

Eligibility

Education is an important cornerstone of a society's economic prosperity and should be supported and enabled at every effort. The current framework for transport assistance does not meet these requirements at a basic level.

Families invest heavily in their children's wellbeing and a large part of that is education, physically, emotionally as well as monetarily parents invest. A policy for a school bus service should in no way and by no means impede a family's decision around choice of educational facility nor their choice of where to live. Fundamentally the Public Transport Authority are not qualified to make education assessments and ethically they should not provide prejudice to families who choose to live regionally and educate their children at schools not immediate to their homes, as an example.

A school bus service does not operate in isolation of schools, they operate because of schools. They do not operate in isolation of families commitments such as regional businesses, employment and caring for family. Therefore there should never be any circumstance where a school bus service policy dictates where a child is educated.

Revision of the framework is grossly needed evidenced by the colloquial and continued issues arising from school bus service applications by families. Education is a basic right in a democratic society and should most definitely not be dictated to by a school bus service, which in far too many cases it currently is.

To have applications declined because of negligible distance to an alternative bus stop or school has got to stop, on all levels.

Having school buses drive directly by a student's home and not stop, is preposterous.

Having families told their 4 yr old must stand on a main road and navigate catching a bus with loaded road trains has got to stop.

Having families have to reduce their hours of employment because they cant reconcile with putting their 5 year old through a long bus commute most metropolitan workers wouldn't accept.

Our regional schools often can provide a culture and sense of community that many families actively seek out. A credit to the school, the support by parents of regional schools provides much needed economic in-situ support for communities and as such to know of examples where school bus services have made it untenable for families to continue to support their local primary school and change schools, change sports commitments, shopping habits all contribute to disrupting a community's prosperity. Its atrocious a provider of transport for children to education can have such a disruptive negative impact to a wider community and on top of that blatant disregard of their impact.

Types

Provision of transport to education is a fundamental cornerstone to living regionally and as such should be seen as an enabler not an inhibitor. Assumptions made by a distanced department, divorced from the needs of its actual 'customer' is wrong. The lack of understanding of routes, stop locations, road conditions lead to waste in resources, overpayments and a loss of common sense. Stakeholders need to be engaged more directly, prior to decisions being made and the local government cannot be the only stakeholder, given they have no direct connection to any school a bus service would be delivering too, coupled with the similar bureaucratic mindset.

Relevance of Policies

Clearly the need for this very review showed that the relevance of current policies is trivial at best and negligible at worst.

The practise of enabling education in communities in locations who are so varied cannot be archaically fitted into policies which are not human centred. There are families with the capacity to travel to bus stops and those that aren't. Families where all eligible adults work full time. Towns and regions with industries that make many roads unsafe for school bus stops in locations assessed by local government as having 'good visibility' but not accounting for the size or speed of the vehicles that use those roads.

A school bus service provides transport for children, ultimately for education that is compulsory, yet the mis-aligned policies create more stress and pressure for families who can already feel like they aren't afforded equal access to basic services such as education afforded to their counterparts in metropolitan regions. The service is dealing with humans, so the policy needs to be steeped in human centred outcomes not length of spurs and distance between stops.

This review will no doubt receive many factors to consider but imperative to the assessment of those factors is the timeliness and thoroughness of change following 31st August 2022.

Assessment process of stops and routes

Having only recently become a new school parent I grossly underestimated the onerous impact applying for a school bus stop would have. I was encouraged to submit my application with plenty of time, good advice from one parent, as it took 64 business days to advise that our location request had been rejected. No clear pathway for re-application or appeal, and it took an additional 5 months for the matter to be resolved to a satisfactory level, well after the school year had started. Absolutely no consideration was taken into the age of the child and the safety of the alternate stop proposed. Calls and discussions held resulted in proposals for catching other buses from other stops that went to other schools 50kms further away. If it wasn't affecting small children, it would be laughable.

With what is a completely reasonable request I was aghast at the time, effort and complete mind mess it would be dealing with the bureaucracy. Then that it was largely when I explored other peoples' experiences 'accepted' as the norm was so disappointing. To hear of story after story of people reducing work hours, quitting work, uprooting children, moving towns because of a school bus service which should be supporting families, but wasn't, was frankly disgusting.

Resourcing of the department

To not have a transparent picture of how the current department is resourced my following comments are ignorant, yet personal experience tells me the current structure and resourcing is not working well for families or children. Clearly by so many examples of absurdity in decisions it shows that regionality is paramount to the future of a successful framework with relevant policy supporting it. The new and improved policy and framework that will hopefully birth from this review has to include resourcing that is based regionally, engages with stakeholders at a school level to be able to accurately inform routes, stops and enable schools to utilise their resources well by allowing families who want to use a particular school to easily travel to that school. At this point I would like to repeat that the local government is not a suitable nor should be primary stakeholder in determination of stops and routes as the process clearly shows that there is very little consideration for the children and families impacted.

Conveyance allowance vs transport assistance

An alternative to transport assistance must be very carefully and delicately considered. We have in our society now many families using dual incomes or both working full time in a business to maintain living standards and build families and businesses in regional areas. The archaic metric of only one primary income earner is outdated, therefore, to assume that a parent or family can be adequately rewarded for that loss of wage/profit, superannuation and entitlements is not appropriate.

In regions this is very important to be able to capture as much income and profit into regional communities, having families spend money where they live is important. An allowance can quite directly significantly reduce a family's household income earning potential – to complete a task that should be for public good – the sound and solid education of our children.

Applications need to be more holistic in uncovering family need, as some families would volunteer to travel to stops and complete this multiple times a day to support an education choice and be willing to do so. Other families may not have this capacity. Far too many assumptions were made in applications, and it has come to light whilst talking to other parents this experience isnt isolated.

To make an assumption that parents are able to travel distance to another bus stop was ignorantly prejudice. The assumption that an employer would support time away from my contracted employment to complete a task of which is the primary goal of a school bus service was arrogant of a department towards their primary customer. The issue of businesses being able to source staff during these current times is widely reported. The flow on effect of this is that many businesses look in house to resource their labour gap, which means traditional reliance on parents to 'fill the gap' of a school bus service is not an option for many and shouldn't be assumed by the service.

It is clear that dynamic forward thinking is required to drag the current state of the service up to level that is required to support our regions, our schools, their families and children.

Many times, in many circumstances it can be said we shouldn't 're-invent the wheel', but given the current state of things, maybe this time we really should.