



March 22, 2017

Greetings,

The Duluth Public Schools Head Start Program has an opportunity to provide transportation to 4 year olds enrolled in Head Start on school district buses during the upcoming school year. Head Start children will be allowed to ride school district K-5 buses if this waiver request is approved. This opportunity is a result of our district receiving State funded Voluntary Preschool dollars to serve 4 year olds. In Minnesota, that means districts essentially are adding another grade to the K-12 system. Voluntary Preschool funding is treated the same as all other grades meaning the students in that program generate both special education and transportation dollars.

Our plans for 2017-2018 include blending our classrooms with School Readiness and Voluntary Preschool in both our double session and full day options. The way it works now, Voluntary Preschool rooms are separate from Head Start and School Readiness. Children in Voluntary Preschool can ride the bus from a corner stop near their home or childcare with K-5<sup>th</sup> grade students. These 4 year old children sit in the front of the bus, are not using restraints and do not have a bus monitor. They must comply with all bus safety regulations for behavior and unlike their older fellow riders, an adult must meet the 4 year old at the corner stop at the end of the day. Failure to do so results in the child being returned to the school where the classroom

staffs work to reach the parent or an emergency contact to pick up the child. Our district transportation staff has seen very few problems with 4 year olds on the K-5 buses this year. The older students are protective of the younger ones and often help them on and off the buses.

We have been working on blending classrooms and braiding funding with our district early childhood partners for some time. This current school year marks the first time we have blended Head Start and School Readiness children in 3 pilot rooms. Because Voluntary Preschool dollars were announced and awarded at the very end of August 2016, we had no opportunity to include them in the blending and braiding. As we try to remove barriers to enrollment for Head Start families, we need this waiver to allow 4 year old Head Start children to ride the bus just like their Voluntary Preschool and School Readiness age mates.

To be clear, this busing opportunity is only for children who are 4 by September 1<sup>st</sup> and are enrolled with Head Start dollars. We propose to waive the regulations for restraints 1303.71(d) and 1303.72(a) (1) and monitors 1303.72(a) (4). We believe this is in the best interests of the Head Start children we serve and would significantly reduce the barriers to enrollment and improve attendance. Our 2017 Mid-year Parent Survey listed lack as transportation as a significant barrier to participation. Our Policy Council supports this plan contingent on establishing and implementing the following safety measures.

1. 4 year old Head Start children riding the bus to and from school would sit in the first few rows of seats closest to the driver.
2. 4 year old Head Start children riding the bus home from school must be met by an adult. If the adult is not the child's parent, it must be someone who the parent designates may take the child home from the bus stop.

3. All Head Start 4 year olds must participate in a bus safety presentation on the first day of school.
4. This is voluntary, so parents who are uncomfortable putting their Head Start 4 year old on a bus can still choose to do self-transport.

We urge you to act swiftly so that we have the opportunity to provide access to Head Start for the families most in need of our services. Your fast action will allow us enough time to plan and execute our safety trainings and ensure drivers, teachers, parents and staff are all prepared for Head Start 4 year olds riding the bus. We strongly believe this waiver will improve attendance, ensuring more 4 year olds can get to school during the critical year before kindergarten and will greatly reduce the burden on parents and caregivers who are responsible for getting their children to and from school.

We will upload Policy Council and Governing Board approvals as they are granted.

Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or concerns.

Respectfully,

*Pam Rees*

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