

Saskatoon Transit - Implementing Free Child Fare

What We Heard Engagement Report

April 2024



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1. Executive Summary

Public engagement activities for the implementation of free child fare on September 1, 2024 occurred between February and April 2024 to help Saskatoon Transit determine how best to design and implement an effective program that meets the needs of the community and improves the accessibility and affordability of public transit.

The engagement strategy targeted several groups of respondents through multiple different surveys and engagement events. These surveys and events collected responses from Saskatoon Transit employees, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 615, elementary school principals, teachers and administration, community groups, riders, parents and the general public. There were various channels and forums for people to share feedback on eligibility and implementation options and identify possible barriers to consider.

Participants in all engagement activities identified that Grade 8 and under was the preferred age of eligibility for free child fare [Elementary Schools (84%), Saskatoon Transit Employees (39%), Community Groups (52%), Public Survey (44%)], followed by 13 and under [(Elementary Schools (7%), Saskatoon Transit Employees (7%), Community Groups (11%) and Public Survey (16%)]. The community groups proposed that free fare for 18 and under would be ideal, which participants in all surveys included in their comments.

Community groups who attended in-person sessions and 62% of participants in the public survey wanted a program without barriers to make it easy to use, preferring children to self-identify when boarding the bus, and not require verification like a pass or proof of age. If age verification was required, 56% (public survey) preferred a child pass.

Saskatoon Public Schools and Greater Saskatoon Catholic School representatives indicated that some classes use public transit for class field trips, but that free child fare would not significantly increase student riders. Participants had safety concerns with more young children riding alone on the bus with free fare for children. School representatives indicated they do not provide identification for students and cannot manage the distribution of a free public transit Child Pass to elementary school students. However, the schools can help promote the free child fare program through newsletters and other communication tools.

Saskatoon Transit employees identified concerns with a potential increase in fare evasion (adults and high school age posing as a child) and unaccompanied younger children, with 56% preferring a child pass or other age verification to reduce fare evasion and 20% preferring that the child rides for free when accompanied by an adult. Community groups were equally split on whether the child should be accompanied by an adult. Bus Riders of Saskatoon suggest children under five will be accompanied at the guardian's discretion, but older than five years should not have a barrier, such as a pass or identification, to be eligible.

The ATU Local 615 requests a pass that requires registration and verification for children to ride free, to reduce the instances of people claiming to be eligible who are not. The concern is that introducing free fare for children will give people another way to abuse the fare policy, making the current issue worse and stretching the frontline Saskatoon Transit workers further by adding more stress. While ATU Local 615 understands that a registration process could place barriers for those

in desperate need of the program, they suggest collaborating with other partners on a solution. ATU Local 615 prefers a “grade” cut-off for the program for eligibility.

Across Canada, of the 15 transit agencies that participated in the benchmark survey coordinated by the Canadian Urban Transit Association, most have free child fare for 12 and under and do not require a pass for verification. Half did not report any issues and the other half is experiencing issues with an increase in fare evasion. Regina Transit has free child fare for 13 and under and children self-identify when boarding the bus. Regina Transit has experienced an increase in fare evasion and fare disputes. There are also more older children riding on buses, but the Administration does not consider it a problem.

2. Background

At its meeting held on August 15, 2023, the Governance and Priorities Committee considered the Transportation Business Line Information [report](#) and resolved, in part:

“That, ahead of the final 2024/25 budget meetings, the Administration report on the impact of eliminating fares for children 5 to 13 years of age (under 13). The report should incorporate details from Regina Transit related to their elimination of fares for children under 13.”

At its meeting held on November 8, 2023, the Governance and Priorities Committee considered the Impacts of Elimination of Child Fare on Saskatoon [report](#) and resolved:

- “1. That the implementation of fare elimination for children be considered at the 2024/25 budget deliberations for implementation in September of 2024 with no impact to Saskatoon Transit 2024 revenue budget and if an impact is realized in 2024 that it be brought forward to future budget deliberation;
2. Prior to implementation Admin report back on a) operational details/implementation plan for the elimination of child fares, and b) engagement with stakeholders.”

City Council, at its 2024/2025 Preliminary Corporate Business Plan and Budget meetings held [November 28 to December 1, 2023 \(pages 59 and 60\)](#), considered the Governance and Priorities Committee’s report entitled “Impacts of Elimination of Child Fare on Saskatoon Transit” and resolved:

“That City Council direct implementation of fare elimination for children beginning in September 2024 with no impact to Saskatoon Transit 2024 revenue budget. Prior to implementation, Administration report back on:

- a) operational details/implementation plan for the elimination of child fares; and
- b) engagement with stakeholders.”

3. Strategic Goals

This project contributes to the City of Saskatoon's strategic goal of Moving Around where Saskatoon's transit system is safe, equitable and modern, with ridership growing beyond pre-pandemic numbers. It is specifically tied to City Council's Transportation key action to ensure affordable transit compared to other similar-sized cities.

4. City Project Team

- Michael Moellenbeck, Director, Saskatoon Transit
- Cory Shrigley, Manager, Customer Services, Saskatoon Transit
- Karen Grant, Communications Consultant
- Leighland Hrapchak, Marketing Consultant
- Taha Najam, Transit Planner, Saskatoon Transit
- Thomas Kinge, Public Engagement Consultant
- Braden Cline, Intern, Saskatoon Transit

5. Engagement Strategy

Engagement goals indicate the level of influence community members will have and connect our engagement more clearly to decisions. The City strives to conduct public engagement in a way that meets the vision and guiding principles of the City's [Public Engagement Policy](#).

The goals of this engagement were to:

- **Understand** and gauge the level of interest community members have on the impacts free child fares will have on their communities and families.
- **Gather feedback** from community members and partners on how to appropriately design and implement a program that best meets the needs of the community.
- **Gather feedback** from community members on how to improve the accessibility and affordability of public transit.
- **Provide clear, transparent communication** about project timelines and report back on what we heard.

6. Engagement Activities

Engagement activities included:

- Jurisdictional scan with other transit agencies managed by the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) and summary of the experience from the City of Regina Transit
- Meetings and a survey for elementary school administration
- Information session and a survey for Saskatoon Transit employee groups and meetings with ATU Local 615 executive
- Submission from Bus Riders of Saskatoon with their recommendations
- Facilitated information sessions and a survey for community groups
- Online public survey for riders, residents, families and the City of Saskatoon's Citizens Advisory Panel

Engagement Activity	Participants	Engagement Goal
Internal Engagement	City of Saskatoon internal groups (ATU Local 615 and Saskatoon Transit employees)	Gather perspectives from internal stakeholders to assist in designing a program that would ultimately work best for Saskatoon Transit workers and provide for a smooth transition.
Community Engagement Meetings	People who rely on transit to move around the city, including schools. People who are considered vulnerable populations (including community organizations) dependent on public transit as their only or major means of transportation.	Discuss the benefits, implementation, impact and concerns of offering free fare to children, and to ultimately design a program that meets the needs of the community and improves accessibility and affordability of public transit.
Jurisdictional Engagement and Online Survey	Other Canadian transit agencies with similar programs and with a population similar to Saskatoon's population size. Members of the public who currently uses public transit or who may be interested in using Saskatoon Transit services in the short or long term.	Understand broader stakeholder perspectives and gather insights on the benefits, concerns, barriers and impact of offering free fare to children to ultimately help design a program that best meets the needs of the community and public and improves accessibility and affordability of public transit.

7. Engagement Participants

Overall, engagement was focused on groups that consider Saskatoon Transit as their primary mode of transportation, including:

- People with lived experiences of systemic barriers
- Indigenous Peoples
- Newcomers (immigrants)
- Older adults and seniors
- Low-income individuals and families
- Schools
- People experiencing disabilities
- Internal City of Saskatoon employee groups (ATU Local 615, Saskatoon Transit)
- Other Canadian transit agencies

8. Engagement Results – What We Heard

8.1 Benchmark Survey with Canadian Transit Agencies

On behalf of Saskatoon Transit, CUTA reached out to their members from municipalities and agencies across Canada that currently implement free child fare with a survey to gather information about how other agencies developed similar policies. The survey was focused on gathering feedback on best practices relating to how these agencies designed and implemented their respective programs, along with barriers and challenges they currently face since the program was implemented.

Summary of results:

- 15 systems across seven provinces responded to share their experience and lessons on child fare within their transit agency. Responses included nine from Ontario and eight from Quebec, Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.
- 93% of these agencies reported they do not charge child fare, with most defining a child as age 12 and under.
- Of the respondents that do not charge child fare, 71% use a self-verification process (there is no pass) for riders, with some noting an increase in fare evasion for riders posing as a child, young children riding unaccompanied and disruptive incidents with youth.
- Two of the agencies that offer free child fare plan on introducing a child pass.

The charts below highlight some of the feedback received through the survey.

<i>Does your agency charge fare for children?</i> (n = 15)		
No	14	93%
Yes	1	7%

<i>What age group is eligible for free child fare?</i> (n = 14)		
12 & under	10	71.5%
11 & under	3	21.5%
13 & under	1	7%

<i>How do you verify eligibility for free child fares at your agency?</i> (n = 14)		
Self-Verification or No Pass	9	64%
Child Pass (Validation system), ID card, fob	4	29%
Paying Adult Verifies Age	1	7%

Do you require child riders to be accompanied by adults?
(n = 14)

No adult requirement	8	57%
Adult required	5	36%
Other: Fare-paying customer	1	7%

If you have a child pass, how do you administer it?
(n = 5)

Parent verifies child's age or grade at customer service for Pass/ ID	4*	80%
Child pass distributed to families	1	20%

* One agency has an optional Child Pass to confirm eligibility available at Customer Service if necessary

Did you experience any of the following issues with the elimination of child fare? (select all that apply)
(n = 14)

No issues experienced	8	57%
Increase in high school students presenting as children	6	43%
Increase in young children riding unaccompanied	3	21%
Increase in adults presenting as children	3	21%
Loss of revenue	2	14%
Increase in disruptive incidents with youth	2	14%
Confusion with 13 yr olds in high school who are eligible for free child fare	1	7%
Increase in fare disputes	1	7%

Have you realized any benefits of offering free child fare?
(n = 14)

No data	5	36%
No benefits identified	5	36%
Increase in ridership (not necessarily children)	3	21%
Fewer fare disputes*	1	7%

* Niagara Transit Commission has self-verification for free child fare

If you currently offer free child fare, do you anticipate making any changes to the way free child fare is managed or to the eligibility framework?
(n = 14)

No	12	86%
Yes*	2	14%
* Calgary Transit and Thunder Bay Transit indicated a pass may be implemented to track ridership statistics and improve the program's efficiency.		

8.2 Feedback from Regina Transit

The City of Regina implemented free child fare in July 2023 for ages 13 and under and relies on self-verification for eligibility (no pass or ID required). In addition to the responses in the CUTA benchmark survey, a representative shared some feedback directly with the Administration about current status and lessons learned.

- **There's been an uptick in users of public transit in general** and, more visibly, children, particularly during peak periods of the day. There is a “button push” enforced by operators to track “free fare” ridership.
- **Overall, there have been no major concerns** about the safety of children riding unaccompanied, and there are security protocols in place to ensure unaccompanied children are transported to exactly where they intend to be transported.
- **There has been an increase in the number of people (youths in particular) simply hanging out on buses** with no particular destination point in mind. Although management does not currently see this as a major issue, it is something to be mindful of.
- **If the program was expanded to more age groups, it would push bus capacity**, including high school-aged youths.

8.3 Meetings and Survey with Elementary Schools

Elementary schools were identified as key partners to collaborate with, particularly with the roll-out phase of the program, given that elementary school-age children will be eligible. Engagement with representatives from Saskatoon Public Schools and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (GSCS) included meetings and a survey to gain an understanding of the impact free child fare will have on elementary schools, how the schools recommend the program be implemented and if and how they could potentially play a key role in that process.

This survey was open for participation from March 26 to May 7, 2024, and amassed **73** participants.

- **84% preferred Grade 8 and under**; 8% said it should be free for kindergarten to Grade 12; 7% said 13 and under.
- **89% of participants were very satisfied with the introduction of free child fare.**
- **81% believe free child fare will contribute to increasing public transit use and student attendance/punctuality.**
- **75% prefer no verification of age or grade.**

- **If there was a child pass for verification**, the preferred option was a physical or mobile pass (81%).
- The GSCS Transportation Committee preference is for children grade 6 and under to be accompanied by a guardian, while children between grades 6 to 8 can ride unaccompanied.
- The **schools cannot manage and distribute a child pass**. It was confirmed that elementary schools do not currently have an identification card for enrolled students. Schools can use their communication channels, such as newsletters and other media tools, to promote a free child pass to the school community.
- The top benefits from options were **increased use of public transit (99%)**, **reduced barriers to using public transportation (96%)**, and an **affordable option for families (40%)**.
- The top barriers for people getting a child pass were **access to a mobile device (100%) or data (93%)**, **language barriers in understanding the opt-in process (33%)** and **obtaining required documentation or identification (27%)**.
- The top concerns from options were **safety concerns with more young children riding buses unaccompanied (88%)**, **an increase in disruptive incidents among youth (74%)**, **overcrowding on buses (67%)**, **confusion with 13-year-olds in high school eligible for free fare (12%)**, and **difficulty of reaching / people not being aware of the program/pass (11%)**.

Other comments and concerns:

- Concerns that students may not make it home/school promptly, getting lost/ending at the wrong stops
- Concerns that free child fare could allow students to leave school during the day, get on a bus, and be unaccounted for.
- Suggested making the free child pass available at other civic facilities (libraries, etc.)
- More security for the safety of young riders (video surveillance, etc.).
- The GSCS Transportation Committee suggested two pass types in different colours.
 - Colour #1, child to be accompanied by an adult.
 - Colour #2 child can ride unaccompanied.
- Good option for class trips, track meets, etc.

The charts below highlight some of the feedback received through the survey.

<i>Do you believe the implementation of free child fare will contribute to increasing public transportation use and student attendance/punctuality?</i> (n = 73)		
Yes	59	81%
No	1	1%
Maybe	6	8%
Other	7	10%

<i>Should a student be required to verify their age or grade to ride for free?</i> (n = 73)		
Yes	15	21%
No	55	75%
Other/No response	3	4%

<i>If a child pass is mandatory to ride for free, what should be required for a child to board and ride the bus?</i> (n = 73)		
Child scans a free child pass (physical card or mobile)	59	81%
Child must be accompanied by parent who confirms their age	5	7%
No child pass required	4	5%
Child shows proof of age or grade to bus operator	1	1%
No opinion	0	0%
Other/No response	4	5%

<i>What age group should be eligible for free child fare?</i> (n = 73)		
Grade 8 and Under	61	84%
13 and Under	5	7%
12 and Under	0	0%
11 and Under	0	0%
No opinion	1	1%
Other	6	8%

Please select all of the following barriers that may make it difficult for students to access physical or mobile child pass cards. (multiple selections)
(n = 73)

Student does not have access to a smartphone or mobile device to use on the bus	73	100%
Child does not have access to mobile data	68	93%
No access to phone or email	62	85%
Language barriers in understanding the opt-in process	24	33%
Challenges obtaining required documentation or identification	20	27%
Transportation difficulties reaching distribution locations	17	23%
Difficulty in navigating the mobile app or online registration process	16	22%
Limited availability of distribution points	15	21%
Limited knowledge or familiarity with mobile technology to register or use a mobile ticket	11	15%
Concerns about data privacy and security	10	14%
No opinion/Other/No response	5	7%

Does your school board or school have the capacity to distribute and a method of distribution to students to access free child fare passes?
(n = 73)

No (capacity and ability to distribute)	50	68%
Yes (capacity and ability to distribute)	13	18%
Unsure	5	7%
Other/No response	3	4%
No opinion	2	3%

***How frequently do students currently utilize public transportation as a means of commuting to and from school or extracurricular activities?
(n = 73)***

Very frequently	8	11%
Occasionally	9	12%
Rarely	49	67%
Never	1	1%
Other/No response	6	8%

***Do you believe the implementation of free child fare will contribute to increasing public transportation use and student attendance/punctuality?
(n = 73)***

Yes	59	81%
No	1	1%
Maybe	6	8%
Other	7	10%

***Do you have any concerns with Saskatoon Transit offering free child fare?
(multiple selections)
(n = 73)***

Safety concerns with more young children riding bus unaccompanied	64	88%
Difficulty reaching all eligible families/children	8	11%
Increase in disruptive incidents among youth	54	74%
Confusion with 13-year-olds in high school eligible for free fare	9	12%
Increase in high school students presenting as children to ride for free	4	5%
Increase in adults presenting as a child to ride for free	4	5%
Increase in arguments over the purchase of/paying bus fare	5	7%
Overcrowding on buses	49	67%
None	2	3%
Other	2	3%

***What benefits do you see from offering free child fare?
(multiple selections)
(n = 73)***

Reduce barriers to using public transportation	70	96%
An affordable option for families	29	40%
Increased use of public transit	72	99%
None	0	0%
Not applicable	0	0%
Other/No response	0	0%

***What are the best channels to share information with students, families
and caregivers about free child fare? (multiple selections)
(n = 73)***

Saskatoon Transit website	66	90%
Existing Transit mobile app	60	82%
Existing school channels	70	96%
City of Saskatoon's social media	21	29%
Television or audio advertisement	18	25%
Newspaper advertisement	7	10%
Email subscription list	4	5%
No opinion	1	1%
Other	2	3%

8.4 Engagement Session and Survey for Saskatoon Transit Employees

An 'open house' style information session was held on March 20, 2024, at the downtown Customer Service Centre for Saskatoon Transit operators and other employees. Individual operators shared their experiences and concerns with offering free child fare, which they were encouraged to write on a paper copy of the survey or go online. The survey questions were specific to employees to identify their level of support of the program, top concerns and how best to roll out this new program in Saskatoon. The results identified impacts on the various work groups to consider in planning the implementation. In total, approximately 30 staff attended this session. The internal survey received engagement from 96 participants out of more than 400 Saskatoon Transit employees.

Summary of results:

- **39% preferred Grade 8 and under**; 17% said 12 and under; several said it should be free for all.
- **45% prefer a child pass for age verification**; 20% said accompanied by an adult.
- 46% of participants prefer that **no adult accompaniment be required**; however, 35% said adult accompaniment should be required.
- **64% of employees are somewhat satisfied, satisfied or very satisfied with the introduction of free child fare**; 36% are not very or not at all satisfied. Comments included that it will be nice for families.
- **77% of employees said their family is less likely or not at all likely to benefit from free child fare**, while 23% are somewhat likely, likely or very likely to benefit.
- Potential barriers for people getting a Child Pass were the **child losing the card, access to a mobile device, families being accountable or motivated to get the pass, limited locations to get a pass and people not being aware of the program/pass**. A few people said that the cards could be stolen.
- **Top concerns** from options were: safety concerns with young children riding unaccompanied; increase in disruptive incidents with groups of older children; increase in fare disputes with adults and high school students; fairness for other paying rider groups, such as seniors; and it is not easy to count child riders accurately.

Other comments and concerns:

- A couple of Access Transit employees expressed that Access Transit clients who are children should still have to pay for the specialized service.
- There needs to be motivation for a child pass, such as incentives, rewards or to make it a collectible. Another suggestion was to have a family pass.
- Concern about budget and lost revenue to sustain the program.
- Not enough capacity for more children in peak times, could trial on weekends.
- Consider a curfew for a child without an adult or only have free fare during school hours.
- Specific comments about an increase in existing issues with disruptive behaviour including littering, gangs/violence and robbing young children.
- Asking the bus operator to check ID or guess how old children are will add more stress to the job.
- Several comments that there is already a lot of fare evasion and free child fare will encourage more people to feel entitled to free bus fare. Without enforcement for bus fare, more and more people get on who create trouble and are disrespectful. There is frustration with the lack of enforcement for paying bus fare. One suggestion was to do more advertising to all riders that paying is required unless they are eligible for free child fare.

- Employees suggested making the free child pass available at other civic facilities and partnering with schools and health organizations to distribute cards. One suggestion was to give the bus operators passes they could hand out.

The charts below highlight some of the feedback received through the survey.

<i>What is your role at Saskatoon Transit?</i> (n = 96)		
Access Transit	8	8%
Administration, Finance, Planning	6	6%
Bus Operator (Fixed-route)	41	43%
Customer Service Centre	7	11%
Fleet and Maintenance	13	13%
Operations	12	12%
Supply Chain	2	2%
Other/Prefer not to say	7	4%

<i>What is your preference for the maximum age/criteria to ride for free?</i> (n = 96)		
Grade 8 and under	37	39%
12 and Under	16	17%
13 and Under	7	7%
No opinion	10	10%
Other/No response	26	27%

<i>Which would you prefer for verifying a person is eligible to ride for free?</i> (n = 96)		
Child scans a free child fare pass (mobile or card)	43	45%
Child must be accompanied by an adult who confirms the child's age or grade	19	20%
Child shows proof of age or grade to bus operator	11	11%
Other/No response	14	15%
No opinion	9	9%

8.5 Response from Amalgamated Transit Union Local 615

From President Darcy Pederson, regarding the industry scan managed by the CUTA:

- I have reviewed the survey provided in regard to free fare for children. The properties that provided information on the child fare programs I question from what scope they answered the questions, I don't believe they were answering from an operator or frontline transit worker's perspective.
- I have provided you information last October (Appendix A). The questions are answered from a frontline transit employee's perspective, which is not quite in line with the information you provided.

Further general feedback from President Darcy Pederson as follows:

ATU believes there should be some type of registration process, whether it is administered at transit customer service or some other facility, having an actual pass in hand to ride I'm hoping will not open up a new opportunity for even further abuse of the no fare enforcement policy. We understand that having a registration process can possibly put barriers in place for those that are in need of this program and I believe through collaborating with different partners that are identifying these barriers a process can be put in place to eliminate these possible barriers.

If the program goes ahead restricting the program to Grade 8 and under doesn't make a difference to ATU, but choosing a Grade instead of age makes the most sense, what we are concerned about is creating more stressors on an already stretched workgroup, with the amount of issues our operators face daily adding an additional way for those that abuse the no fare enforcement policy will just exacerbate a situation that is already out of control.

8.6 Response from Bus Riders of Saskatoon

In addition to participating in the facilitated feedback sessions, Bus Riders of Saskatoon provided supplementary comments to the Administration.

- **A program with few barriers** - The free child fare initiative should be implemented with as few barriers to use as possible. Any restrictions that are put in place are most likely to have the greatest adverse effects on those with the fewest resources to overcome them.
- **Grade 8 and under preferred for the age range** - Rather than focusing on a child passenger's age, school placement should be the criteria. This follows principles that are largely reflected in the current fare structure. The current child pass applies to kindergarten to Grade 8. However, we must also ensure that we do not exclude elementary school-age children who are not enrolled in school. Focusing on school placement would reflect current eligibility for the high school pass, as customers must provide a valid high school student card.
- **No adult accompaniment required for older than five years** – Saskatoon Transit should not be the agency that determines whether or not a child is old enough to ride the bus without the presence of a supervising adult. This reflects current practice. It is assumed that anyone boarding the bus aged five and up who pays the child fare has been deemed capable enough to do so by the adult who is responsible for them. There will be ten-year-olds who can use the system very well on their own. There will be fifteen-year-olds who cannot. Saskatoon Transit is not a child protection agency.

- **A self-identification process is preferred with school verification for mature-looking children** - Enforcement of the 'free child fare' cannot be considered outside of the general fare evasion and enforcement issue and should be accommodated under existing policies. The expense of creating a system of separate identity passes for young children to qualify for the free child fare would be expensive and is not practical. Provision for school verification identification for mature-looking children attending elementary schools should be examined, in consultation with the school boards. One of our members reports that under the current system, her mature-looking son who attends elementary school sometimes feels hassled by drivers when he boards paying the child fare. Using public transit should be easy, not only for adults but for children too.
- **Collect data without requiring a Child Pass** – Saskatoon Transit's need for statistical data has been put forward as justification for a pass system. Although such data would be valuable for future planning, there are less intrusive sampling techniques which would give Saskatoon Transit sufficient amounts of information.
- **Identify mechanisms for ongoing feedback** - It is unlikely that the new fare structure can be implemented without a few bumps along the way. It is important to have mechanisms in place to gather ongoing feedback from stakeholders including adult riders, child riders, anti-poverty groups, school division staff and Saskatoon Transit employees.

8.7 Facilitated Sessions and Survey for Community Groups

Engagement sessions were held in March 2024 to gather feedback from individuals representing community groups and organizations that work with those most impacted by the decision to offer free child fare. The main objective was to gain a better understanding of the benefits, concerns and potential challenges associated with this initiative and how it could potentially improve accessibility and affordability for the community.

Twelve people participated in these meetings (two in-person meetings and one virtual meeting) in total representing:

- Bus Riders of Saskatoon
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind
- International Women of Saskatoon
- Saskatchewan Intercultural Association
- Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership
- Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada

Themes of feedback:

Benefits of Offering Free Child Fare to Your Organization

- **Increase ridership, especially among families** using public transit for recreational activities, appointments and more. It was added that this program could also positively impact children by promoting social interaction with peers and reduce traffic as families might opt for public transit instead of personal vehicles.
- **Support marginalized groups** who might struggle with transportation costs, such as newcomers to Saskatoon or low-income families.
- **Community groups could redirect** funding for transportation assistance to other needed areas.

- **Cognitively challenged individuals could experience greater independence** and potentially boost employment opportunities.

Appropriate Age Group and Verifying Eligibility

- Of the options presented, the common preference was for free fare for **Grades 8 and under**. Most participants advocated for free bus fare for children under 18. Some suggested free fare for all students enrolled in educational programs.
- **Children riding unaccompanied are acceptable to most**, but express some safety concerns, particularly after 9 p.m. Certain participants had concerns regarding their children riding the bus unaccompanied.
- **Preference for no child pass**, as there was concern that a verification system could strain bus operators, raise costs and create an unnecessary step.

Administration and Implementation of Verification

- **If a pass is implemented, participants proposed that children above 5-6 years old should need a pass**, while younger children would likely be accompanied by parents.
- **Consider partnerships to distribute passes**. Partnerships with healthcare systems, libraries, schools, social services and pop-up events in malls, other public locations and community buildings were recommended.
- **Technology-friendly options, such as a new mobile app or improved functionality on current mobile apps with built-in age verification** could offer flexibility. Online verification applications, particularly for cognitively challenged individuals, was also suggested.
- It was unanimously agreed that once deemed valid, a **pass should remain valid until the child is no longer eligible for the program**. It should not be a pass that requires annual renewal.
- A **joint library card and child pass** was proposed to simplify distribution and verify eligibility.

Potential barriers to accessing physical or mobile-based verification

- **If a pass is implemented, participants suggest eliminating fees for initial card registration** (physical cards and replacements for lost cards). Participants voiced that the costs of obtaining a pass, such as transportation, would be a barrier.
- **Concerns were raised about the affordability of mobile-based verification systems**, specifically for low-income families who may not be able to afford a smartphone and data to access a mobile-based pass.

Concerns about implementing free child fare

- Although increased ridership is expected, some **participants worry about large gatherings on buses**, requiring bus operators to manage potentially unruly children.
 - Through group discussion, others believe this should not be a program concern and should be addressed by the City. They also believe that parenting responsibilities should remain with parents, not the program.
- **Fare evasion and safety concerns were not significant** among most participants, indicating general acceptance of the program's potential.

Targeted Survey for Community Groups

Given not all community groups and organizations were available to participate in one of the three sessions, a dedicated online survey was promoted for community groups.

A total of 19 people representing various organizations participated in the online survey, representing:

- Child and Youth Friendly Saskatoon
- EGADZ – Saskatoon Downtown Youth Centre Inc
- Prairie Harm Reduction
- Saskatchewan Intercultural Association
- Saskatoon Newcomers Network
- Saskatoon Open Door Society

Summary of results:

- **Adult accompaniment required** was a split vote, 47% said no, and 47% said yes.
- **52% preferred Grade 8 and under** and 21% said 12 and under.
- **79% of participants were very satisfied with the introduction of free child fare.**
- **100% said they would be more likely to use public transit once free child fare is introduced.**
- Participants were split 47% to 47% on whether there should be verification of age or not.
 - **If there was a child pass for verification**, 63% preferred a physical or mobile pass.
- Top benefits from options were **an affordable option for families (90%), reduced barriers to using public transportation (68%), and increased use of public transit (68%).**
- The top barriers for people getting a child pass were **access to a mobile device (90%) or data (95%), limited locations (63%) and transportation costs (42%) to get a pass, obtaining required documentation or identification (58%), and language barriers in understanding the opt-in process (53%).**
- Top concerns from options **people not being aware of the program/pass (42%), safety concerns with young children riding unaccompanied (32%), an increase in confusion and fare disputes with high school students (32%).**
- Other comments and concerns:
 - Increased security measures, such as facial recognition cameras, for the safety of young riders.
 - Additional comments on having this program opened up to high school and under.

The charts below highlight some of the feedback received through the survey.

<i>How frequently do you or your organization interact with Saskatoon Transit service?</i> (n = 19)		
Daily	8	42%
Weekly	3	16%
Monthly	3	16%
Occasionally	4	21%
Rarely/Never	0	0%
Other	1	5%

<i>Should it be mandatory for child riders to be accompanied by an adult?</i> (n = 19)		
Yes	9	47%
No	9	47%
Other/No response	1	5%

<i>Should a child be required to verify their age or grade to ride for free?</i> (n = 19)		
Yes	9	47%
No	9	47%
No opinion	1	5%

<i>What age group should be eligible for free child fare?</i> (n = 19)		
11 and Under	1	5%
12 and Under	4	21%
13 and Under	2	11%
Grade 8 and under	10	52%
No opinion	0	0%
Other/No response	2	11%

***If a child pass is mandatory to ride for free, what should be required for a child to board and ride the bus?
(n = 19)***

Child scans a free child pass (physical card or mobile)	12	63%
Child shows proof of age or grade to bus operator	2	11%
Child must be accompanied by parent who confirms their age	2	11%
No child pass required	3	16%
No opinion	0	0%
Other/No response	0	0%

***What benefits do you or your family see from offering free child fare?
(multiple selections)
(n = 19)***

Reduce barriers to using public transportation	13	68%
An affordable option for families	17	90%
Increased use of public transit	13	68%
None	0	0%
Not applicable	0	0%
Other/No response	1	5%

***Please select all of the following barriers that may make it difficult for you to access physical or mobile child pass cards. (multiple selections)
(n = 19)***

Limited availability of distribution points	12	63%
No access to phone or email	6	32%
Challenges obtaining required documentation or identification	11	58%
Transportation difficulties reaching distribution locations	8	42%
Language barriers in understanding the opt-in process	10	53%
Child (or each child) does not have access to a smartphone or mobile device to use on the bus	17	90%
Child does not have access to mobile data	18	95%
Limited knowledge or familiarity with mobile technology to register or use a mobile ticket	11	58%

<i>Please select all of the following barriers that may make it difficult for you to access physical or mobile child pass cards. (multiple selections)</i> (n = 19)		
Concerns about data privacy and security	12	63%
Difficulty in navigating the mobile app or online registration process	11	58%
No opinion	2	11%
Other/No response	1	5%

<i>Do you have any concerns with Saskatoon Transit offering free child fare? (multiple selections)</i> (n = 19)		
None	6	32%
Increase in high school students presenting as children to ride for free	2	12%
Increase in adults presenting as a child to ride for free	4	24%
Increase in arguments over the purchase of/paying bus fare	3	16%
Safety concerns with more young children riding bus unaccompanied	6	32%
Increase in disruptive incidents among youth	1	5%
Confusion with 13-year-olds in high school eligible for free fare	6	32%
Difficulty reaching all eligible families/children	8	42%
Overcrowding on buses	2	11%
Other	3	16%

8.8 Online Public Survey

The public survey was launched on March 14, 2024, to collect input and feedback on offering free child fare along with potential benefits, concerns and barriers to implementation. It was promoted through social media channels and elementary school communication channels to reach school families.

The survey was open for participation until April 12, 2024, and amassed a total of **1,375** participants.

- **46% preferred that no adult accompaniment be required;** however, 35% said adult accompaniment should be required.

- **44% preferred Grade 8 and under**; 16% said 13 and under; 26% said it should be free for various ages under 18 or free for all.
- **72% of participants were very satisfied with the introduction of free child fare.**
- **69% may be more likely to use public transit once free child fare is introduced.**
- **62% prefer no verification of age.**
 - **If there was a child pass for verification**, the preferred option was a physical or mobile pass (49%); 30% again said no child pass for verification should be required.
- The top benefits from options were **an affordable option for families (77%), increased use of public transit (66%) and reduced barriers to using public transportation (64%).**
- The top barriers for people getting a child pass were **limited locations (39%), transportation costs to get a pass (36%), access to a mobile device (68%) or data (67%), obtaining required documentation or identification (28%) and language barriers in understanding the opt-in process (24%).**
- The top concerns from options were the **increase in fare disputes with adults and high school students (49%), safety concerns with young children riding unaccompanied (37%), people not being aware of the program/pass (25%) and overcrowding on buses (22%).**

Other comments and concerns:

- Need more routes into suburban neighbourhoods to reduce child walking distances.
- More security for the safety of young riders.
- Concerns with the cost of implementing and operating this program.
- Additional comments on increased fare evasion.
- Having a pass can add extra steps and stress for both children and operators.
- The overcrowding of buses and missed pickups of children, especially during winter conditions, necessitate the need for more buses.

The charts below highlight some of the feedback received through the survey.

<i>Do you or your family currently ride a Saskatoon Transit or Access Transit bus?</i> (n = 1375)		
Yes	896	65%
No	479	35%

<i>Should it be mandatory for child riders to be accompanied by an adult?</i> (n = 1375)		
Yes	478	35%
No	633	46%
No opinion	264	19%

<i>Should a child be required to verify their age or grade to ride for free?</i> (n = 1375)		
Yes	363	26%
No	849	62%
No opinion	163	12%

<i>What age group should be eligible for free child fare?</i> (n = 1375)		
11 and Under	78	6%
12 and Under	85	6%
13 and Under	222	16%
Grade 8 and under	607	44%
No opinion	33	2%
Other/No answer	350	26%

<i>Are you or your family more likely to use Saskatoon Transit or Access Transit once children can ride for free?</i> (n = 1375)		
Yes	685	50%
No	427	31%
Maybe	263	19%

<i>If a child pass is mandatory to ride for free, what should be required for a child to board and ride the bus?</i> (n = 1348)		
Child scans a free child fare pass (mobile or card)	664	49%
Child shows proof of age or grade to bus operator	69	5%
Child must be accompanied by an adult who confirms the child's age or grade	125	9%
No child pass required	399	30%
No opinion	34	3%
Other/No response	57	4%

If a child pass is mandatory to ride for free, how should it be administered? (multiple selections)
(n = 1375)

Parent or child verifies the child's grade at Saskatoon Transit Customer Service Centre	677	49%
Saskatoon Transit mails out an annual child pass for each child that registers (by mail, e-mail, etc.)	650	42%
Saskatoon Transit hosts an event(s) at an accessible location each August for drop-in registration	330	2%
No child pass required	386	28%
Other/No response	113	8%

Please select all of the following barriers that may make it difficult for you to access physical or mobile child pass cards. (multiple selections)
(n = 1375)

Limited availability of distribution points	540	39%
No access to phone or email	332	24%
Challenges obtaining required documentation or identification	390	28%
Transportation difficulties reaching distribution locations	490	36%
Language barriers in understanding the opt-in process	329	24%
Child (or each child) does not have access to a smartphone or mobile device to use on the bus	939	68%
Child does not have access to mobile data	919	67%
Limited knowledge or familiarity with mobile technology to register or use a mobile ticket	482	35%
Concerns about data privacy and security	488	36%
Difficulty in navigating the mobile app or online registration process	481	35%
No opinion	505	37%
Other/No response	156	11%

<i>Do you have any concerns with Saskatoon Transit offering free child fare? (multiple selections)</i> (n = 1375)		
None	570	42%
Increase in high school students presenting as children to ride for free	248	18%
Increase in adults presenting as a child to ride for free	152	11%
Increase in arguments over the purchase of/paying bus fare	278	20%
Safety concerns with more young children riding bus unaccompanied	508	37%
Increase in disruptive incidents among youth	274	20%
Confusion with 13-year-olds in high school eligible for free fare	281	20%
Difficulty reaching all eligible families/children	347	25%
Overcrowding on buses	299	22%
Other	95	7%

<i>What benefits do you or your family see from offering free child fare? (multiple selections)</i> (n = 1375)		
Reduce barriers to using public transportation	876	64%
An affordable option for families	1061	77%
Increased use of public transit	908	66%
None	114	8%
Not applicable	64	5%
Other/No response	79	6%

9. Limitations

A limitation was not having participants attend the engagement sessions from all community organizations identified, such as vulnerable populations and other groups that depend on Saskatoon Transit (and consider public transit as their major mode of transportation).

To mitigate limitations in participation, efforts to make this engagement accessible and easy for participants to attend included offering remuneration where appropriate, assistance with travel to in-person meetings and refreshments for attendees. Another effort to make the engagement accessible was to provide an online session, wherein participants had the option to join the

conversation via video, audio or phone call. Materials were provided in different formats (online and in-person) in an attempt to reach a wider audience.

Another limitation of this engagement relates to participation with the school boards. The timing of engagement sessions and surveys conflicted with teacher job action, which may have contributed to lower participation rates. The survey was extended and additional feedback was added to the study in late-April and early-May 2024.

Even with certain limitations, there was significant combined participation through in-person sessions and various online surveys. The survey for principals and teachers was promoted again once teachers were back to regular duties.

10. Next Steps

Feedback from this engagement report will be shared with participants and Saskatoon Transit staff to further the conversation on free child fare being offered in Saskatoon. The public engagement results will be shared on saskatoon.ca/engage.

A report from the Administration with recommendations for the implementation of free child fare will be presented to the Standing Policy Committee on Transportation in June 2024.

Appendix A - Responses from ATU Representatives Across Canadian Transit Properties

Provided by Darcy Pederson, President Amalgamated Transit Union Local 615
October 24, 2023

Regina:

In Regina, this came in over a year ago and started out fine but is now out of control. The passengers do not require an adult to ride, any bus card, school ID or anything. They simply get on the bus, state they are 13 and walk on. What we are seeing now is people in high school, or 19, 20 year olds with hoodies over their heads just walk, say they are 13.

Guelph, ON:

We have free rides for kids under 12 and it works just fine. They must swipe bus card, but we don't have any real issues with it.

Winnipeg:

The link provided will show Winnipeg Transit's fare structure. Our free child fare was raised from under 5 to 11 and under a few years ago. As with other properties the change is irrelevant as fare evasion is rampant. Prior to this change we had 6' tall 4 year olds and now we have 6' tall 11 year olds with a full beard. Our hope is the new transit security will curb some of this abuse. [Transit Fares \(winnipegtransit.com\)](https://www.winnipegtransit.com/fares)

Niagara:

In Niagara children 12 and under are free. No pass or card is required nor are they required to be with an adult. There is definitely a lot of abuse such as older passengers with a full beard claiming they're 12 years old but we view this as the employer's problem and continuously stress to our members that they should not dispute any fares at all.

Edmonton:

Darcy, it's 12-and-under at ETS. I haven't heard any concerns raised about behaviour issues related to it. Council is considering raising it to 18, but it won't fly. The revenue loss would be too great. But I can't report any trouble arising from the under-12-free policy. Cheers!

London:

We have 12 and under free. Must use FOB provided. Issues at hand is no proof required to receive FOB so adults and teens alike will use FOB. Company SOP'S state do nothing with regard to fares when public boards bus so if improper or no fare just push 3 keys on farebox.

Sault St. Marie:

In Sault Ste. Marie we have 12 and under free when with a paying guardian
No issues that make it relevant

Thunder Bay:

Here in Thunder Bay we are 12 and under ride free. This has become a major problem as kids ride all day and night. Management has directed operators to treat them as adults and not worry where they go or get off. We have agreed to create a card pass as a means to identify who is really 12 and under.

Lethbridge:

Lethbridge is free under 5 yrs old.

Reduced Student passes for school age 6-17 available

Upass for University students.

Reduced fee for seniors.

St. John's:

Here in St. John's, we have an 11 or under ride free policy. At first there was rampant abuse until the company initiated a policy that the "child" who appears over the age has to visit the property to receive their free pass upon verification. This has cut down on abuse substantially!