



Overview of the Impact of School Bus Electrification in Canada on Workers and Small Transport Companies



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Canadian
**Electric
School
Bus**
Alliance

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About CESBA

Led by Green Communities Canada in partnership with Équiterre, the Canadian Electric School Bus Alliance (CESBA) is an initiative that brings together various provincial and federal school bus actors, including school boards, environmental organizations, and bus manufacturers. Their goal is to advocate for policies that can accelerate the transition from fossil fuel-powered school buses to electric school buses, aligning with Canada's climate targets. With the support of a steering committee, CESBA gathers insights and best practices to formulate recommendations and implement engagement strategies aimed at mobilizing governments and increasing awareness of the issue. This project, running from January 2022, spans across Canada and draws upon best practices from North America and beyond, with a focus on specific regions or provinces, including Atlantic Canada, Québec, Ontario, and British Columbia.

This project aims to:

- Strengthen the network of actors involved in school bus electrification across Canada;
- Maximize knowledge transfer and sharing of best practices around school bus electrification;
- Amplify awareness on the social and environmental justice issues related to the transition to electric school buses;
- Increase federal policy support for the electrification of school transport.

About Équiterre

As one of the main environmental organizations in Québec, Équiterre seeks to make the necessary collective transitions towards an equitable and environmentally sound future more tangible, accessible, and inspiring. Since 1993, Équiterre has worked with citizens, organizations, and governments to develop projects in transportation, agriculture, energy, consumption, and climate change.

About Green Communities Canada

Green Communities Canada (GCC) has been leading a community-based climate action movement since 1995. With more than 100 member and partner organizations across Canada, GCC shares resources, co-develops programs, and drives transformative and equitable change. As a national organization, GCC aims to support and sustain community-based civic action. To this end, GCC acts as a network, a funder, a support structure, and a catalyst.

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Executive Summary

Drawing on provincial data and first-hand accounts, this report analyzes the opportunities and challenges that the electrification of school transportation represents for the Canadian workforce. The energy transition, still in its infancy, is necessary due to its climate, economic, and public health benefits. However, it is predominantly unfolding in a private sector characterized by labour shortages, an aging workforce, and structural challenges that must be addressed to ensure a truly fair transition for workers and small transport operators.

Key Findings

1. This transition is taking place alongside a renewal of the workforce. Electrification is taking place amid a labour shortage and rapid population aging, highlighting the potential role of the transition as a catalyst for modernizing and revitalizing the sector. The average age of drivers is high and rising, reaching 60 in Quebec and 57 in Alberta in 2024, while the number of certified drivers in Quebec is at an all-time low.

2. Working conditions need to be improved to support electrification. The transition to electric vehicles is taking place in a context where working conditions in school transportation are characterized by disparities: conditions are significantly better in the public sector than in the private subcontracting model, which is dominant in Ontario and Quebec. This wage insecurity leads to service disruptions: in Quebec, approximately 65% of service disruptions are linked to labour issues or labour disputes. The introduction of electric school buses is transforming the conditions under which the job is performed. It highlights the need to adapt working conditions—particularly in terms of vehicle range and the management of charging times—so that bus drivers can fully benefit from the transition.

3. A strategic opportunity to strengthen training. Electrification highlights a significant need for specialized training, both for drivers and mechanics. For bus drivers, Ontario and British Columbia do not require any mandatory training, and Quebec limits itself to a 90-second video. For mechanics, requalification faces obstacles such as the prohibitive cost of equipment, lengthy procedures, and, above all, manufacturers withholding technical information making diagnosis and repair difficult. These findings highlight a key challenge: making training a central pillar of successful electrification.

4. The importance of maintaining diversity among school transport companies. The shift to electric vehicles is accelerating the transformation of a market that is already undergoing consolidation. Rising diesel prices and investments related to electrification are pushing small school bus fleet owners to sell. Faced with these multiple factors, approximately 75% of small companies surveyed see a risk of having to sell, compared to about 35% of large companies. This consolidation weakens workers' bargaining power when faced with the financial resources of large corporations, which can withstand

long-term labour disputes. These challenges provide an opportunity for public policies designed to support local small and medium-sized businesses and preserve a diverse ecosystem that benefits workers and communities.

Recommendations for a fair transition

1. Increase the use of school transportation operated by public agencies and, where possible, reduce reliance on private transport providers.
2. Sustain and expand pilot projects involving school transportation services provided by school authorities in provinces that rely wholly or partly on the private sector and electrify their bus fleets.
3. Provide public funding to recreation and tourism establishments for the installation of charging stations for heavy-duty vehicles.
4. Actively support the electrification sector through investment and consistent public communication.
5. Increase consultation with workers in the development and implementation of school transportation electrification programs.
6. Integrate school transportation into existing federal entities and launch a parliamentary inquiry about its funding.
7. Compile statistics on industry consolidation in provinces where the private sector provides all or part of the school transportation service.
8. Protect small and medium-sized transport operators by enabling owners to take part in voluntary training courses on the mechanics of heavy-duty electric vehicles, which are currently restricted to company employees.
9. Introduce a tax credit for small transport operators who choose to electrify their school bus fleets.
10. Include content on driving ESBs in driver training and as part of the licence renewal process.
11. Ensure that manufacturers of ESBs provide trade schools and transport operators with all the information required for the maintenance and repair of the buses.
12. Provide financial support for the full requalification of mechanics.
13. Promote gender equality in the workplace from an inclusive perspective, drawing inspiration from measures implemented in other sectors where women are under-represented

1. Introduction

In Canada, the public-school transportation service is used by around 2.2 million pupils every day and is made possible by the work of bus drivers and mechanics (Task Force on School Bus Safety, 2019). Like most modes of transport, school transportation is moving towards electrification, a process that is part of a wider effort to combat climate change. This transition represents an opportunity to improve working conditions in an industry where jobs are often less competitive than in other sectors. This is why the workforce involved in electric school buses (ESBs) must be able to benefit from a just transition, meaning that electrification must go hand in hand with an improvement in their working conditions.

This study explores the effects of the electrification of school transportation on employees in this sector across the country. The electrification of the sector is still in its infancy, with only 4% of Canada's school bus fleet currently powered by electricity (CESBA, 2025). It is important to make recommendations to improve the various school transportation electrification programs, particularly regarding their implications for the workforce.

The first chapter provides a socio-economic profile of school bus drivers and mechanics, as well as outlining the various management models for this service across the country. This overview highlights the aging workforce in the sector, which is largely due to unattractive working conditions. Interviews with various stakeholders provide further insight into the effects of electrification on the workforce and the shortcomings of the electrification programs implemented to date.

The second chapter addresses the issue of the requalification for the drivers and maintenance staff. It outlines the measures already in place in Canada and highlights the importance of strengthening them to secure the support of workers, particularly in Quebec and Prince Edward Island, where the proportion of ESBs is the highest in the country.

The third chapter analyzes the impact of electrification on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In Quebec, many of these have been acquired by larger transport operators in recent years. This trend, which was already present, has continued with the transition to electric vehicles. However, preserving a diverse entrepreneurial landscape is key to maintaining a balanced power dynamic for the workforce and ensuring healthy competition, which is essential for the efficient use of public funds.

The final chapter contains 11 recommendations designed to ensure that the electrification of school transportation is carried out fairly and, in so doing, to encourage its implementation across Canada.

2. An overview of the school transportation industry in Canada, its workforce and working conditions

The success of an energy transition in a given industry depends in part on the level of support it garners from the workforce. Both the positive and negative impacts of the transition on working conditions within an industry influence workers' support for the transition. After outlining the context that led to the electrification of school transportation and providing a socio-economic profile of the school transportation workforce in Canada, this chapter explores the impact of electrification on their working conditions.

2.1. BACKGROUND ON THE ELECTRIFICATION OF SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION IN THE COUNTRY

The public-school transportation service as we know it today in Canada really began to take off in the second half of the 20th century. It was during this period that most provincial governments took over the planning of school transportation, which had previously been organized more or less independently by individual schools. Two main factors contributed to the need to establish a universal school transportation service subsidized by public funds: rising school attendance, as well as urban sprawl and the closure of schoolhouses, which increased the distance between schools and pupils' homes in regions across Canada (Gauthier, 1987; School Bus Ontario, n.d.).

Transport safety quickly became a top priority for the provinces, the federal government and school boards. In Quebec, a tragic collision between a train and a school bus in 1966, which claimed the lives of 19 pupils, led to the establishment of a commission of inquiry, followed by various reforms. In 1982, Transport Canada introduced further safety standards applicable to bus design, such as the removal of rigid metal seats, to improve seat padding and mitigate the severity of impacts (Transport Canada, 1999).

Today, efforts to electrify school transportation can be seen as a broadening of the concept of safety, in which the type of vehicle propulsion becomes a new safety factor. In addition to the broader issue of climate change as a determinant of public health, diesel combustion affects the quality of the air breathed by pupils and their drivers (Bursey and Kalisa, 2025).

The electrification of school transportation began in the early 2010s. Quebec played a significant role in this transition with the arrival, in 2011 in Saint-Jérôme, of Lion Electric, now the only wholly Canadian manufacturer of ESBs. From 2013 onwards, the Quebec government supported the development of this technology with an investment of \$675,000 (Radio-Canada, 2013). This support took shape in 2016 with the launch of its program to support the deployment of ESBs, backed by a budget of \$30 million over five

years (Newswire, 2016). Quebec's motives are clear: to reduce noise and improve air quality, but above all to contribute to the development of an emerging industrial sector.

From the second half of the 2010s, other provinces followed suit. Ontario invested \$8 million in the launch of a pilot program for ESBs between 2017 and 2019 (Schlosser, 2017), with the aim of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the sector and providing a healthier mode of transport for pupils (Ontario, 2017). In 2020, British Columbia introduced grants for the purchase of ESBs. Through its Bus Acquisition Program, the Ministry of Education is providing \$13 million to the province's 31 school districts for the purchase of a total of 101 school buses, including 18 ESBs (Capkun, 2021). As in Ontario, the aim is to reduce GHG emissions and meet reduction targets.

The year 2021 marked a high point with the adoption in Quebec of a regulation mandating the purchase of ESBs (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2023), as well as the roll-out of major federal programs, including the Zero-Emission Public Transit Fund. The latter comes with a budget of \$2.75 billion over five years and is aimed at funding electric public transport and school buses (Canada, 2021). The Canada Infrastructure Bank has also committed to investing \$1.5 billion in electric buses (Government of Canada, 2021). In the same year, the federal government and the Government of Prince Edward Island joined forces to each invest \$6.3 million in the purchase of 35 ESBs, through the Green Infrastructure stream of the Investing in Canada Plan (Government of Canada, 2021). These initiatives are part of a national strategy aimed at reducing the country's GHG emissions and supporting job creation in Canada's electric vehicle sector.

Despite these efforts, the level of electrification of school transportation in Canada remains very low. Less than 5% of Canada's school bus fleet is electrified. With 3%, 15% and 43% of their respective bus fleets electrified, British Columbia, Quebec and Prince Edward Island lead the way. This uneven progress is largely due to the obstacles encountered in recent years. The financial difficulties faced by Lion Electric, the temporary suspension of Quebec's regulations, the oversubscription of the federal funding program, and the slowdown in the purchase of ESBs by certain provinces, such as Prince Edward Island, highlight the ongoing challenges related to costs, industrial capacity, and the stability of public policy.

2.2. MODELS OF SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION MANAGEMENT

In Canada, school transportation is a responsibility that falls primarily within the provincial jurisdiction. The main factor distinguishing provincial regulatory models is whether the service is contracted out to private transport providers. There are three models in Canada: (1) full management of the service by school boards; (2) full outsourcing to private companies; (3) a hybrid model combining private and public operation. The following table breaks down the provinces according to whether their school vehicle fleets are public or private. The provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island are not included in the table due to a lack of precise data, but both provinces have adopted a predominantly public model (Newfoundland and Labrador School Boards Association, 2022; CUPE-SCFP, 2022).

Table 1: Breakdown of eight Canadian provinces according to the private or public nature of their school transportation

Province	Alberta	B.C.	Manitoba	N.B.	N.S.	Ontario	Quebec	Saskatchewan
Publicly operated vehicles	1,411	1,280	1,811	1,110	805	28	104	1,900
Privately managed vehicles	3305	580	383	113	493	18,995	11,241	1,700
Percentage of the public fleet relative to the total fleet	29.9%	68.8%	82.5%	90.8 %	62.0 %	0.1%	0.9%	52.8%
Year of data	2014	2019	2019	2008	2019	2014	2023	2019

Sources: School bus fleet (2019 and 2014); Monteiro et Atkinson (2012); TRAFICS financial reports of Quebec school institutions.

Drivers and mechanics are employed either by the school board where they work or by a private transport provider to operate one or more routes. Some private transport providers and school boards have their own workshops and in-house mechanical expertise for the maintenance and repair of school vehicles, and others use private workshops.

2.3. PROFILE OF THE SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION WORKFORCE

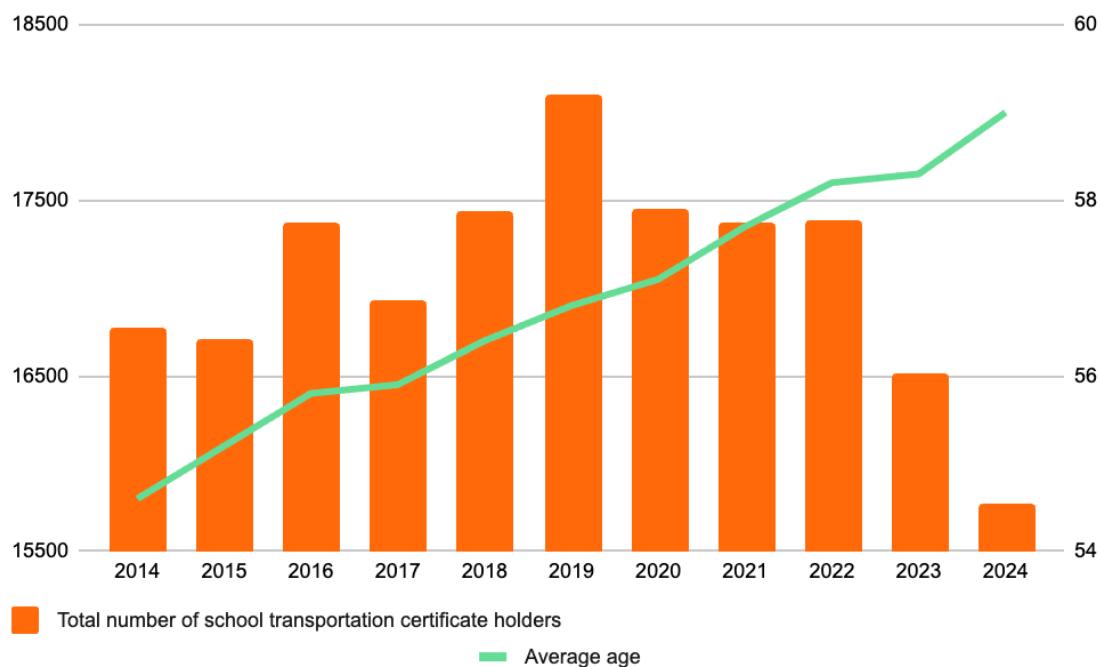
Each province faces its own challenges when it comes to attracting and retaining staff. Since the turn of the 2020s, there has been a labour shortage, with many transport operators and school boards across the country struggling to attract and retain drivers and mechanics. Among the main factors behind this shortage are the COVID-19 pandemic and its numerous consequences on the working conditions of these two professions, atypical working hours, and pay (Pratte, 2023). The issue of wages is discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

A detailed data compilation by province shows that the appeal of the bus driver profession varies. Data was obtained from six provinces through access to information requests. We present the statistics for each province and analyze their respective evolutions.

Quebec

Figure 1 breaks down the number of holders of valid school transportation certificate of competence between 2014 and 2024. Holding such a certificate does not necessarily mean that the holders are employed by a transport operator. Each certificate is valid for three years, after which a one-day refresher course is required for its renewal. These statistics provide a measure of the evolution of the labour pool and the general appeal of this profession.

Figure 1: Evolution of the number of people holding a valid school transportation certificate in Quebec and their average age



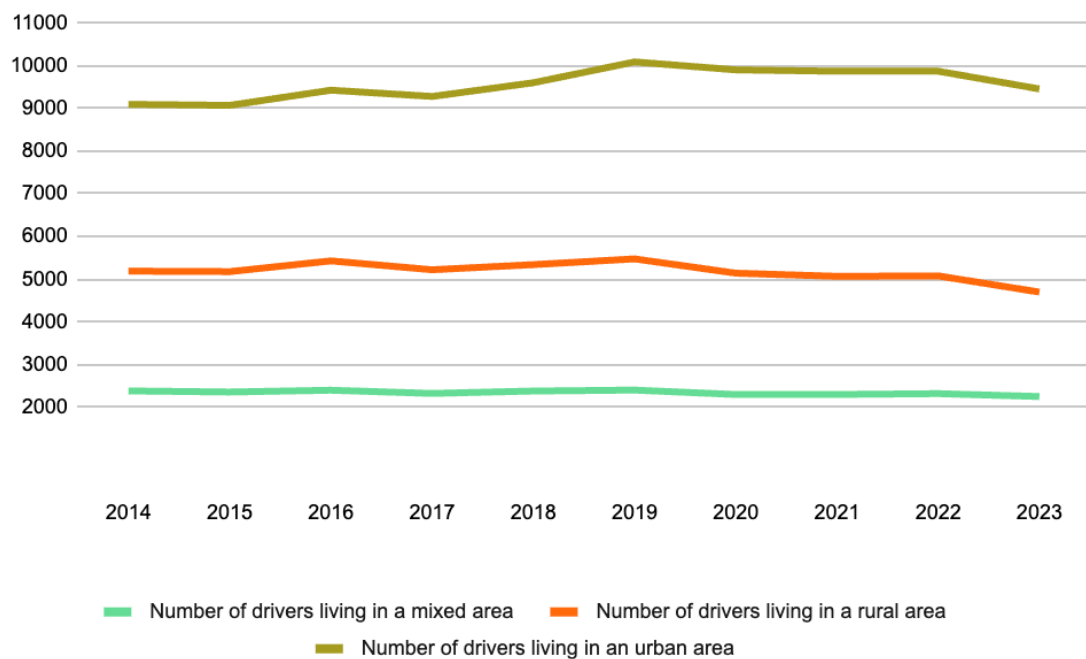
Source: Access to information request submitted to the Ministère des Transports et de la Mobilité durable du Québec.

Two key findings emerge from Figure 1. First, there has been a decline in the number of holders of valid certificates. After peaking in 2019, this figure has fallen steadily, reaching an all-time low in 2024. It is likely that the difficult working conditions during the pandemic have made this profession less attractive. The second observation concerns the average age of licence holders, which has been rising steadily since 2014. This aging trend illustrates the difficulty many transport operators in Quebec face in renewing their workforce. Additional data not included in the graph shows a marked under-representation of women in this profession, as they account for an average of only 30% of certificate holders.

The decline in the pool of school bus drivers in Quebec is particularly affecting rural areas. Figure 2 breaks down Quebec holders of school transportation certificate of

competence by their place of residence, classified into three categories: rural, urban or mixed. This classification is based on the first three digits of the postcodes of drivers between 2014 and 2023.

Figure 2: Breakdown of the residential locations of holders of school transportation certificate of competence in Quebec between 2014 and 2023



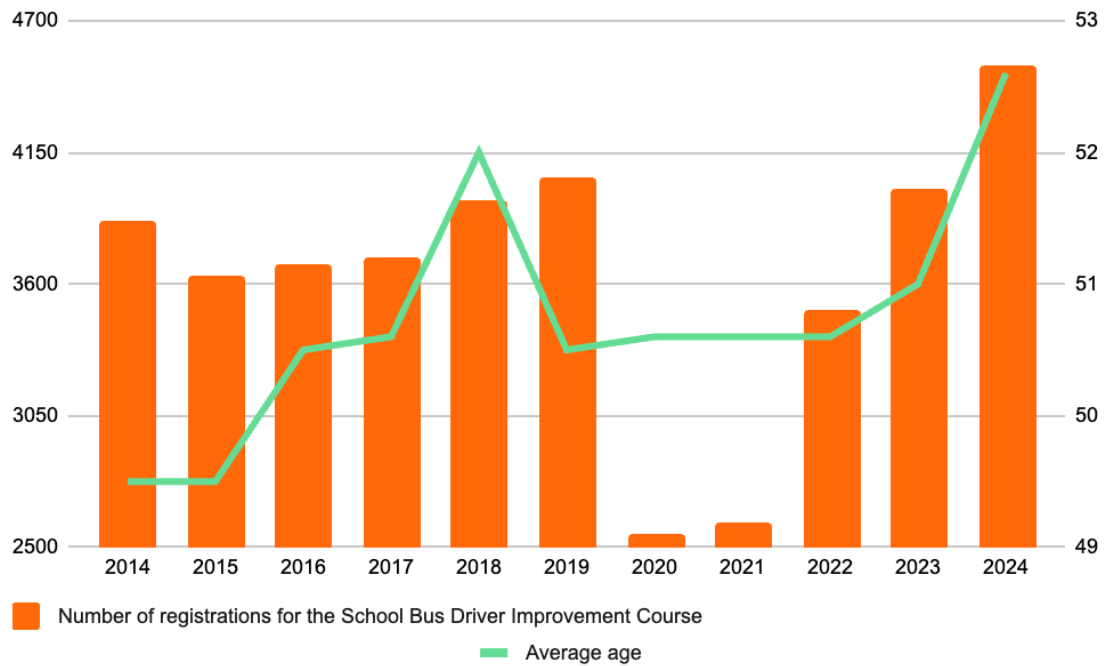
Source: Access to information request submitted to the Ministère des Transports et de la Mobilité durable du Québec; author's calculations.

Between 2014 and 2023, the number of people holding a school transportation certificate of competence rose by 4% in urban areas and fell by 9% in rural areas. The lower availability of workers in rural areas is becoming an additional factor to be taken into account when considering transportation electrification and the issue of service reliability.

Ontario

Figure 3 shows the annual number of people who have completed Ontario's School Bus Driver Improvement Course, as well as the average age of participants. As in Quebec, there was a sharp decline during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. Unlike Quebec, however, Ontario has seen a recovery in enrolment, reaching a peak in 2024. The average age of participants appears to be rising, though not as sharply as in Quebec.

Figure 3: Yearly change in the number of people who have completed the School Bus Driver Improvement Course in Ontario

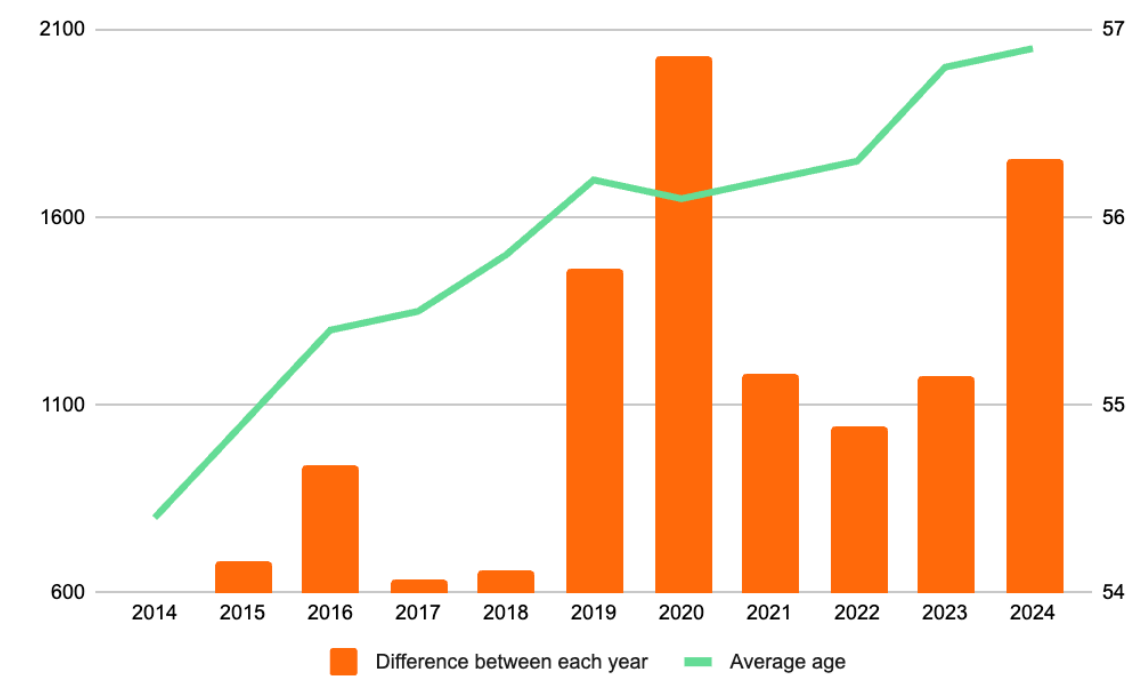


Source: Access to information request to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation.

Alberta

Figure 4 shows the annual evolution of the number of new holders of valid school bus driver certificates in Alberta, as well as their average age. This number has grown over the last 10 years, particularly since 2019. However, this growth has been accompanied by an aging workforce, whose average age was approaching 57 in 2024, compared with 54.4 in 2014.

Figure 4: Evolution of the number of new school bus driver certificate holders and their average age, 2014–2024

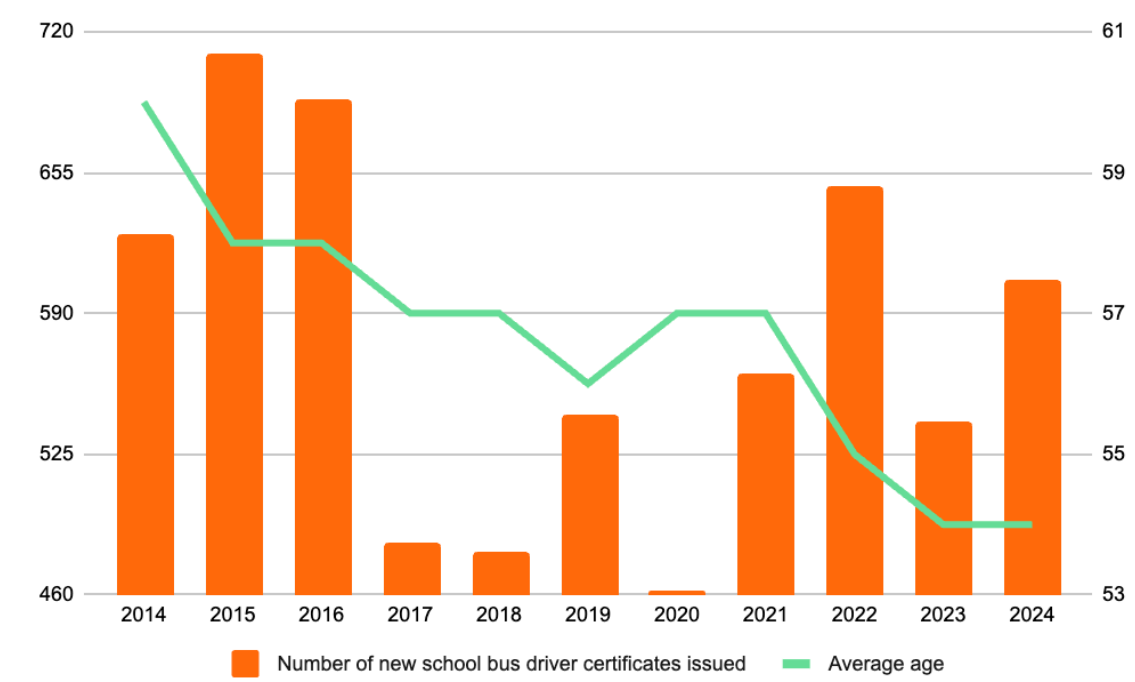


Source: Access to information request to the Alberta Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Saskatchewan

Figure 5 shows the number of new school bus driver certificates issued each year by Saskatchewan. Although there have been fluctuations over time, the number of licences issued has not declined in the years since 2020. Unlike in other provinces, the average age of new drivers has tended to decrease over the years but remained high in 2024. Data on the proportion of men and women working as school bus drivers is not included in the graph, but Saskatchewan has a higher proportion of men, as does Quebec. Women account for an average of 43.7% of drivers.

Figure 5: Evolution of the number of new school bus driver certificate holders in Saskatchewan and their average age

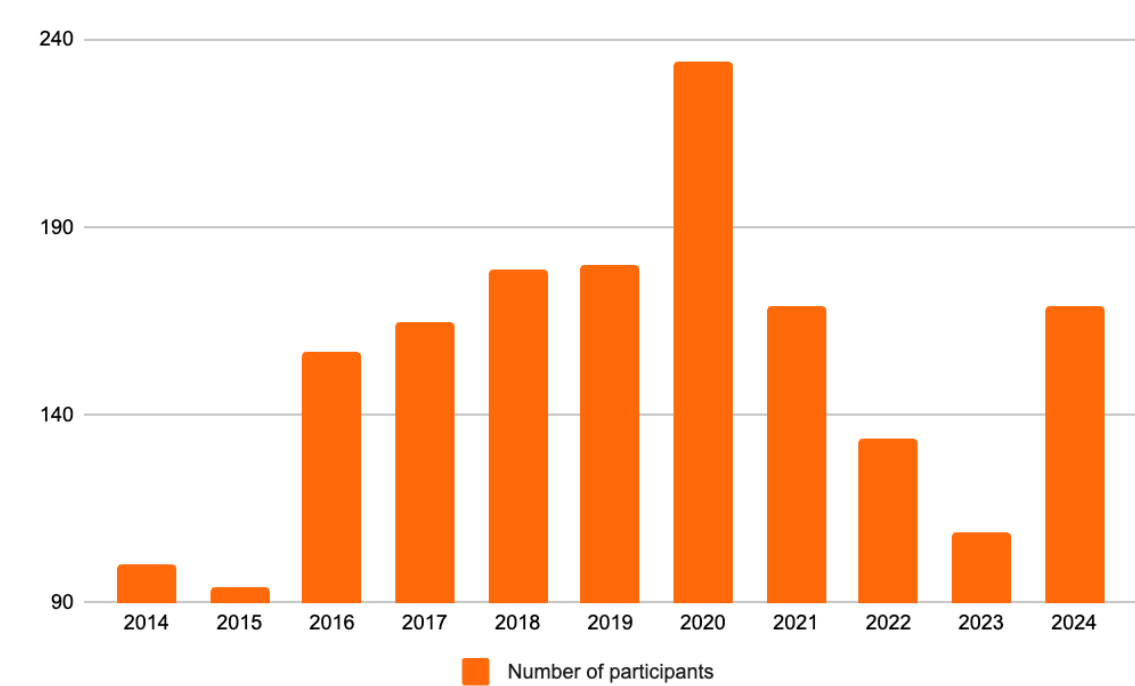


Source: Access to information request to Saskatchewan Government Insurance.

New Brunswick

Figure 6 shows the number of people trained each year to drive school buses in New Brunswick. This data should be interpreted with caution, as the province’s Auditor General concluded that 37% of employed school bus drivers had not completed this mandatory training (Auditor General of New Brunswick, 2024). Chapter 2, which deals with the issue of workforce requalification, addresses this aspect in greater detail. Nevertheless, a decline in participation in training programs can be observed in this province from 2020 onwards, followed by a partial recovery in 2024.

Figure 6: Evolution of the number of people who have completed the New Brunswick school bus driver training course

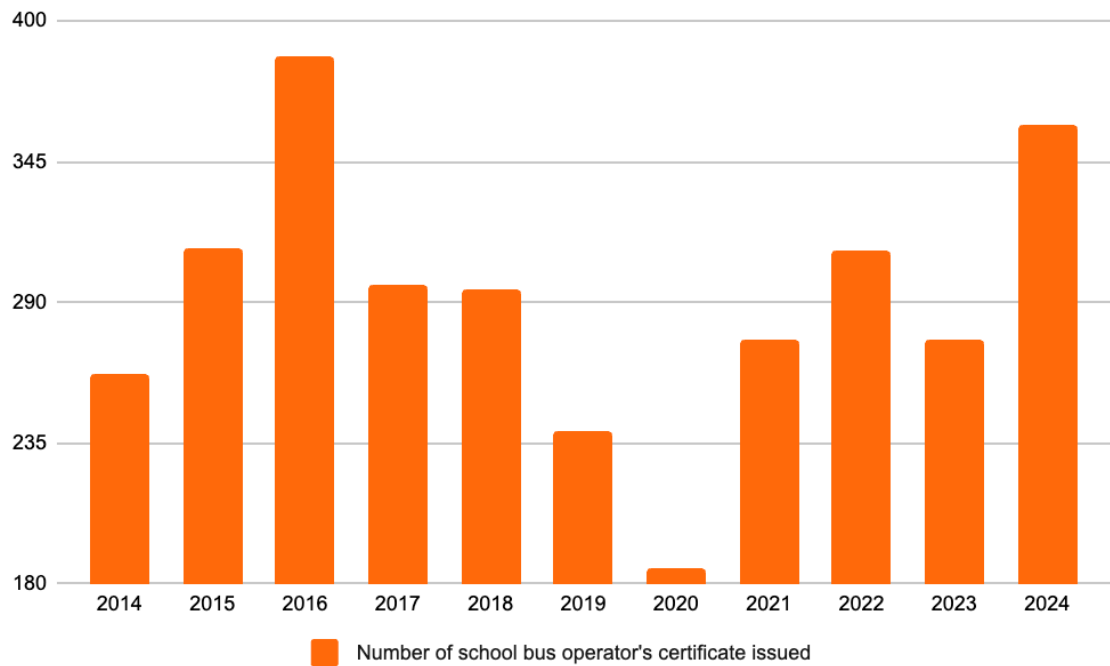


Source: Access to information request to the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Manitoba

Figure 7 shows that, like several other provinces, the rate at which new School Bus Operator's Certificates are being issued in Manitoba has reached a level like that seen prior to the historic low in 2020. With 359 new certificates issued in 2024, the profession of school bus driver remains as attractive as it was before the pandemic.

Figure 7: Evolution of the number of new School Bus Operator's Certificate holders in Manitoba



Source: Access to information request to Manitoba Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

Several provinces (Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba) have seen their labour pools recover and even grow beyond pre-pandemic levels after 2020. Quebec stands out as an exception, with a steady decline in the number of certificate holders, reaching an all-time low in 2024. This decline, which is hitting rural areas hardest (-9%), is accompanied by a general aging of the profession nationwide: the average age is rising almost everywhere, peaking at 60 in Quebec, with Saskatchewan being the only province to show a reverse trend of a younger workforce. The next section provides an overview of working conditions, which vary greatly from province to province.

Key points from this section:

- The school bus driver workforce, which is predominantly male, is aging significantly.
- Most provinces have seen their workforce recover from the historic low reached during the pandemic. Quebec is an exception, particularly in rural areas.

2.4. WORKING CONDITIONS FOR SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS AND MECHANICS IN CANADA

There are various factors behind the recruitment and retention of school bus drivers and mechanics. Working conditions and hourly pay are at the top of the list, as they are often lower than in other jobs within the transport sector. Indeed, the working conditions for public transit bus drivers and maintenance staff are generally better than those prevailing in school transportation (Comité sectoriel de main-d'œuvre du transport routier, 2023). Table 2 presents the average starting wages for school bus drivers and mechanics, weighted according to a Statistics Canada indicator of the respective cost of living in each province (Statistics Canada, 2025). The data are drawn from an analysis of a sample of collective agreements for each province; they do not include non-unionized staff.

Table 2: Comparison of hourly wages for unionized drivers and mechanics by province, 2024, weighted according to Statistics Canada's purchasing power parity indicator

Province	Hourly wage for drivers	Hourly wage for mechanics
Nova Scotia (public sector)	31.39	38.04
British Columbia (public sector)	28.87	35.4
New Brunswick (public sector)	28.72	N. A.
Prince Edward Island (public sector)	28.51	N. A.
Nova Scotia (private sector)	25.99	
Quebec (private sector)	25.91	33.31
Manitoba (public sector)	25.58	N/A
Newfoundland and Labrador (public sector)	24.79	30.42
Saskatchewan (public sector)	21.9	35.16
Alberta (public sector)	21.59	N/A
Ontario (private sector)	20.94	N/A

Source: compilation of a sample of collective agreements in the school transportation sector by province; weighting carried out using Statistics Canada data.

Several observations can be drawn from Table 2. The main factor that appears to influence hourly wages across provinces is whether school transportation is provided by the public or private sector. Indeed, the best working conditions are found in the public

sectors of Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. Furthermore, these hourly rates do not include benefits such as pension plans and group insurance. The unionized private sectors in Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia, for the most part, do not provide for employer contributions to a pension fund or access to a group insurance program. The poorest working conditions are found in Ontario, where school transportation is entirely subcontracted to private operators. In Quebec, working conditions in the private sector have improved following labour disputes in recent years, which led to the adoption of collective agreements more favourable to employees (FEESP-CSN, 2025). In 2023, 20% of the 121 strikes or lockouts across all private sectors in Quebec involved the school transportation sector (Pratte, 2024).

The current hourly rates for non-unionized staff in provinces that rely wholly or partly on private transport providers are not included in Table 2, as individual employment contracts are not available. In Quebec, around 55% of school transportation staff are not unionized (Comité de réflexion sur les enjeux de la pénurie de main-d'œuvre dans le secteur du transport scolaire, 2019). Taking their working conditions into account would likely lower the average hourly rates shown in Table 2, as non-unionized workers in Canada earn on average 8% less than their unionized counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2024).

The difference between working conditions in the public and private sectors is evident even in provinces that operate a hybrid model. In Quebec, 99% of school transportation – 11,241 out of 11,345 buses – is operated by the private sector. The 104 buses managed by the public sector are operated by rural English-language school boards that have provided school transportation services since the early 20th century, well before the introduction of a universal service subsidized by the provincial government (Gauthier, 1987). The average hourly wage for a minibuss driver employed by a private transport operator is around \$21.85/hour, with no access to a pension fund or insurance program. The average hourly wage offered by an English-language school board for an equivalent position is \$23.47/hour, which is 7.4% higher than in the private sector, not including the benefits arising from access to a pension fund and a group insurance program (CSQ, 2024). This difference is less significant for regular bus drivers, as the average hourly rates in the public and private sectors are similar. The difference is limited to the lack of benefits for drivers in the private sector.

In Nova Scotia, where school transportation is organized under a public-private partnership model, the difference in working conditions between drivers in the private and public sectors is even more pronounced. Excluding benefits, hourly rates are on average 18.7% higher in the public sector.

Working conditions in the school transportation sector do not solely impact its attractiveness. They also affect the reliability of the service, as labour shortages and disputes lead to service disruptions (Education News Canada, 2019; Pratte, 2024; Hutson, 2024). A study published in 2024 compiled data on service disruptions in school

transportation in Quebec and concluded that approximately 65% of these were due to labour-related issues, notably the lack of drivers available to provide transport or service interruptions resulting from labour disputes. In Quebec, during the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 school years, an average of 7,000 pupils per school day were left without transport due to recurring service disruptions (Pratte, 2024).

The labour shortage has led the provinces of Ontario and Quebec to set up a wage bonus program providing an annual payment of up to approximately \$2,000 to school bus drivers (School Bus Ontario, 2024; Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2025). These bonuses are funded from public funds. In Quebec, the program provides a referral bonus of \$250 to \$500 to drivers who recommend new recruits. Such public programs do not exist elsewhere in Canada, apart from some initiatives by private transport operators who sometimes offer recruitment bonuses to attract staff.

The existence of such public programs in Quebec and Ontario coincides with the fact that these are the two provinces that outsource services to private transport operators. These bonuses compensate for the less favourable working conditions typically found in this management model, which is more vulnerable to labour shortages.

In Quebec, following a series of service disruptions that became recurrent from the 2022–2023 school year onwards, the Ministry of Education launched a pilot project in which 10 school service centres were invited to take charge of part of their school transportation operations to mitigate service disruptions (Cousineau, 2024). The school service centre most affected by this phenomenon in Quebec saw its service disruptions fall by 95% year-on-year following its participation in the pilot project (Pratte, 2024). School service centres offer benefits to their drivers, which helps them attract and retain staff. This case demonstrates that labour shortages can be addressed, in part, by improving working conditions.

Figures 1 to 7 showed a trend towards an aging school bus driver workforce in all the provinces analyzed, except Saskatchewan. The sector is therefore struggling to replenish its workforce. In this context, the inclusion of employee benefits in employment contracts is of particular importance, as such benefits are likely to attract staff.

The next section explores the impact of the electrification of school transportation on workers. We have focused on the cases of Quebec and Prince Edward Island, as they have the highest rates of electrification of their school bus fleets in the country.

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- Provinces that favour a publicly run school transportation model generally offer better working conditions than those that rely on outsourcing.
- In Nova Scotia, drivers in the private sector earn on average 18.7% less than their counterparts in the public sector. Ontario (100% private) offers the least favourable conditions.
- Precarious working conditions fuel the labour shortage, which (along with labour disputes) accounts for 65% of service disruptions in Quebec. However, a public management pilot project has reduced service disruptions by 95% in a school service centre with a particularly high rate of service disruptions.
- To mitigate the difficult conditions of the private model, Quebec and Ontario pay public retention bonuses (up to \$2,000), a measure that does not exist in provinces with a public model.

2.5. THE IMPACT OF ELECTRIFICATION ON DRIVERS' WORKING CONDITIONS: THE CASE OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND AND QUEBEC

In Quebec, the main union representing school bus drivers, the Fédération des employés et employées de services publics – Confédération des syndicats nationaux (FEESP-CSN), has never publicly stated its position on the school transportation electrification program. As part of our research, we conducted interviews with six members of the FEESP-CSN. According to these accounts, the lack of public support for electrification does not mean that union members are against electrification, but rather that their priority demand remains the improvement of working conditions. The members interviewed also listed several negative effects of electrification on their work. Table 3 summarizes their observations.

Table 3: Summary of the impact of electrification on drivers in Quebec

Area affected by electrification	Detailed implications	Chapter of the study
Balance of power vis-à-vis the employer	Electrification has led to greater market concentration. Labour disputes with large private transport companies are more difficult to resolve than those with SMEs. Private transport companies cite the increased costs associated with electrification as a reason for not agreeing to wage increases.	3
Loss of income	Drivers working for a partially electrified company are assigned fewer special school trips, as the limited range of the batteries restricts the distances they can travel and, consequently, the employer's ability to cover extracurricular field trips.	1
Health and safety at work	Drivers do not receive training in driving electric vehicles, which increases their stress at work and compromises transport safety.	2
Charging management	Drivers are not allowed to warm up their buses when they are charging, which in cold weather can force them to go into a business and spend money just to stay warm. Tense interactions can arise with the public when the school bus is plugged into a public charging station.	1
Partially paid overtime	Occasional breakdowns of ESBs result in longer working days for drivers, yet they are not always compensated accordingly, as such compensation depends on the terms of their employment contract.	1
Failure to consult beforehand	Some of the negative consequences of electrification could have been avoided if workers had been consulted before the electrification plan came into effect.	1

Source: interviews with members of the FEESP-CSN, 2025.

An interview with a school transportation manager in Prince Edward Island highlights some of the same issues as those outlined in Table 3. The challenges posed by extracurricular field trips and the loss of revenue due to the limited range of batteries are also relevant to this Maritime province:

"We have drivers who have missed out on extra trips due to a lack of infrastructure to support them. [...] Field trips provide unionized drivers with the opportunity to earn a little extra money. When you consider that they only work five hours a day, these trips mean a great deal to the drivers." (Gillis, 2025)

A school bus driver from the Montreal area, who has been doing this job for 38 years, echoes this sentiment:

“We’re getting a salary that’s more appropriate when we’re able to make special trips, to the zoo or a sugar shack for example. But with electrification [...] there’s nowhere to charge. You can go apple-picking in an electric bus, but you won’t be able to drive back.” (FEESP-CSN, 2025)

The company she works for has electrified almost its entire fleet and now has only five buses with internal combustion engines left. This transport operator is forced to turn down contracts for school trips, to the detriment of drivers wishing to increase their working hours to earn a slightly better wage (FEESP-CSN, 2025), due to the limited range of the batteries and insufficient charging infrastructure.

School transportation is also subject to its fair share of unforeseen events. Sometimes, a bus must travel a greater distance than originally planned. Drivers then have to deal with the issue of charging by rushing to a public charging station. Buses manufactured by Lion Electric do not allow the cabin heater to be used when charging. Drivers have reported having to make a purchase in a business to take advantage of the warmth of the premises until charging is complete. These expenses are not reimbursed by the employer (FEESP-CSN, 2025).

The sometimes complicated task of charging school buses adds to drivers’ responsibilities. Using a public charging station can sometimes lead to tense interactions between drivers and other users, as the large size of the buses can block access to other nearby charging stations. One driver argues that this type of logistical shortcoming in the electrification process is the driver’s responsibility (FEESP-CSN, 2025). In Prince Edward Island, drivers have also had to deal with motorists who have unplugged the charging cable only to use it for their own car. These incidents lead to heated exchanges and increase stress at work. In this province, some charging stations have been installed at drivers’ homes. As these locations are not designed for such use, some buses sometimes get stuck during heavy rain or the spring thaw.

According to two bus drivers who were interviewed, bus breakdowns have become more frequent since the introduction of electric buses. These breakdowns sometimes result in unpaid working time, since “virtually all pay plans allow for a certain amount of time during which you can work extra without receiving any pay in return” (FEESP-CSN). This additional period can vary from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the employment contract, beyond which the employee is paid in accordance with the relevant provisions.

Some employment contracts provide for weekly pay, based on a standard working week of 25 hours. In practice, employees may work fewer than 25 hours but still receive their full agreed pay. However, one driver we spoke to pointed out:

“If you’re paid for 25 hours and you only work 21, you’re not going to want to wait an extra hour for your next job, because you won’t get paid any more anyway [...] once you do that, you lose the only benefit you have as a driver.” (FEESP-CSN, 2025)

This driver refers to the almost universal lack of employee benefits (pension plans and group insurance) in this sector in Quebec.

In Quebec, the employees interviewed also maintain that school transportation workers were not consulted during the implementation of the electrification process:

“It was a good idea, but they really should have consulted us; we could have given them plenty of factors to consider and helped them think it through. If someone has never driven a bus, they don’t know what the impact will be at the end of the line.” (FEESP-CSN, 2025)

A similar trend can be observed in Prince Edward Island. As far as driving is concerned, the feedback received has been largely positive, but better planning could have prevented several problems:

“When they work, they work well, drivers like them, they are smooth, they are quiet, the hallways are wider. There are a lot of positive things with this transition, [...] but there is a lot more on the other side that [...] someone should consider.” (Gillis, 2025)

The limited range observed in some ESBs reflects the fact that the technology is still under development. As with electric cars, advances in battery technology, energy management and charging are expected to gradually improve range and reliability. As these technologies become more widespread and refined, the performance of ESBs is expected to approach that of combustion-engine buses, although challenges relating to charging, route planning and weather conditions remain in the short term.

The next chapter focuses on the issue of requalification raised by the electrification of school transportation.

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- Limited battery range and a lack of infrastructure prevent drivers from undertaking extracurricular field trips, a crucial source of additional income for these part-time workers.
- On certain models (Lion), the heating does not work when the vehicle is charging. In cold weather, drivers sometimes have to wait in businesses at their own expense to keep warm.
- The use of public charging stations creates conflicts with car drivers (access blocked by the size of the bus, unplugging without consent).
- Breakdowns, which are more frequent with electric vehicles, and waiting times during charging extend the working day without any guarantee of additional pay.
- Workers complain that they were not consulted during the development of electrification plans, a precaution that could have prevented several logistical problems.

3. The requalification of workers for the electrification of school transportation

A fair ecological transition, which requires a transformation of the economy, necessitates workforce requalification programs. The electrification of school transportation is no exception. Supporting drivers and mechanics in acquiring new skills is crucial to the success of this electrification. A key principle of a fair transition is to ensure that the reskilling of workers does not fall solely on their shoulders but is instead planned and funded by public authorities (Cha, 2019). This chapter outlines the requalification measures put in place across the country for the electrification of school transportation.

3.1. ELECTRIC SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION: A PROMISING SECTOR WITH THE POTENTIAL TO ATTRACT WORKFORCE FROM SECTORS UNDERGOING TRANSFORMATION

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the energy transition entails the disappearance or a significant reduction of the workforce in certain employment sectors, alongside an increase in others (ILO, 2008). Electrified school transportation falls into the category of employment sectors that can attract workers from sectors undergoing transformation. The electric bus driving and repair sector can welcome workers from the heavy-duty internal combustion transport sector. In this context, both

the reskilling and continuous professional training of the workforce must be planned as part of public policy.

The lack of such planning at the provincial level is jeopardizing the electrification of school transportation across the country. Both private and public transport operators in Quebec and British Columbia have reported difficulties in requalifying their workforce internally (Langlois, 2024 and Cobb, 2025). This uncertainty regarding the ability to operate ESBs is slowing the pace of electrification, as well as raising risks to service reliability. Research into school transportation electrification initiatives elsewhere in the world, notably in Vietnam, highlights similar challenges (Thanh Truong et al., 2023).

A simulation included in a study published in 2025 on the electrification of school transportation in the United States showed that, given the current maturity of the technology and the range of ESBs, around 90% of school buses in operation in the United States could be electrified without altering their routes (Jonas, 2025; He, 2025). In other words, technology is becoming less of a barrier to electrification, unlike workforce skills. This factor therefore deserves particular attention.

3.2. PROVINCIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR BECOMING A DRIVER OR MECHANIC

As school transportation is a provincial responsibility, the qualifications required to drive a school bus legally vary from province to province. In addition to a specific category of driving licence, most provinces require compulsory training specific to school transportation. The following table lists the requirements for becoming a school bus driver in each province.

Table 4: Overview of the entry requirements for school bus drivers in Canadian provinces

Province	Specific training requirements for school transportation*	Procedure for renewing qualifications	Compulsory holding of a higher class of driving licence
New Brunswick	5-day compulsory training course	Compulsory annual refresher course (duration unknown)	Yes
Ontario	6.25-hour compulsory training course	Certification renewal every five years	Yes
Quebec	15-hour compulsory training course	6-hour compulsory refresher course, every 3 years	Yes
Nova Scotia	No additional compulsory training	No compulsory training	Yes
Prince Edward Island	Additional compulsory training provided by a private trade school (duration unknown)	N/A	Yes
Newfoundland and Labrador	Compulsory training provided by schools (duration unknown)	Annual online training organized by the English-language school board (duration unknown)	Yes
Manitoba	24-hour compulsory training course with written and practical exam	8-hour annual refresher course	Yes
Saskatchewan	No additional compulsory training	No compulsory training	Yes
Alberta	A 15-hour compulsory training course, in addition to practical training (duration unknown)	No compulsory training	Yes
British Columbia	No additional compulsory training	No compulsory training	Yes

**Drivers in provinces where certification is not mandatory may nevertheless receive training upon recruitment, provided by the private transport operator or the educational institution.

Sources: compiled by the author from provincial government websites.

Table 4 shows significant disparities between provinces in terms of training for school bus drivers. All provinces require drivers to hold a specific category of licence to drive a school bus. Seven provinces require additional compulsory training specific to school transportation, and five of these require a refresher course. Among these seven

provinces, the duration of the compulsory specific training ranges from 6.25 hours to five days.

The case of New Brunswick shows us, however, that the requirement for compulsory training does not necessarily mean that drivers complete this training. A report by the Auditor General of New Brunswick published in 2024 concluded that 37% of drivers did not have proof of completion of bus driver training in their files at the time of recruitment.

The Auditor General noted several other breaches related to mandatory first-aid training and the possession of the required class of driving licence. The report states that this situation has existed for some time: “[D]espite the extensive audit of school transportation carried out by our office in 2001, several discrepancies remain in compliance levels” (Auditor General of New Brunswick, 2024, p. 83).

There is nothing in this New Brunswick study to suggest that the shortcomings observed in that province are prevalent elsewhere in Canada.

The existence of a compulsory training infrastructure is a key asset for implementing requalification measures in the context of electrification. Provinces planning some form of skills renewal program can incorporate content on driving ESBs into ongoing staff training.

When it comes to mechanics, all provinces require a qualification pathway involving trade schools, followed by several years of professional experience leading to different levels of expertise. The next section describes the various requalification measures for the electrification of school transportation in Canada.

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- All provinces require a specific driving licence, with seven of them mandating training specifically for school transportation, the duration of which varies greatly (from 6.25 hours to 5 days).
- Only five provinces require periodic skills renewal, which makes it difficult to incorporate new knowledge relating to electrification.
- The existence of standards does not guarantee their enforcement; in New Brunswick, 37% of current drivers do not have the required proof of mandatory training.
- Unlike drivers, the training for mechanics is standardized across the country through trade schools and professional experience.

3.3. OVERVIEW OF REQUALIFICATION AND CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVES BY PROVINCE

Table 5 details the specific content relating to the operation of ESBs that has been added to driver training for each Canadian province.

Table 5: Breakdown of the adjustment to school bus driver training by province

Province	Current state of training for ESB drivers	Estimated number of ESBs in use
Quebec	A 90-second video about electric buses has been added to the compulsory training in 2024.	1,606
Prince Edward Island	All drivers are trained to drive electric buses.	107
New Brunswick	No specific content relating to ESBs has been added to the compulsory training.	22
Ontario	No specific content relating to ESBs has been added to the compulsory training.	25
British Columbia	Although there is no compulsory training, drivers in the public sector receive training coordinated by school boards. No information is available regarding drivers in the private sector.	158
Alberta	No specific content relating to ESBs has been added to the compulsory training.	50
Newfoundland and Labrador	No specific content relating to ESBs has been added to the compulsory training.	1
Manitoba	No specific content relating to ESBs has been added to the compulsory training.	0
Saskatchewan	N/A	1
Nova Scotia	N/A	0

Sources: Access to information requests; CESBA, 2025; Gillis, 2025.

Table 5 highlights disparities between provinces in terms of training for driving electric buses. This disparity can be partly explained by the penetration rate of ESBs in each province. It also highlights significant gaps in most provinces where ESBs are in use. In Quebec, the first ESB began operating in 2014 (Quebec Electric Vehicle Association, 2014), and a subsidy program for electrification was gradually introduced from 2016 onwards (Government of Quebec, 2025). However, it was not until 2024 that content relating to ESBs was incorporated into driver training for the mandatory licence. Moreover, the content in question is minimal. Three aspects relating to ESBs are covered in a 90-second video: the safety check, the charging procedure and the emergency stop system.

Bus drivers from Quebec interviewed for this report highlight the lack of training in driving electric buses:

“We had absolutely no training. None at all. Here are the keys and just wait until the light tells you it’s OK. That’s what the training was like.” (FEESP-CSN, 2025)

However, they report several characteristics specific to ESBs that they have learned through driving experience: the need to follow a specific shutdown procedure for the heating system; different driving techniques to extend battery range; and how to navigate turns. To date, they say they are unaware of the meaning of the various error codes on the dashboard or their severity. They are sometimes instructed to “press the X button, clear the code, and keep going. It’s no big deal. If it breaks, they just have to call back” (FEESP-CSN, 2025). The drivers we spoke with suggest that this lack of knowledge about the specifics of electric buses causes them stress.

Elsewhere in the country, some provinces that have begun introducing ESBs have not yet updated the content of their mandatory training programs. This is the case in New Brunswick, Ontario, and Alberta.

In British Columbia, ESB drivers acquire technical knowledge informally on the job through interaction with other drivers and instructors (Cobb, 2025). Additionally, the Association of School Transportation Services of B.C. offers optional visits by an instructor to school boards to train drivers. This training includes a module dedicated to ESBs (ASTSBC, 2025).

The gaps in driver training observed in various provinces reflect a lack of planning for the requalification required as part of the transition to electric vehicles. Ultimately, it is the workers who suffer the consequences of this lack of planning. In the long run, this failure fuels anti-electrification sentiment among many of them, whose working conditions are affected by the transition (FEESP-CSN, 2025).

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- Despite the presence of 1,606 ESBs in Quebec, mandatory training has only included a 90-second video since 2024. Drivers complain of a complete lack of hands-on training.
- In Ontario, Alberta, and New Brunswick, no content specific to ESBs has been added to the training. Drivers often have to teach themselves how to manage range and error codes, which increases their stress.
- Only Prince Edward Island has trained all its active drivers in the operation of ESBs (Gillis, 2025).
- The lack of preparation for requalification is hindering workers' acceptance of electrification.

3.4. THE CHALLENGES OF REQUALIFYING MECHANICS

Most provincial technical training programs leading to a career as a mechanic now enable new cohorts to work on electric vehicles. However, there is a lack of reskilling programs in the country for mechanics from pre-electrification cohorts who were trained to repair internal combustion engine vehicles.

In Quebec, there are two public training programs for heavy-duty electric vehicle mechanics. These programs are designed for mechanics who are already in the workforce and wish to acquire the skills needed to work on the electrical systems of heavy-duty vehicles. Table 6 summarizes the content of these two programs as well as the number of people trained, based on the most recent data.

Table 6: Overview of two Quebec continuous professional training programs in ESB maintenance

	Training program coordinated by Camo-Route	Training program coordinated by EV Skills
Duration	30 hours, plus a 24-hour refresher course if required	5 levels totalling 154 hours
Accessibility	Two training centres in Quebec	Ten training centres in Quebec
Target audience	Mechanics already in employment	Mechanics already in employment
Funding available	Wage subsidy covering 85% of the wage, up to \$25/hour	Wage subsidy covering 85% of the wage, up to \$25/hour
Number of participants to date	84 men from 13 different regions Goal to eventually train 140 mechanics	Exact figures are unknown; the vast majority are men
Longevity	Renewable pilot project	Permanent program

Sources: Messias, 2025; Hébert and Houle, 2025; EV Skills program, 2026; Camo-Route, 2025.

Two employees interviewed from EV Skills, the organization that coordinates one of the two training programs listed in Table 6, cited several obstacles related to training programs and the challenges of performing mechanical maintenance on heavy-duty electric vehicles. Table 7 summarizes these challenges.

Table 7: Summary of issues related to the training and maintenance of heavy-duty electric vehicles identified by two members of the EV Skills organization

Type of issue	Detailed explanations
Difficulty in repairing heavy-duty electric vehicles	The lack of access to information from manufacturers hinders a thorough diagnosis of mechanical problems. The procedure for disconnecting the high-voltage system in heavy-duty vehicles can take up to 8 hours, which complicates repairs.
Insufficient resources allocated to training	Access to training equipment is expensive and insufficient.
Quality of training programs	The quality of training is compromised by limited access to information from manufacturers.
Availability of mechanics	The labour shortage prevents employers from releasing mechanics for more than five workdays to attend training, even though 85% of their wages are reimbursed.

Sources: Hébert and Houle, 2025.

As shown in Table 7, the main obstacles faced by trainers relate to access to used equipment and incomplete information from manufacturers. One of them notes that, given the scarcity of used electric buses on the market, “access to equipment for training is very expensive. You have to acquire a bus and then take it apart. The initial cost of delivering the training is extremely high” (Hébert and Houle, 2025). According to them, access to equipment for training purposes is essential in a context where participants are technicians who learn much better through hands-on practice than through theory. Furthermore, for mechanics trained in and accustomed to thermal models, acquiring skills in heavy-duty vehicle electrical systems is a process that amounts to nothing less than learning “a whole new trade, since it involves industrial electricity” (Hébert and Houle, 2025). This continuous professional training is therefore challenging, though necessary to ensure a certain level of workplace safety for combustion engine mechanics called upon to work on high-voltage-powered engines.

Of all the obstacles cited by the trainers we spoke to, access to information from manufacturers tops the list. Mechanics find it difficult to access the detailed information needed to repair heavy-duty electric vehicles. The trainers themselves face resistance from manufacturers who are reluctant to share all the information required to carry out in-depth diagnostics and subsequently teach these procedures during training courses. According to them, this restricted access is partly driven by manufacturers’ concerns regarding intellectual property and competition. To overcome these obstacles, one trainer noted the need to be resourceful and build good relationships with

manufacturers' engineers: "It's your contacts that will determine whether you get the information or not" (Hébert and Houle, 2025).

In this regard, he expresses his disappointment at the recent departure of an engineer with whom he had built a relationship of trust and who had been providing him with technical information on the vehicle models manufactured by his employer.

The arduous process of requalifying mechanics is hindering their interest in electrification: "I haven't seen anyone who was happy working on heavy-duty electric vehicles" (Hébert and Houle, 2025). In addition to the challenge of accelerated learning in electromechanics, the emerging nature of the technology contributes to the mechanics' lack of enthusiasm:

"What's on the road are prototypes undergoing testing. Workers are being made to work on prototypes, which are poorly designed in most cases, and for which there are no repair manuals." (Hébert and Houle, 2025)

Other ways of reskilling mechanics exist across the country. In British Columbia, some mechanics employed by local school boards operating ESBs have been given time off to undertake training provided by the region's ESB manufacturer, Microbird (Cobb, 2025). The private company Highland Fleet, which specializes in logistical support for the electrification of school transportation, also offers on-the-job training for ESB mechanics (Doucette, 2025).

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- The main obstacle remains manufacturers' withholding of technical data, which hinders complex diagnostics and the quality of training for mechanics.
- Despite grants covering up to 85% of wages during training, employers struggle to release their mechanics for training courses lasting several days due to the acute labour shortage.
- The high cost of electric buses limits training centres' ability to acquire vehicles for practical learning.
- Mechanics see this requalification as the arduous process of learning a new trade (industrial electricity) on vehicles regarded as emerging "prototypes".

4. The electrification of school transportation and its impact on work relations: the case of Quebec

Technological changes in certain aspects of an industrial sector have both direct and indirect consequences for that sector. The electrification of school transportation is no exception. This chapter focuses specifically on the issue of work relations, namely the ability of workers to influence their terms and conditions of employment. The gradual introduction of ESB across the country must be carried out in such a way as not to weaken the bargaining power exercised by staff over their respective employers. The example of Quebec's electrification program shows that the outsourcing of school transportation services can have consequences for the workforce insofar as it may contribute to the consolidation of the sector through the merger and acquisition of small transport operators. This chapter addresses the issue of industry concentration from the perspective of labour relations in Quebec, the only province with an electrification program and where school transportation is provided entirely by private operators.

4.1. EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS AND THE SIZE OF TRANSPORT COMPANIES

As mentioned in the first chapter, the provinces of Ontario and Quebec contract out school transportation to private companies. Other provinces, such as British Columbia and Alberta, favour a hybrid model involving both private and public transport providers. Funding for the service comes from the provincial Ministries of Education, which transfer funds to local school boards or groups of school boards. These school boards then sign transport contracts with private companies or organize transport themselves in the case of the public model. Under the outsourcing model, transport workers are therefore employed by private transport companies.

We saw in the first chapter (Table 2) that Ontario is the province with the poorest working conditions for bus drivers, a situation that is closely linked to the subcontracting model in place in that province. In this context, improving working conditions requires the use of pressure tactics against employers, sometimes culminating in strikes or lockouts. In 2023, in Quebec, of the 121 strikes or lockouts that occurred in the private sector, around 20% involved school transportation companies (Pratte, 2024). Of these disputes, nearly half involved a major school transportation company, which controls 12% of the Quebec market. In June 2023, at the end of the school year and during negotiations for the new collective agreement, this company locked out its workers, thereby depriving them of their unemployment benefits during the summer (Confédération des syndicats nationaux, 2024). Indeed, the job of a school bus driver is seasonal and covered by the public employment insurance program.

Labour disputes in the school transportation sector tend to be more intense when large transport operators are involved. According to a Quebec trade union adviser interviewed for this study, negotiations for new collective agreements are in fact easier with small and medium-sized transport operators than with large ones, as the latter have greater financial resources to cope with a labour dispute. This trade union adviser summarizes this dynamic as follows:

“The balance of power has shifted significantly because large companies have the financial muscle to weather strikes. We saw this with the dispute at Transco in Montreal, which brought school transportation to a standstill for four months. And with Sogesco in the Eastern Townships, it was the same story. When you looked at their financial statements, the loss of revenue it caused was a drop in the ocean for them, because they’re big and their other operations were running smoothly. Whereas with family-run businesses [...], if we went on strike, it would take two or three weeks and that was it. Market concentration is a ‘game changer’ for us.” (FEESP-CSN, 2025)

The consolidation of the school transportation industry therefore appears to be a key issue for workers in the private sector, as concentration is likely to reduce their ability to secure better working conditions.

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- In 2023, 20% of strikes and lockouts in Quebec’s private sector took place in the school transportation sector.
- Nearly half of these disputes involved a single major transport operator controlling 12% of the market.
- Market concentration weakens workers’ bargaining power. Unlike SMEs, large companies have the financial resources to sustain long-running disputes.

4.2. ELECTRIFICATION: A CONSOLIDATION FACTOR?

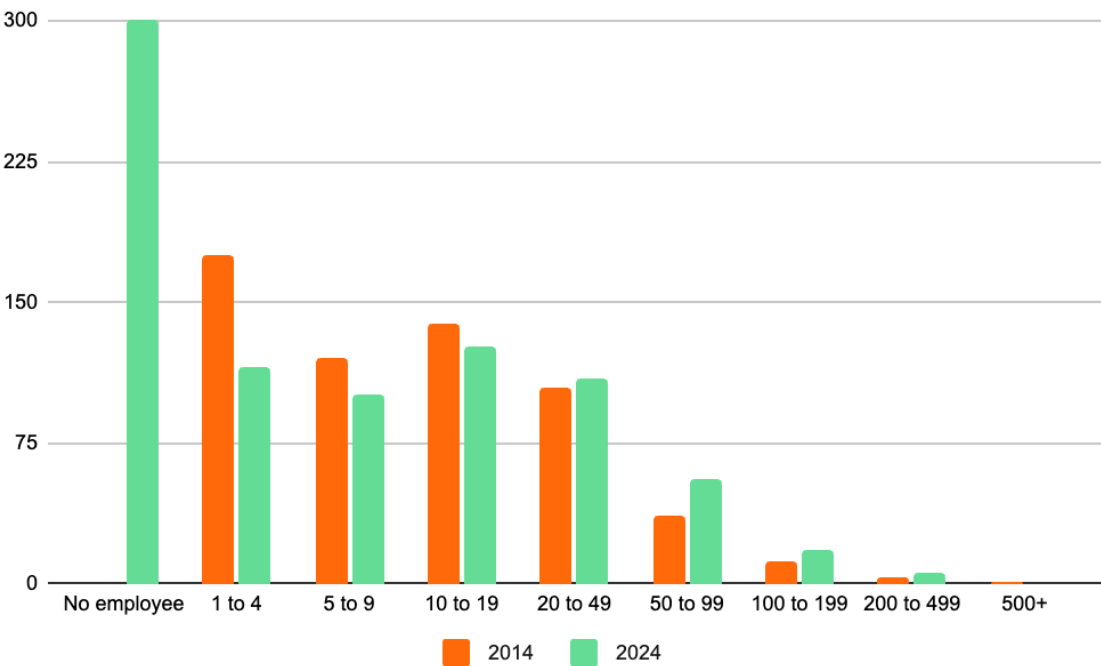
In Quebec, the size of school transportation companies varies greatly. There are both small operators running one or a few buses, and large operators—some of which are multinational companies—with fleets numbering several thousand buses.

It is important to determine, based on the case of Quebec and its electrification program, whether the introduction of ESBs contributes to increasing industry concentration. This trend towards consolidation already existed prior to the electrification of school transportation. In 2011, the Office of the Auditor General of Quebec published a report estimating that the 10 largest transport operators in the province controlled approximately 35% of the school transportation market (Office of the Auditor General of Quebec, 2011). In 2024, the relative share of the 10 largest transport operators was estimated at 40% (Pratte, 2024). The trend towards

consolidation is also evident in Ontario, which currently has no electrification program (Bedard and Pagé, 2025).

Figure 8 below shows the number of Quebec-based companies providing bus transport for pupils and employees over a 10-year period in Quebec, broken down by workforce size. There is no separate statistical category for school transportation, as this is combined with the employee bus transportation sector. Nevertheless, these data highlight a trend towards concentration in the field of pupil and employee transportation.

Figure 8: Evolution of the number of companies in the school and employee bus transportation sector by employment size group, between 2014 and 2024 in Quebec



Source: Statistics Canada, tables 33-10-0023-01 (2015) and 33-10-0716-01 (2024).

Whilst there are a significant number of SMEs, it is also clear that this figure has declined between 2014 and 2024. In 2014, there were 539 companies in Quebec employing between 1 and 49 people, compared with 451 in 2024. Conversely, the number of companies employing 50 or more people rose from 54 to 80. It is reasonable to assume that smaller transport operators have been acquired by larger companies.

The Fédération des transporteurs par autobus (FTA) of Quebec, an association representing most private school transportation operators, has compiled certain statistics regarding its members.

Table 8: Breakdown of FTA member school transportation operators in Quebec that have ceased operations since 2021, by company size

Company size	Number of operators that have ceased operations
Less than 5 vehicles	56
Between 5 and 10 vehicles	20
Between 10 and 20 vehicles	19

Source: FTA, email communication.

The FTA notes, regarding the data in Table 8, that “most were sold to other companies, so the number of school transportation operators has fallen. The reasons for the sale are not known” (Dugas, 2025).

We conducted two interviews with small transport operators in Quebec: one operating two school transportation routes using three buses, and the other operating 12 routes. In both cases, these were second-generation operators who decided to sell their businesses in the wake of Quebec’s school transportation electrification program (Gilbert and Caron, 2025). The owner of the three buses used to carry out the mechanical maintenance of his vehicles himself. The use of ESBs would have reduced his ability to maintain his fleet, due to a lack of sufficient knowledge and expertise in electromechanics. He regrets the loss of his small business, as it was deeply involved in the village where it was based. He says he had built close relationships with the pupils, something that is less common among larger transport operators due to higher staff turnover.

The transport operator running 12 routes has purchased two buses from Lion Electric. Based on its experience, it concludes that Lion Electric’s monopoly position is detrimental to its after-sales service, the quality of which is inferior to that offered by manufacturers of internal combustion engine buses. Under Quebec’s mandatory purchase program, the subsidy for the purchase of ESBs applied only to those assembled in Quebec. Lion Electric was the only company meeting this condition.

Both these transport operators were aware of several small businesses in their network that had also sold their companies to larger players in the wake of Quebec’s electrification program. A lack of understanding of the procedures and forms required to claim subsidies for the purchase of an ESB was one of the reasons for the sale. Many were also concerned about the resale value of these vehicles, given that the value of these vehicles depends largely on the condition of the batteries. Their potentially higher rate of depreciation poses a risk that is more difficult for small businesses to absorb.

We also conducted a survey of 104 transport operators in Quebec, 75% of whom believe that the school transportation market has become more concentrated in favour of larger companies. Furthermore, this survey shows that the acquisition of small

businesses by larger transport operators is driven by several factors. The primary factor cited by the transport operators surveyed relates to the investment required for electrification. This is followed by rising costs associated with internal combustion engine buses, regulatory and budgetary changes by the government, and wage increases for the workforce. A third of respondents cite the lack of successors as a major factor driving consolidation.

The survey of Quebec transport operators indicates that the risk of being forced to sell is particularly acute for small transport operators. Whilst none of the respondents from the medium and large enterprise categories mentioned facing an immediate risk of being forced to sell, nearly a quarter of the small transport operators surveyed believe they are in this situation. Table 9 presents these results in more detail.

Table 9: Breakdown of transport operators surveyed by sales risk and size

Transport operators by size	Proportion of survey respondents facing an immediate risk of being sold	Proportion of respondents facing a risk of short-term sale	Proportion of respondents not facing any risk of sale
Major operators – 100+ routes	0%	9%	63.60%
Medium-sized operators – 10 to 99 routes	0%	11.10%	55.60%
Small-sized operators – less than 10 routes	23%	23%	23%

Source: survey of 104 transport operators conducted between November 13 and 21, 2025.

Key points from this section of the chapter:

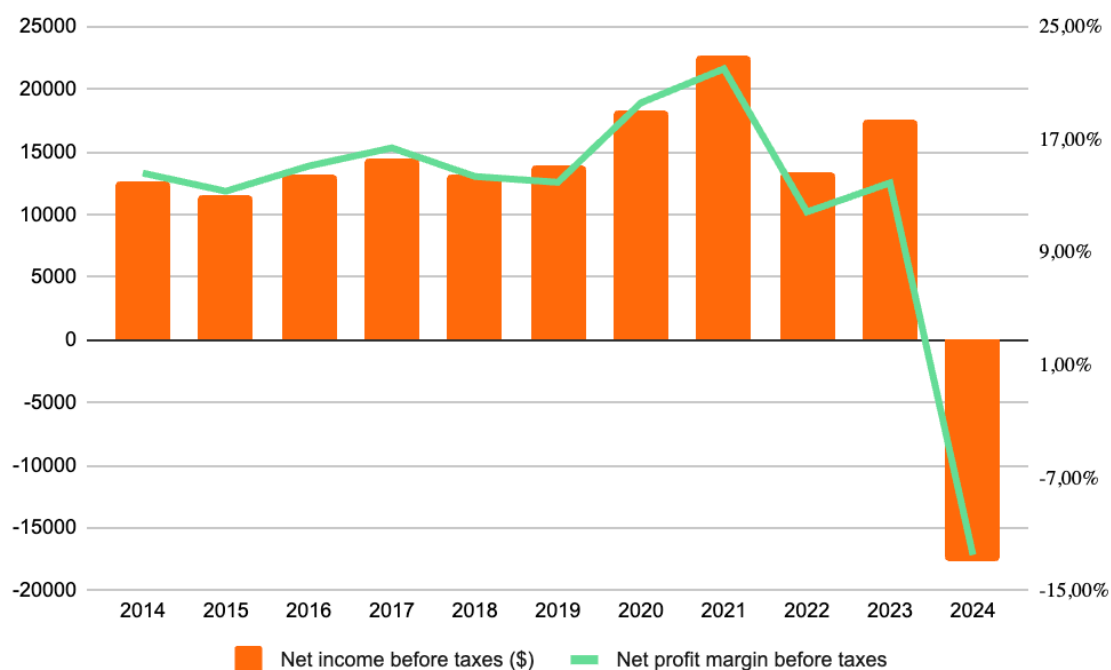
- Electrification is reinforcing an existing trend where the 10 largest transport operators now control 40% of the Quebec market. Three-quarters (75%) of the transport operators surveyed believe that the market is becoming increasingly concentrated in favour of large companies.
- Medium-sized and large companies do not fear for their survival, and nearly a quarter (23%) of small transport operators foresee an immediate risk of having to sell.
- The administrative complexity of subsidies, a lack of technical knowledge for maintenance, and uncertainty regarding the resale value of ESBs are among the factors driving SME owners to sell.

4.3. PROFIT MARGINS VERSUS WORKING CONDITIONS

As mentioned earlier, working conditions in the industry are a key concern for workers. For provinces that rely on subcontracting, the distribution of profits between drivers and mechanics on the one hand, and the companies that employ them on the other, is a recurring issue that is likely to lead to labour disputes. The working conditions prevailing in this industry have an impact on service quality, as many service disruptions result from operators' inability to attract and retain staff.

In Quebec, the argument that school transportation companies do not have sufficient financial flexibility to improve working conditions and address the labour shortage is often put forward by transport operators (Lafrance, 2021). In the absence of recent data on the profit margins of all transport operators, the following table shows the average before-tax profit margins of the largest active transport operator in Quebec. This is the only operator for which all financial data is publicly available.

Figure 9: Evolution of Transport scolaire Sogesco's financial results between 2014 and 2024



Source: Sedar+ database, compilation of Transport scolaire Sogesco's financial statements, 2014 to 2024.

Between 2014 and 2023, the average before-tax profit margin of the transport company Sogesco stood at 15.53%. The school years affected by the pandemic proved profitable for the company, which recorded a profit margin of 19.61% in 2020, followed by 22.02% in 2022. This performance is attributable to government subsidies paid through a business support program which covered 17% of Sogesco's wage costs in 2021 (Sogesco, 2022). In contrast, 2024 shows a loss. This result is due to an exceptional accounting charge:

faced with uncertainty surrounding the standards for the transition to ESBs, Sogesco had to reduce the estimated value of its intangible assets by \$39 million, primarily business assets representing the anticipated economic value of contracts, business relationships and growth prospects. This decline in value has weighed on its net balance sheet. However, its gross revenue has remained stable, up 13% since 2023 (Sogesco, 2024).

The case of the school transportation operator Sogesco demonstrates that larger transport operators may have the financial capacity to invest in service quality, primarily by improving the working conditions of their drivers and mechanics. The lack of precise data on the profit margins of smaller transport operators means that their financial situation cannot be accurately assessed.

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education commissioned an accounting study from Deloitte to determine a reasonable profit margin for the school transportation industry. The Ontario government wished to better estimate the budget allocations provided to local school boards for the funding of school transportation. Deloitte concluded in its report that, given the relatively low level of risk faced by private transport operators, a before-tax profit margin of 8% was deemed reasonable (Deloitte, 2007). School transportation, Deloitte noted, benefits from guaranteed public funding and a predictable and stable customer base. Considering this accounting opinion, the profit margins observed at Sogesco far exceed the level of profit deemed reasonable by Deloitte.

In short, a fairer distribution of the profits made by the major transport operators would, in the long run, improve working conditions and make the electrification of school transportation fairer and more socially acceptable. However, industry consolidation and the weakening of drivers' and mechanics' bargaining power vis-à-vis the major groups are undermining this objective. Consolidation is therefore becoming a trend that any fair electrification program must be able to curb.

Key points from this section of the chapter:

- Sogesco, Quebec's largest private transport operator, maintained an average before-tax profit margin of 15.53% between 2014 and 2023.
- These rates are almost twice as high as the 8% profit margin deemed reasonable by Deloitte for this industry, which carries low financial risk (with state-guaranteed revenues).
- Potential for improvement: contrary to arguments based on an alleged lack of funds, large transport companies have the necessary financial flexibility to improve working conditions, but workers have less leverage than they do with small and medium-sized transport companies.

5. Recommendations

5.1. INCREASING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN CANADIAN SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION

5.1.1. Increase the use of school transportation operated by public agencies and, where possible, reduce reliance on private transport providers.

Provinces with a hybrid or entirely private school transportation model generally offer poorer working conditions than those favouring a public model. The case of Nova Scotia, which operates under a hybrid model, is telling in this regard, as there is an 18.7% pay gap between drivers employed by a private transport operator and their counterparts hired directly by a public-school board. Conversely, the example of the Centre de services scolaires des Affluents in Quebec shows that more direct management of school transportation by a public agency can also help improve service stability: by purchasing its own buses and recruiting its drivers directly, without going through private transport operators, the organization has reportedly significantly reduced the number of service disruptions, according to a source at the Quebec Ministry of Education, notably thanks to better working relationships and improved employment conditions (Gratton, 2025). In this context, reducing outsourcing to private transport operators in favour of an increased public sector role represents a way of enhancing the fair nature of the electrification of school transportation.

This objective should not be interpreted as a uniform and rapid reduction in the number of small and medium-sized private transport operators but rather as a long-term direction to be adapted to each province's specific circumstances. The report shows that publicly owned models tend to offer better working conditions but also points out that small transport operators play a key role in maintaining a diversity of operators, ensuring a local presence, and limiting excessive concentration of economic power, which can be beneficial to workers.

We must distinguish between two timeframes. In the short term, in provinces where the sector is largely private, such as Quebec and Ontario, the priority should be to protect small and medium-sized transport operators from consolidation trends, through targeted support, training and advisory measures. In the longer term, however, these provinces could experiment with and expand certain types of public involvement.

Conversely, in provinces with a hybrid model, electrification can serve as a lever to increase the public sector's share, whilst maintaining a role for small private transport operators that meet specific regional needs. In the longer term, this approach could lead to a predominantly public model, in which outsourcing would be gradually reduced in a manner that reflects regional circumstances. Such a development would provide greater public leverage to structure training and reskilling, direct subsidies and limit consolidation within the sector. In other words, protecting SMEs and increasing the

public sector's share are not mutually exclusive if they are considered within distinct timeframes and institutional contexts.

5.1.2. Sustain and expand pilot projects involving school transportation services provided by school authorities in provinces that rely wholly or partly on the private sector and electrify their bus fleets.

Quebec has experienced recurring disruptions to school transportation services in recent years. The Ministry of Education has funded pilot projects for school transportation services operated directly by school boards. These pilot projects have helped reduce service disruptions, as better working conditions in the public sector have attracted and retained drivers. The 2025–2026 school year is the final year of this pilot project, the continuation of which is not yet guaranteed. The publicly operated school buses were purchased second-hand and are internal combustion vehicles.

These pilot projects could be made permanent by gradually providing school boards with ESBs. Quebec already provides \$240,000 in funding for the purchase of ESBs for private transport operators (Government of Quebec, 2025a). This funding could be increased and extended to school authorities. This approach could be shared and adopted by other provinces with a hybrid or entirely private model, to increase electrification.

5.2. ELECTRIFICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

5.2.1. Provide public funding to recreation and tourism establishments for the installation of charging stations for heavy-duty vehicles.

The loss of revenue resulting from the difficulty ESB drivers face in making extracurricular field trips highlights a lack of access to charging stations. Recreation and tourism facilities that host such activities should be eligible for existing grant programs, which is not necessarily the case now. In Quebec and British Columbia, a business or organization hosting visitors travelling in electric vehicles is not necessarily eligible for public subsidies, as these are primarily designed for use by employees (Government of Quebec, 2025b; BC Hydro, 2025).

5.2.2. Actively support the electrification sector through investment and consistent public communication.

Governments should continue to actively support the transport electrification sector – beyond school transportation alone – through strategic investments and consistent public communications. Given that electrification has received more critical media coverage in recent years, a clear political signal is needed to restore confidence in this transition. A strategy combining steady funding, support for innovation and information campaigns could help make the sector more attractive to the next generation, particularly young drivers, mechanics and professionals who are expected to play a key role in the energy transition.

5.3. DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ELECTRIFICATION PROGRAMS

5.3.1. Increase consultation with workers in the development and implementation of school transportation electrification programs.

Technological changes within an industry inevitably have an impact on the workforce. Interviews with school bus drivers have highlighted several blind spots in the electrification process that affect workers. Consulting them at an early stage would both help prevent certain negative consequences of electrification and increase staff support for electrification programs. The energy transition must become an opportunity to enhance the democratic nature of workplaces, and the implementation of school transportation electrification must be designed accordingly.

5.3.2. Integrate school transportation into existing federal entities and launch a parliamentary inquiry about its funding.

Rather than creating more structures, the federal government should instruct existing ones, notably Canada's Zero-Emission Vehicle (ZEV) Council, to explicitly include electric school transportation in their work. The ZEV Council was established specifically to bring stakeholders together to develop solutions to accelerate the transition to ZEVs.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities or the Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications should conduct a study on ESBs. This study would benefit from being part of a broader discussion on federal funding for transport electrification, which includes school buses, particularly in the context of discussions surrounding the Canadian Public Transit Fund and the role of ZEVs.

5.4. PREVENTING MARKET CONCENTRATION

5.4.1. Compile statistics on industry consolidation in provinces where the private sector provides all or part of the school transportation service.

Market concentration is problematic as it reduces the diversity of operators, weakens competition, limits workers' bargaining power and may lead to higher costs for public authorities. Surveys and interviews conducted with small school transportation operators in Quebec highlight the financial and operational difficulties caused by the current school transportation market (rising diesel prices and costs associated with electrification). These difficulties sometimes prompt them to sell their businesses to larger transport operators, which increases market concentration. This consolidation presents a risk to public finances, as well as reducing the bargaining power of workers vis-à-vis their employers.

Although there is ample evidence of concentration within the school transportation industry in Quebec, there is no formal system for compiling such data at the provincial level. Provinces with a hybrid or entirely private model should compile statistics on the

concentration of the industry. This exercise would make it possible to identify, understand and, ultimately, adjust electrification programs to prevent them from contributing to even greater consolidation of the industry.

5.4.2. Protect small and medium-sized transport operators by enabling owners to take part in voluntary training courses on the mechanics of heavy-duty electric vehicles, which are currently restricted to company employees.

The loss of autonomy resulting from electrification is one of the factors driving the sale of small school transportation companies. The owners of these companies are often involved in day-to-day operations, including the mechanical maintenance of their buses. Allowing business owners who wish to receive training in electromechanics to enrol in requalification programs would provide greater protection for small and medium-sized transport operators.

5.4.4. Introduce a tax credit for small transport operators who choose to electrify their school bus fleets.

Smaller transport operators find it more difficult to absorb the financial risk associated with electrification, which may contribute to their acquisition by larger operators. Following the example of various tax measures aimed at SMEs, provincial electrification programs could include an additional tax credit for the purchase of an ESB, available to operators whose vehicle fleet does not exceed a certain threshold.

Small transport operators play a key role in the school transportation ecosystem, notably by providing local services, ensuring a greater diversity of operators and fostering regional resilience, particularly in rural areas. Providing them with financial support—and offering them greater flexibility in their electrification timelines—would help reduce the pressure associated with the transition, limit market consolidation and promote a more gradual and equitable transition to electric vehicles across the country.

5.5. REQUALIFYING THE WORKFORCE

5.5.1. Include content on driving ESBs in driver training and as part of the licence renewal process.

The importance of training in driving ESBs should not be underestimated. Feedback gathered from drivers in Quebec reveals that a lack of training causes stress at work and presents a health and safety issue. Several provinces with ESBs on their roads have not adapted the basic training followed by drivers. In others, the added content relating to electrification is minimal. These shortcomings fuel a negative attitude towards electrification among drivers who are expected to learn on the job.

The requirements for becoming a school bus driver vary from province to province. Amending these requirements to take electrification into account is essential to the

success of this transition. The reskilling process must not fall solely on the shoulders of workers, nor should it rely exclusively on private or public transport operators.

5.5.2. Ensure that manufacturers of ESBs provide trade schools and transport operators with all the information required for the maintenance and repair of the buses.

The requalification of mechanics to service heavy-duty electric vehicles presents a major challenge. In addition to allocating more public funds to training programs for mechanics already in the workforce, it is important to make the information needed to repair electric buses readily available. Trainers in Quebec we met expressed their dissatisfaction in this regard and stated that the lack of information is detrimental to the quality of the training provided. Access to information from manufacturers is currently too sporadic and must be the subject of a formal public policy.

5.5.3. Provide financial support for the full requalification of mechanics.

The requalification of mechanics currently relies on pilot projects that are insufficient given the scale of the technological transformation. A lack of time and resources is preventing adequate maintenance of ESB fleets. Structural and long-term support, as well as funding for comprehensive reskilling programs (rather than pilot projects) in the mechanics of heavy-duty electric vehicles, are needed to prevent the skills shortage from slowing down electrification.

5.6. INCLUSION POLICY

5.6.1. Promote gender equality in the workplace from an inclusive perspective, drawing inspiration from measures implemented in other sectors where women are under-represented.

School bus drivers are predominantly men. The field of mechanics is even more male-dominated. A requalification program for mechanics in Quebec has, to date, has been attended only by men. The underlying causes of the under-representation of women in these sectors go beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, it contributes to the labour shortage by reducing the potential pool of workers. It is also important to consider the well-being of women in a predominantly male work environment. Such initiatives are underway in the construction sector in several provinces, where gender parity measures are being implemented and the realities faced by female workers are being studied. In Quebec, hiring a female apprentice on a construction site entitles the employer to hire one additional apprentice, beyond the set ratio of master and apprentice (Commission de la construction du Québec, 2025). This serves as an incentive to hire women. In short, such measures could be introduced drawing inspiration from policies in place in other sectors where women are under-represented.

6. Conclusion

The electrification of school buses in Canada represents a major driver of decarbonization, with the potential to eliminate over a million tons of GHGs per year, particularly in provinces with access to clean electricity. It also significantly reduces diesel-related pollutants. Beyond climate benefits, this transition generates significant health and economic benefits—improved air quality, reduced pollution-related illnesses, savings in public health costs and job creation—as well as enjoying strong public support.

This transition is taking place within a specific context in terms of working conditions and transport management models: private, public or hybrid. Among these models, the one in which school authorities directly provide the school transportation service generally offers the most favourable employment conditions, both in terms of employee benefits and hourly rates. Conversely, in a province that relies on subcontracting, electrification may contribute to industry consolidation, i.e. a reduction in the number of small and medium-sized transport operators. This phenomenon could limit workers' ability to improve their working conditions, not to mention the financial risk that consolidation poses to public finances. In this context, increasing public management of school transportation appears to be a key lever for ensuring a truly fair transition. In the medium term, such an approach would both strengthen worker support and improve service reliability, by reducing the effects of the labour shortage.

Another key issue is the requalification of this job sector. In several provinces, training in the operation and maintenance of ESBs remains inadequate. In Quebec, the drivers interviewed report significant gaps in driver training, which can be partly attributed to the lack of consultation with and involvement of industry workers in the development of electrification programs. As for the mechanics, there is also a lack of public investment in training and reskilling programs, which may compromise both health and safety and the electrification of transportation in the country. This situation is reflected in the plans of transport operators: nearly half of the private transport operators in Quebec surveyed do not plan to further electrify their fleets over the next five years.

In short, the challenges identified in this report do not result from electrification itself, but rather from the current state of school transportation, which is characterized by the prevalence of private subcontracting and underfunding. Electrification must therefore be seen as an opportunity to strengthen and modernize the school transportation sector, by improving working conditions, service quality, and the user experience.

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