

SCHOOL BUS SERVICES — DUMBLEYUNG

Grievance

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe) [9.16 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Tourism on behalf of the Minister for Transport in relation to school bus services. The policy document for the Public Transport Authority's School Bus Services states —

In many areas, the school bus is important to the health of a town or remote community and is in many cases intrinsic to the education of students.

No truer words could be spoken. In my electorate of Roe, and in other electorates, there has been a longstanding concern over school bus services and the way bus routes are calculated. Either the policy needs to be changed or an alternative policy allowance is required. For example, in Roe, the Dumbleyung community is fighting hard to keep a small bus run so that they can maintain their school numbers in the short term, and increase the numbers in the long term. The Shire of Dumbleyung has been identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the 2016 census as having a seven per cent higher rate of growth than the wheatbelt average. At the time of the 2016 census, the Shire of Dumbleyung had 61 children under the age of four, 44 children between the ages of five and nine and many more babies on the way. This means the number of school-age children will increase significantly over the next few years.

I am very disturbed by the current policy of looking directly at only school enrolments as the predictor of school numbers and therefore school bus runs. There seems to be no logical approach to long-term strategic management of school buses. As I said in my opening statement, which, as members may recall, came straight from the School Bus Services operational guidelines, the orange bus is critical to the survival of not only the school, but also the local businesses and the community. If children go to the local school, the parents shop in town, use the doctor and hospital and come together at community events. The school, and by association the school bus, is critical to the stability of the community.

The community of Dumbleyung, although not unlike any other community in Roe, has assembled and united in its fight to keep the bus run. Although it may seem a small thing to those in the metropolitan area to lose a run with a small number of children on it, the removal of the bus run is tantamount to yet another blow to this vital community and to the demise of rural communities at large. At its recent meeting with SBS representatives, over 40 people plus their children and babies represented the community in varying guises—business, school, farming and services. All the people there were emotionally attached to the implications of the loss of the service. It was an emotional and at times confusing and frustrating meeting with the archaic policy dominating the discussion and having no bearing on the real world in the regional and rural areas. Families have expressed their frustration at the current situation and are looking at options for remaining in the community. Some are considering moving because their children cannot get on a bus. This has enormous implications for the school and the community. Imagine a school of 25 losing three children in one hit. Their access to equitable education will be withdrawn. The conveyance allowance does not provide a solution as many of the families concerned have working parents who live on farms and are unable to do a twice-daily run to school, especially during the peak seasonal times when farm labour requirements are at maximum levels.

Numbers determine the viability of a bus run. Apparently, anything below three will mean the demise of the bus run, but it takes eight children on the run to start it up again. Although numbers would seem a logical way to plan a run, it needs pointing out that even if two children were on a similar run to 10 children, it is not the number of children on the bus that determines the cost; it is the length of the bus run. Bus contractors work tirelessly to get the best outcomes for the government, the school, the parents and the carers, but mostly for the children on their run.

Other towns in my electorate of Roe are working on limited numbers and are trying desperately to keep their bus runs and, consequently, their schools. The Nyabing, Pingrup and Woodanilling communities are working tirelessly to try to come up with solutions that will fit the outdated school bus services policy so they can retain their community services. Each town has a uniquely different situation that requires planning with a realistic and commonsense approach. We need to work under the philosophy of providing equitable education for everyone in this state, not just those in the metropolitan area.

I would like to see a more strategic and commonsense approach to the planning of bus runs in rural communities. Looking ahead of the current situation is a logical and simple way of determining long-term outcomes. If the number of babies and small children in a town is increasing, it is logical to assume that they will attend the local school. Instead of planning for them not to be there, we must plan for them to be there; otherwise, we face the prospect of our rural families packing up and leaving if they have no incentive to stay. That would be a further nail in the coffin for rural communities.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Tourism) [9.22 am]: I thank the member. I apologise to the member that the Minister for Transport is unable to be here this morning to respond to his grievance. She has asked that I respond on her behalf as the minister representing the Minister for Education in this house. I must say that as someone who grew up in a small country town, attended a very small primary school and used a bus service to get to high school, I am familiar with the member's concerns. I understand the challenges that families face when sending their children to school in the regions, particularly with school drop-off and pick-up.

The current student transport assistance policy provides for a reasonable level of transport assistance to the nearest appropriate government school or non-government school of religious denomination or ethos that offers the year of study for the student. Families elect to enrol their children at schools that are not their nearest appropriate school for many reasons—these may include the curricula offered to the individual student—and although these decisions are respected, they bring with them a responsibility for parents to make their own transport arrangements. Any decision to alter the current policy for the provision of transport assistance for all students in Western Australia by allowing school of choice would be cost prohibitive. The government has to manage a balance between a reasonable level of student transport service to the community whilst operating within budget constraints. The Public Transport Authority has met with the Dumbleyung community and believes that there is enough capacity in the transport network for children from eligible families attending Dumbleyung Primary School for 2018 and beyond for future families and siblings. If enrolment numbers increase markedly in the future, the PTA will commission a new service or increase the size of buses used on the existing routes. The member for Roe should take heart because the minister will continue to monitor the situation and look for ways to improve bus services for students through a more strategic and commonsense approach.