need to have an honest conversation about it. Facing substantial and unknown increases in our cost, we're trying to have that now rather than closer to the start of school next year. We also realize the increase in cost may cause you to decide you would rather make an alternative plan. If our ridership drops it has the potential to drive up costs. This is why and where we need your feedback.

We have put together a survey using Google Forms at <https://forms.gle/qfuPhZJu63CLdi78A> If you are a parent that currently uses or anticipates needing busing in the coming year, please complete the quick survey. **IF YOU COMPLETE THE SURVEY BY JANUARY 31, 2021, THIS WILL SERVE AS YOUR RESERVATION FOR A SEAT IN THE COMING SCHOOL YEAR ASSUMING THE DISTRICT IS ABLE TO CONTINUE TO OFFER IT.** We are not asking for any payment at this time and if you choose to not take busing later in the year, that's OK, you will not be charged. Collecting as many answers as possible will give us the best chance at properly planning and being able to continue to offer busing in the coming year. Feel free to encourage your friends you know use buses to indicate their interest at the increased price.

If 2020 taught all of us anything, it's that even the best plans can go sideways. It should be noted, even with the increased costs we expect the service challenges caused by limited numbers of drivers to persist. Please make sure you always have an alternative backup plan. We are in the process of securing a provider for the Fall of 2021 for our Before and After Care Program. Keep in mind, with our previous program the earliest a student could be dropped off was 7:30AM. Students may not be dropped off at school and left unattended.

Thank you for your patience and participation as we continue to navigate challenges together,

Dr. Vincent Caputo, Superintendent of Schools
Mike Harvier, Business Administrator
Marissa Plancher, Transportation Coordinator
Brian Glassberg, Metuchen Board of Education, President
Justin Manley, Metuchen Board of Education, Finance Chair