

Tuesday, August 27, 2019

Greater Victoria School District, Songhees and Esquimalt Nations and BC Transit Collaborate to Improve Student Transportation

VICTORIA, B.C. – Beginning this September all grade 9-12 students living on the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations will receive a U-PASS, which will help remove transportation costs as a barrier to school attendance.

This program is a result of the BC Tripartite Education Agreement between the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia and the First Nations Education Steering Committee. The Agreement addresses meaningful systemic changes in B.C. education, including ensuring First Nations students have transportation services to BC public schools.

“Transportation is a critical element of access to education,” said Board Chair Jordan Watters. “Since the signing of the BC Tripartite Agreement, the District has been working closely with the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, the District’s Aboriginal Nations Education Division and BC Transit to ensure solutions are in place in advance of the coming school year. We’re pleased to have collaboratively developed the U-PASS program, with the goal of eliminating the transportation barriers that might prevent high school-aged youth living on the Songhees and Esquimalt Reserves from attending school. We look forward to seeing increased student participation and having more learners in our classrooms.”

The U-PASS Transportation Plan gives unlimited access on all Victoria Regional Transit routes from September 1 – August 31. The program is funded by the First Nation Student Transportation Fund, which is paid by the Federal Government to the Provincial Government, and allocated by the Ministry of Education to boards of education. The U-Pass program came into effect as a pilot project for the months of May and June and will be in full implementation in September 2019.

“We are pleased to see the U-PASS program being implemented to help eliminate transportation costs for these students,” said Susan Brice, Greater Victoria Transit Commission chair. “By removing this barrier, we are able to provide a safe and reliable transportation option for students from the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations attending high school.”

“BC Transit is proud to partner with the Greater Victoria School District, as well as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, to provide essential transportation services for high school students living on the Songhees and Esquimalt Reserves,” said Erinn Pinkerton, BC Transit President and Chief Executive Officer. “BC Transit recognizes the importance of having viable transportation options for students, and the U-PASS program helps provide them with better access to education.”

“Improving the learning outcomes of our on-reserve students is a high priority for the Nation”, shared Francine L’Hirondelle, Director of Education Services at Songhees Nation. “It is more than appreciated that the school district will be administering the U-pass program. This is a positive step moving forward with an already good working relationship with the district.”

“Safe, affordable and accessible transportation is a key component in supporting our kids to attend school, noted Trisha Chestnutt, Education and Programs Manager with Esquimalt Nation. “Our grade 9-12 students will benefit significantly from the implementation of the U-PASS.”

“This is fantastic news for the Songhees and Esquimalt Nation youth. The U-PASS program will ensure more students are able to get to school safely and reliably,” MLA for Esquimalt Metchosin Mitzi Dean. “It will also make it easier for youth to attend extra-curricular activities and access services in our community.”

The District continues to work to implement and support all elements of the Agreement, which recognizes that improving educational outcomes for First Nations students is central to the self-determination and well-being efforts of First Nations in B.C.

The BC Tripartite Education Agreement was signed on January 23, 2019. It is the first of its kind in Canada and replaces the TEFA (Tripartite Education Framework Agreement) that was signed in 2012. The Agreement benefits First Nations students, schools and communities across the province.

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