

Inquiry into the Student Transport Assistance Policy framework

Addressee: Public Accounts Committee

Education is a basic human right to which every child is entitled to. It is a parent's prerogative to send their child to (what they deem to be) the most appropriate school so that their child receives the best education possible. Decisions by Governmental bodies are prohibiting parents from making decisions that are in the best interest of our children and our communities.

I'm Renee Jenkin a mother of 2 children [REDACTED] and I have had an uphill battle with School Bus Services since my eldest child commenced education at Mukinbudin District High School in 2019.

We first applied for Student Transport Assistance in 2018 for the 2019 school year. It wasn't long before we realised just how outdated, unrealistic and quite frankly absurd the eligibility criteria in which each child's eligibility was determined. We were deemed "ineligible" for gate service (even though the current bus route already came within 5.5km of our residence) for several reasons, mainly because our child was not enrolled in his nearest appropriate school (Beacon Primary School) and because he/she was not enrolled in compulsory education (as a Kindy student). Nothing could be done to change this decision (according to School Bus Services) however we were encouraged to re-apply at the end of the year (2019) for the 2020 school year – as then our child would be enrolled in mandatory education (as a Pre-Primary student) and therefore further meeting another of the eligibility criteria to potentially receive "gate service".

Based on the recommendation from School Bus Services, we re-applied late in 2019 for Transport Assistance and more specifically "gate service" for our child who would be enrolled in mandatory education as a Pre Primary student (2020 school year) however once again it was determined we were "ineligible" purely because we were not sending he/she to the nearest school, Beacon Primary School.

As a result of this ruling, we had no other alternative but to drive our child (now children) to the "nearest approved bus terminus" as advised by School Bus Services – 22km per day just to get on and off the bus on top of the bus trip itself. We have received a "Complementary Passenger" status – in short this means that we did not (and still do not) have guaranteed access to transport to and from school; should the bus service reach capacity and or another eligible student/s require transport we will have our access revoked. We continue to do the commute every day so that our children have access to the most appropriate education.

Under “normal” circumstances families can apply for travel assistance in which you are compensated (remunerated) per kilometre, if you travel more than 2.5km for your child/ren to access a School Bus Service; that being said, as we were/are not sending our child to the closest school (as pre-determined by School Bus Services) we were/are ineligible to receive this also.

My husband & I farm in the Mukinbudin Shire (60km North of Mukinbudin). We have always lived & worked in Mukinbudin and are active community members, we also (both) attended Mukinbudin District High School for the majority of our education (Kindy to Year 10). Furthermore, my husband and all his siblings all accessed the same school bus service at what is now our residence for more than 15 years – the “bus stop area” as such, still exists however as there was a 10-year period in which the terminus was not in use School Bus Services decommissioned the “bus stop”.

In the interest of supporting continuous education the ideology of sending a child to one school for the duration of their primary schooling and another for their high schooling purely because they are being denied reasonable transport services is ridiculous; especially given we have absolutely nothing to do with the Beacon community. It is our right to choose where our children receive their education and that right is not unreasonable given the precedent that has been set (a bus service that has serviced our geographical area for in excess of 35 years!). Not to mention the nearest Bus Service to Beacon Primary School doesn't come within 20km of our home. As a taxpayer I would not be happy to for my hard-earned money to be wasted on old policy and criteria in which these decisions are based on, when there is an obvious more cost effective solution. We live, work & play in our local community, why should we not be able to send our children to our local school?

Furthermore, when the powers at be (Government) closed the Wialki Primary School back in 1980 due to a then decline in population in the area, it was guaranteed (formally in writing) that all children who would have otherwise attended the school (in the “catchment area”), would be assured gate service by School Bus Services and an express route to Mukinbudin made as compensation.

Given the recent “baby boom” and return of families (sons and daughters) to their respective family farms in the Mukinbudin area and the school (Mukinbudin District High School) having the largest number of students enrolled for the last decade; this is going to be an ongoing issue, particularly in our area (North Wialki).

In addition, there are another two families within 15km of us with another 5 children who are also dealing with this issue. We will continue to have this problem until all of our eldest children reach high school age - then we will receive eligibility as Mukinbudin is the only high school within a 140km radius.

Currently we have four families with a combined total of seven children (nine by the 2023) who all access the school bus at the one terminus. Under normal circumstances this would be considered to be “manageable” solution. What isn’t taken into consideration is, that “terminus” is one of the main “gateways” or “access points” to a family’s rural property. It is regularly frequented by heavy agricultural and construction machinery – utes, motorbikes trucks, tractors, boom sprays, graders, loaders and livestock – sheep, horses, goats and cattle. How is that a safer, more appropriate alternative to extending a pre-existing bus route so that children can access a service in which they are entitled to? As this is the only option for our children to access transport to and from school for the time being, we cannot/have not requested a change of bus stops for fear of School Bus Services revoking our access altogether, due to our complementary passenger status.

Many of the busses that currently service the Mukinbudin area are at capacity with only more children requiring bus services in the immediate future.

There needs to be a complete restructure of the Student Transport Assistance Policy framework and School Bus Services. Including but not limited to:

- (a) the eligibility criteria for students to qualify for transport assistance, including:
 - i. nearest appropriate school;
 - ii. access to spurs; and
 - iii. inclusion of social, community, and economic and financial factors;
- (b) the types of transport assistance and entitlements to be provided to ensure students can undertake an appropriate education;
- (c) the relevance of existing policies, practices and rules that are applied in delivering the transport assistance arrangements;
- (d) the assessment process when evaluating the safety of bus stops and routes.
- (e) mandatory consultation between local education providers (schools), School Bus Services and Service providers (contractors) to accurately survey and determined the number of children accessing the service now and into the future.

It is apparent that this is not an isolated issue however it is one that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.