

# Bus issues cause hectic first day back

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First Student, the new student transportation company here, says it has been working hard to resolve busing issues after having a hectic first day of school last Wednesday.

Many parents across the community said their child wasn't picked up, was picked up by the wrong bus, or was dropped off at the wrong school.

They also claimed bus drivers got lost on their routes

while picking up and dropping off students.

"This is unacceptable. There's no consistency and children are being put at risk as a result," said Penny Rousseau, whose eight-year-old granddaughter takes a bus to St. Michael's School.

Justin Brown, whose child was dropped off at the wrong school last Wednesday and then was extremely late coming home, said he's totally lost faith in the board's school busing system.

In fact, both Rousseau and

Brown are refusing to let their children ride the bus due to a lack of trust.

In light of its poor service on the first day of school, First Student spokesperson Chris Kemper said the company has been taking steps to alleviate the issues.

"On the first day of school, we had some service issues," Kemper said in a press release.

"Our level of service was not what the community expects of us nor was it what we expect of ourselves."

He attributed the issue to an

industry-wide school bus driver shortage and problems with their onboard communication.

"To fix these issues, we have installed a new radio system in each bus and that is now complete," Kemper said.

First Student also has been doing practice runs with the drivers to familiarize them with their routes.

"You may see a First Student bus on the road at an unusual point in the day with no students on board and that's just a dry run," Kemper noted.

"We're going through the en-

tire route to make sure it's completely clear and comfortable for our drivers to make sure we can provide safe and reliable transportation," he added.

First Student currently has six drivers who were brought in from out of town to cover the routes while eight are local.

The company, along with both the Rainy River District School Board and the Northwest Catholic District School Board, are hoping to secure more local drivers in the near future.

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"First Student has also been diligently working on hiring all local drivers as they want to ensure consistency to all of our families, schools, and community members," said RRDSB community outreach officer Heather Latter, who spoke on behalf of both local school boards.

First Student currently is offering a \$2,000 sign-on bonus for new drivers and also is hosting an urgent information meeting today (Sept. 12) from 6-8 p.m. in the meeting room at the Super 8 Motel here.

The Rainy River District School Board has been working alongside First Student to address the challenges it faced last Wednesday.

"School start-up often includes a variety of transportation challenges and this year was no different," said Latter.

"Yes, we do have a new provider and the Rainy River

District Transportation Services Consortium has been working alongside First Student to address the challenges that are common to transportation," she added.

Some parents alleged First Student drivers aren't properly licensed to drive buses in Ontario and haven't received proper screenings, but Kemper dismissed these as false.

"That would not be anything that we would do," he stressed. "All of our employees are subject to all of the incorporated screenings, training, and background checks so that would not be accurate.

"We take a lot of pride in our training and safety program," Kemper added.

Since Wednesday, Kemper said First Student has not received any complaints about its bus routes and the company hopes to keep it that way moving forward.

"I'm hearing from our operations folks that service has been much better," he remarked.

Still, parents have said there still were bus-related issues as of Monday.

If parents do have any concerns regarding transportation that are not being addressed, both school boards encourage them to contact the Rainy River District Transportation Services Consortium.

"The main focus for all stakeholders is the safety of our student," Latter said.

