

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Students call on Premier, Mayor to provide safe transit as school starts

September 17th, 2020 (TORONTO, ON) -- High school and post-secondary students are calling on Premier Ford and Mayor Tory to provide more TTC funding and service as classes return. Organizations representing hundreds of thousands of young people, including 140,000+ post-secondary students, released an open letter at a press conference Thursday morning about the urgent need to address crowding on public transit.

“We as students should not feel scared to go back to school, because we risk having to take a crowded bus,” said Scarborough high school student Zain Khurram. “Transit access should not become a barrier to receive an education.”

“Students need safe and equitable access to public transportation during a global pandemic and beyond,” said Muntaka Ahmed, President of the University of Toronto Students’ Union. Students will soon begin commuting to the University of Toronto - St. George campus, which has implemented a hybrid in-person and online learning model.

Student groups are urging Mayor Tory to provide as much TTC service as possible to ensure physical distancing, and say that Premier Ford must provide permanent transit operations funding to make this possible. The provincial and federal governments have jointly provided \$404 million to the TTC this Fall, but the TTC faces a \$700 million shortfall by the end of 2020.

“In addition to paying multiple transit fees on various transit systems to get to campus, students are faced with overcrowded and underfunded public transit systems in the midst of a pandemic,” said Mitra Yakubi, President of the University of Toronto - Mississauga Students’ Union. Many post-secondary students commute across multiple Greater Toronto Area transit systems.

Student groups also raised concerns about provincial funding conditions that would require municipalities to review “low performing routes” before accessing the second phase of Safe Restart transit funding in 2021. Students said that the conditions could negatively impact students who rely on TTC buses, especially in suburban areas.

“How are students expected to succeed academically when transit in Scarborough poses a massive barrier for many?” said Scarborough Campus Students’ Union VP External Eesha Chaudhry. “The fight for accessible education is incomplete without the fight for accessible transit.”

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Safe Restart Agreement Letter from Minister Mulroney:

<https://www.scribd.com/document/472840262/Safe-Restart-Agreement-Letter-from-Minister-Mulroney-Aug-12-2020>

Quote from Zain Khurram, the elected Toronto youth councillor for Ward 25, representing approximately 15,000 youth residing in the ward

"We as students should not feel scared to go back to school, because we risk having to take the bus. Transit access should not become a barrier to receive an education. The government and board should step up and implement the services that will ensure proper social distancing and a safe return to school.

Scarborough students rely on transit, especially those from low-income families and high-priority neighbourhoods. But Scarborough has historically been underserved and overlooked for transit improvements. Buses are the backbone of the system and have been heavily cut since the pandemic started. What students require is a reinstatement of scheduled bus trippers that will serve the local school communities of Toronto."

- Zain Khurram, high school student and Toronto youth councillor for Ward 25

Quote from Association of Part-Time Undergraduate Students, University of Toronto representing over 6,000 students across three U of T campuses

"Part-Time students are regularly excluded from student discounts and benefits, while they are often the demographic that is the most in need of additional resources. Accessing affordable transit is necessary for low and middle-income students, working students, and students with caretaking responsibilities. They need to protect their families from unnecessary exposure to COVID. However, many of our members can't afford cars or Ubers and must take transit to school. They are put at greater risk with overcrowded public transit that is being made more inaccessible and expensive."

- Jennifer Coggon, VP Outreach and Events, Association of Part-Time Undergraduate Students, University of Toronto

Quote from the Continuing Education Students' Association of Ryerson, representing over 17,000 students

"The Continuing Education Students' Association of Ryerson – CESAR, represents 17,000 students who rely on the TTC to get to and from work. Most of the students we represent are mature students who use public transportation to drop their kids at school; then go to work; and run errands. Crowded busses and subway cars pose a significant risk for them and their families. Toronto needs a fully funded public transportation system that is accessible, reliable, and safe to use. We join with other students in calling the Provincial elected leaders to fully fund the TTC."

Quote from University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union (UTMSU), representing over 15,000 students at the University of Toronto Mississauga

“The University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) campus is a majority commuter campus; students travel from all across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to get to their classes. In addition to paying multiple transit fees on various transit systems to get to campus, students will still be faced with overcrowded and underfunded public transit systems in the midst of a pandemic. UTM students use public transit to commute to and from campus, access community resources such as food centres, healthcare, grocery stores and going to work. Students often do this for themselves as well as family and community members who might be at risk. Public transit is essential to our students which is why our need to access safe and affordable public transit should be a priority.

The University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union (UTMSU) has made it a priority to advocate for free, safe, and accessible public transit for its members; government officials and transit companies need to make the same priorities and act on these priorities.”

- Mitra Yakubi, President, University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union

Quote from the Scarborough Campus Students' Union (SCSU), representing over 14,000 undergraduate students at the University of Toronto Scarborough

“The Scarborough Campus Students' Union (SCSU) has been engaged in the advocacy for equitable and accessible education for years, however it is crucial to understand that education is intersectional with facets such as transit. The fight for accessible education is incomplete without the fight for accessible transit. How are our members expected to succeed academically when transit in Scarborough poses a massive barrier for many? When public funding is reduced, the lowest income and most marginalized individuals take the hardest hits due to overcrowded, inaccessible, and expensive transit. At the SCSU, our key goal is to help all of our members succeed, and so we urge the government to take necessary action and improve the access to transit in Scarborough.”

- Eesha Chaudhry, Vice President External, Scarborough Campus Students' Union, University of Toronto Scarborough

Quote from the York Federation of Students (YFS), representing approximately 50,000 undergraduate students at York University

“The transit system as we know it has been consistently underfunded by all levels of government. This chronic underfunding mixed with the conditions of the global pandemic have put our overcrowded transit system and those who use it in a dangerous position. Transit should be free and accessible to all.

For many students, commuting is not a choice, but instead is a financial necessity. Recognizing that students come from many different lived experiences, we must also examine who is impacted most by overcrowded and underfunded transit systems, especially in the midst of a pandemic. We

must also recognize that transit fares to get to York University have now doubled and tripled in the last couple of years, due to the decision to move busses off campus, forcing students into using multiple forms of transit just to access their campus. Lower income students, working-class students, students with disabilities, racialized students, and so many more face access barriers everywhere they go, and transit is no exception.”

Quote from the University of Toronto Students’ Union (UTSU), representing over 38,000 undergraduate students at the University of Toronto St. George campus

“The University of Toronto, St. George campus is located in the heart of downtown Toronto and hosts one of the largest commuter student populations in the country. With a community as large and diverse as ours, many students rely on sustainable and safe transit to get to campus every single day.

This year, UofT has implemented a hybrid in-person and online learning model which expects some students to physically attend lectures, labs, and tutorials on campus alongside their online learning. This, undoubtedly, includes many commuter students who will be relying on the TTC to attend their limited in-person classes and need to be ensured safe access to public transportation. Not only is the TTC an essential service for commuter students, it is also often a necessity for low-income students who cannot afford microtransit such as Uber or Lyft on a daily basis. Socio-economic status is a major intersection of one’s identity and the UTSU is committed to advocating and providing support for low-income students from all walks of life. This includes ensuring safe and equitable access to public transportation for our students during a global pandemic and beyond.”

- Muntaka Ahmed, President, University of Toronto Students’ Union