

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework.

Please find the following response to the defined terms of this inquiry.

The Public Accounts Committee will inquire into the current Student Transport Assistance Policy framework within the current budget parameters, in particular:

*a) the eligibility criteria for students to qualify for transport assistance, including:
i. nearest appropriate school;*

1. Students should be deemed as an eligible student for their local school in the town/community/district they reside.

- Current policy states that a student is only deemed eligible to attend their nearest school by distance. This has had negative outcomes for those students who may reside closer to the next towns or communities' school, but do not belong to that town or community.
- Current policy is forcing children to be removed from their local community to attend school.
- Forcing children to attend schools outside of their local area (due to the current distance measured formula) increases isolation for students and families from their own community resulting in increased mental health issues and separation from important social and emotional community connections.
- Not allowing children a bus service to attend their local school has negative effects on school numbers, which may lead to the closure of these small rural schools. The flow on effects of this is detrimental to families, community members and students. Farmers will not be able to employ workers if there is no school available and businesses will be affected. Permanent community families will be broken up when one parent must move away to access schooling.
- This change to policy will ensure that students can attend their local school and maintain social and emotional connections with their local community, peers, and social groups.
- *I will share my story to give context to how the current policy is negatively effecting families. On 12th November 2020, my son [REDACTED] was denied a permanent spot on the Munmlinup School Bus run. It was stated that [REDACTED] was not attending the nearest "appropriate" school and that Jerdacuttup Primary School was the more "appropriate" school for [REDACTED] to attend as it is 3km closer than Munmlinup Primary School.
However, it is evident that Munmlinup Primary School is the more appropriate school for my son to attend. We are permanent residents of the Munmlinup community and have been for 13yrs on our family farm. We are very active in the local community, belonging to many community groups, including the Munmlinup Fire Brigade, Munmlinup Community Group, Munmlinup CWA, Munmlinup Mothers*

Group and currently holding the position of Treasurer for the Munmlinup P&C. Our family does not have these strong community ties in Jerdacuttup Community as we do not live in Jerdacuttup.

██████ has been attending Munmlinup Primary School for the past 2yrs, he is currently enrolled in ██████ and is due to commence full time in ██████. He has excelled in his schooling at Munmlinup Primary, as well as in after school sports he attends in Munmlinup. His confidence and self-belief have grown since attending this school and he has formed very close social and emotional connections within the school and the Munmlinup community.

Our other son ██████ has been attending school-based playgroup at the Munmlinup Primary School in 2021 and will be due to commence his schooling at Munmlinup Primary in ██████

Both of our children will be attending Munmlinup Primary School over the next 11yrs.

It has been suggested that Jerdacuttup would be the more "appropriate" school for our children as it is 3km closer than Munmlinup Primary School. It is very upsetting to be denied a bus service because we are sending our son to our local primary school in Munmlinup and not sending him to a whole different community, where we do not live.

The effects that this denial of a permanent spot on a bus service due to 3km are huge for our family. It would mean a 2hr daily commute each day to drop and pick up my children from children from school. This is not sustainable for any family, especially for families where both parents work. Without a bus service to Munmlinup Primary School I will be forced to quit my part time job as a Registered Nurse. This putting financial stress on our family and effecting the community members of the Ravensthorpe Shire. This would also lead to the loss of my nursing registration as I will not be able to complete the required clinical hours in order to maintain my registration

I am very concerned for the emotional and mental wellbeing of my son ██████ if we are forced to remove him from Munmlinup and send him to another community's school. He will no longer have the opportunity to attend after school activities and sport in Munmlinup, and the strong connections he has formed in the Munmlinup community will be broken. My husband and I will also have to step down our roles in the different Munmlinup Community Groups as we will not be able to attend meetings in Munmlinup in the afternoons due to our son attending school in another community. This will affect the mental health of my husband and I, as these social and community ties are especially important to us in an already isolated environment.

2. If a student who resides in a community/town lives closer by distance to the next community/town school, they should have the choice in which to attend their local school or attend the closer school. They should be deemed eligible to attend both schools and be given access to a bus service.

- This will allow those families who live a significantly closer distance to a neighbouring community/towns school the choice to send them to that school.
- To attend the local school may be a much longer commute and therefore be more appropriate to attend the neighbouring school.
- Extended driving time also leading to possible MVA as witnessed multiple times this year.
- Additional time on buses lead to student fatigue which will affect student's ability for homework and after school physical activity.

ii. access to spurs; and

1. Consultation with families, schools and contractors to ensure that every child receives a fair service, bus route and bus stop.

- Including community consultation, open meetings and reviews with all stakeholders regularly and when circumstances change (e.g. New students).

2. Spurs should not be limited to 5km but should reflect the local needs to aim to get all children picked up from their gate.

- Some family's driveways are already 5kms long.
- Families should not be disadvantaged as they may live further away than other families on a bus route.

3. If a new student arrives that now lives the furthest from the school, then either spurs should be extended or new bus routes be developed to ensure that this student also receives either a gate pick up or a very close bus stop. Every child should receive a fair service.

- Families should not be disadvantaged as they may live further away than other families on the bus route.

iii. inclusion of social, community, and economic and financial factors;

1. Bus services should not be determined by a minimum number of passengers.

- Current policy states, in most circumstances, the minimum number of students required for a school bus service is 8 students.
- This number does not consider current students that are deemed 'complimentary'. Therefore, I believe complementary status should be removed.
- Rural schools, towns and communities often see peaks and troughs in student numbers. Having a minimum number of students to run a service each year does not take into account the future of schools and future enrolments.
- Removing buses due to low numbers one year, can have detrimental effects on future enrolments as families may believe that they will not have access to a bus, and may not enrol their child into school.
- Having no bus service will also act as a deterrent for new families to move to town or gain employment on farms.
- Rural and remote families already face so many barriers to accessing education, that with a requirement for minimum numbers of school students to 'justify' the provision of a bus service, means that those children that require a school bus won't have access to these services.
- This is also applicable when one bus may not be enough to cater for all students due to the distance it must travel to service all students. For example, if a bus has 8 students on it but must travel an exceedingly long distance to pick up 2 of those students, then a second bus should be made available for those students. This would benefit all of the 8 students, by reducing travel time and distance.
- Having additional buses and bus routes for say 3 or 4 children reduces the likelihood of bus driver fatigue and the suffering of children on long bus rides.
- Increasing bus numbers to reduce long commutes will also create more jobs in small communities with few current employment opportunities.

2. Bus service provision must take into account future school enrolment projections.

- The health and longevity of rural schools is essential.
- SBS needs to work with the Education Department to ensure that rural schools are kept alive and supported.
- SBS need to collaborate with schools, families and communities to ensure that school numbers do not reduce as a result of the unavailability or inappropriate school bus services (e.g. Long commutes for children as there is only 1 service).
- Reduced enrolments due to a reduced or no bus service will see school closing down completely, leading to loss of employment (teachers) and families having to be split up to access education.

3. If a bus service is removed from a town/community, it must be reinstated when the demand is increased and not just be given conveyancing allowance.

c) the relevance of existing policies, practices and rules that are applied in delivering the transport assistance arrangements;

- The current policy states
 - o 9.5. Consultation and Communication The process of reviewing either a single service route or an area review of multiple service routes will be conducted in an open and transparent way. SBS will in engage; School Bus Advisory Committees (parent representative groups), Contractors and schools to ensure all affected parties are provided with the opportunity to discuss any concerns.
- I do not believe that SBS are operating according to this policy and are not operating transparently.
- I have had firsthand experience of the lack of communication and lack of transparency from SBS.
- On the 10th March 2021, the Munglinup Parents received an email stating the two Munglinup bus services were at risk of closing for 2022. The parents and community were deeply concerned and the Munglinup P&C, myself and other community members all wrote to the PTA Manager at School Bus Services on 13th May with our concerns. He did not reply to any of our letters. We then received another letter on 21st May stating they were instead considering amalgamating our services.
We heard nothing further from SBS after this. SBS Operations Manager visited Esperance (travelling through Munglinup) on 16th June, he did not contact us to let us know or offer us a meeting.
On August 13th, after receiving no communication from SBS, the Munglinup P&C wrote another letter to the Operations Manager. This letter requested a meeting with SBS to discuss these pending changes. We received a reply stating that SBS had had a meeting in Munglinup in March with the previous school principal and bus contractors and would not be returning again this year. After receiving the email, the P&C were advised that this was a confidential meeting and the principal and contractors were not allowed to discuss this with parents or the community. Community members, families and parents were not told of this meeting and still to this day do not know what was discussed at this meeting. This meeting also took place before parents were advised of the potential cancellation of our bus service in May.
To this day the PTA Manager SBS has not replied to the emails that were sent and the Munglinup P&C had not received any further written communication from SBS.
- This shows a complete lack of transparency and open communication when reviewing services.
- The Munglinup community has also had absolutely no opportunity to discuss our concerns with School Bus Services by not having our letters replied to and being denied any meetings with SBS.

1. SBS must have open and honest communication and consultation with local families, communities, contractors and schools when SBS are considering or planning to make any changes to current or future bus services. This must also include the opportunity for all parties to voice their concerns for any changes.

- All stakeholders must be honestly and openly communicated with by SBS prior to any changes to bus services.
- There needs to be a continual flow of communication during these reviews.
- SBS needs to work together with communities, families, contractors and schools to find resolutions that work in the best interest for all parties.
- SBS must work with communities, families and schools to ensure the health and longevity of rural schools, these schools are the lifeline of rural communities and need to be supported to stay open.
- School Bus Services need to consider the challenges that our rural students face and work together with the community to ensure more direct routes to reduce travel time and ensure that all students have access to the service. Without a collaborative approach and considering each family and each rural community's circumstances it is our children that will suffer in the long run.

d) the assessment process when evaluating the safety of bus stops and routes;

1. SBS must consult with communities, parents and contractors who know the conditions of roads as seasons change to develop safe bus routes and bus stops that meet the needs of all students and families.

- It is the local community that have the best understanding of local roads and conditions during different seasons.
- Conditions of roads change, especially unsealed roads, change greatly during the seasons. This may mean that a service that usually takes 90 minutes to get to school in summer may take a lot longer during winter. This needs to be taken into account when SBS are only providing one bus to service multiple students over a large area.
- Open community meetings regarding the safety of bus routes, stops and the condition of roads needs to happen regularly. The local shire should also be involved in these meetings.
- Local shire road reports can be obtained with updates on road conditions, these should be read regularly and communicated to parents, e.g. changes to conditions for unsealed roads and closures.

h) the appropriateness of the conveyance allowance as an alternative to transport assistance.

- One of the greatest disadvantages that rural and remote families face in order to gain access to education is cost. The cost of transporting children to school and the cost of transporting children to other communities to access extracurricular activities and sports carnivals can be quite significant to families.
- The current conveyancing allowance does not cover even a small amount of the cost to transport children to school.
- Conveyancing allowance does not always reflect or meet the needs of rural families who rely on the provision of a school bus service.
- In this current age many rural and remote families and businesses require both parents to work, whether that is both working for family businesses or one parent having to travel off site for work.
- Due to the long distances that many families reside from the local school, and the distances some parents will have to drive to work. Having no access to a bus service and having to drive kids to school could mean parents have to spend upwards of 2hrs a day in transporting kids.
- This means many parents will have to give up work. Putting a huge financial burden on families.
- Rural and remote families do not have the option to access public transport like those in bigger towns and cities. They rely on the provision of the orange school bus.
- Giving up work also has a huge impact on the local economy and services in small towns and communities, e.g. losing skilled medical professionals and essential workers.

- *Personally, I work as a registered nurse and service the local Ravensthorpe Shire. I already must travel upwards of 150km a day to attend work. I could not possibly spend another 140km a day to drive my son to school. I would have to quit my job, as a medical professional in a rural area that are already struggling to find medical professionals. As well as placing financial stress on our family.*

- 1. Conveyancing allowance should be a last resort when all options to provide a school bus service have been exhausted.**
- 2. For those with a conveyancing allowance, when demand increases, or circumstances change students must receive a bus service over an allowance.**
- 3. The rate for conveyancing allowance needs to be reviewed and reflect the true cost of transporting children to school.**
- 4. Complementary students should be entitled to conveyancing allowance.**

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. I do hope that this inquiry is able to make positive changes to the current student transport assistance policy. I believe that the policy must reflect the current needs of rural families, communities and schools. It should not enable School Bus Services, wherever possible, withdrawing services from schools and communities, rather it should be about supporting rural schools, families and children to access education. Rural students deserve the same educational opportunities that urban students receive.

Our children are the future and we need to ensure that they supported and given every opportunity to excel in life.

Thank you

Kendall Wickstein

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