

Inquiry into the Student Transport Assistance Policy framework

WA DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION (WADHSAA) SUBMISSION

Introduction

The Western Australian District High School Administrators' Association (WADHSAA) represents Principals and Deputy Principals in District High Schools and other rural schools across the state. District High School leaders have worked with School Bus Services (SBS) since inception, and have a deep, positive relationship with both the Public Transport Authority (PTA) and bus contractors in rural areas. WADHSAA recognises the need for, and values the services provided by, orange buses in regional areas and the contribution that they provide to rural communities.

WADHSAA has several concerns around current policy settings for SBS, and the impact that these policies have on the viability of schools in rural areas. These concerns include:

- The ease of access for complimentary passengers on SBS services, and the impact that this can have on local schools;
- Provision of bus services to some non-government schools, especially where these are many kilometres from the rural community that they transport from;
- Specific exemptions that are not clearly defined and create inequitable access from communities in rural areas;
- Providing for local consultation without unnecessarily imposing on the workload of school leaders;
- Incident management and the planning to ensure safety of students on buses.

The provision of bus services imposes a significant cost to the state. This cost is definitely justified by the quality outcomes that students achieve in rural schools. It is important, though, that the resources are not used to undermine the viability of rural schools and communities.

Context

District High Schools are mainly situated in rural towns, located from Wyndham in the north, to Ravensthorpe in the south. Almost all District High Schools have students transported into the school by SBS buses, some of whom travel up to ninety minutes each way to their school. The specific circumstances of each District High School is different, but many District High Schools have catchment areas that exceed three thousand square kilometres. Because of demographic

changes in rural areas over the past four decades, enrolments in many District High Schools have declined from their peak.

Principals and Deputy Principals in District High Schools work hard to ensure that the curriculum provided to students at the school meets Western Australian curriculum requirements defined by the Schools' Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA). Meeting the needs of all students at the school can be a challenge. The viability of District High Schools is vital to communities, and the ability to plan for and manage enrolments is important for this viability.

Complimentary Passengers

In some cases, a government school other than the local community school provides a specific program that meets the identified need of a particular student. This may mean that the student needs to travel to the other school to access this program. For these students, providing access to an SBS bus as a complimentary passenger is justifiable.

In many cases, however, complimentary passenger status is provided to students for reasons other than the above, and in some cases for very trifling reasons. In accepting these students as complimentary students, the PTA is effectively devaluing the service provided by the local school, and the net impact has led in some cases to the cancelation of curriculum programs at the local school. This also applies to students who wish to access a non-government school in a similar vein.

Complimentary passengers should only be accepted where there is a justifiable educational reason for the provision of that status. In some cases, that may include social or emotional issues that are relevant for the child.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That applications for complimentary passenger status are only approved where a specific educational reason is provided, and the stated reason is supported by both the local school and the target school. Appeal mechanisms through the local Regional Office can apply.

Exclusive Bus Services to Non-government schools

Parents often wish to access a religious education for their child, and so may wish to send their child to a school other than their local government school. In many rural towns, government and non-government schools are located within the same town. In these circumstances, the net cost of providing buses to the two or more different schools within the town can be justified on choice grounds.

Currently, though, some SBS services are provided to transport students to private schools many kilometres from the town. Approximately \$8 million is required each year to transport

students from their local community exclusively to non-government schools, sometimes more than fifty kilometres away. This is an inefficient use of taxpayer's money and leads to a residualisation of the school in the local community. The Public Transport Authority should not facilitate the development of negative educational outcomes for students who choose to remain in the local community. The provision of bus services to non-government schools should only be provided where the non-government school is situated in the same locality as the local school, and those students can share the same bus as government school students.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the current policy of providing transport to the nearest independent or Catholic school be scrapped, and the policy changed to providing transport to the nearest government school, or a local non-government school in the same town.

Special Exemptions

Special exemptions can be provided to students to access School Bus Services, most often on religious grounds. WADHSAA supports the provision of religious exemptions, however these have been used in the past in circumstances where the family concerned does not practice the specified religion and is not intending to do so. Some evidence should be provided by the family that the exemption they are seeking is genuinely related to their family's practices and circumstances.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That applications for special exemptions require supporting evidence such as a letter from the local priest or pastor.

Local Consultation

Public Transport Authority policies in relation to the management of School Bus Services have changed over the years, and in most cases these policy changes have been positive. Removing the requirement for school bus committees has been helpful for Principals and Deputy Principals, and there is no appetite from District High School leaders to reinstate these, or to have formal consultative structures in place for managing school bus routes in schools. Nevertheless, there is sometimes a need for local consultation in regards to bus routes and other issues. Local knowledge of road conditions, farm size and family needs may assist in establishing bus routes that are more relevant to the context of the locality where the service is situated.

Minimising spurs provides a smoother and shorter bus journey for most students, and this should be a general principle in the development of bus routes, even where this may mean the need to pay a conveyance allowance. In some cases, these are necessary and provide access that would otherwise not be afforded to the particular students, however the policy prescriptions around these should be clear and the general principle should apply in most situations.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That a process be established for local consultation that does not require significant time investment from school staff.

Incident Management

Ensuring safety of students on school buses is paramount in their operation. School buses have a proud history in this regard, with no student having been killed in a school bus accident. This is a wonderful record and all efforts should be made to preserve it.

Incidents on school buses can include any of the following:

- A single vehicle accident involving the bus;
- A crash involving two or more vehicles;
- Bushfires that can impact on a bus route or endanger students before entering or exiting the bus;
- Pedestrian collisions where a student is entering or exiting the bus;
- Incidents on a bus that has the capacity to impact on the safety of the bus, for example an agitated child who becomes violent;
- Breakdowns, collisions with wildlife, and other incidents that may impact on normal bus travel.

In many cases these incidents can occur many kilometres from a town, and may be in a poor communication zone. These incidents can impact on individual students, families, and the broader school community.

Currently, contractors are required to have appropriate plans in place to mitigate and deal with these incidents, however it is not clear what auditing of these plans is undertaken by the PTA, or how these plans are communicated to stakeholders such as schools and the Local Emergency Management Committees. The management of school bus incidents is the responsibility of contractors and the PTA and this clearly needs to remain the requirement. There are also, though, impacts in schools that need to be managed within the school, so a clear delineation of responsibilities between the PTA, the Department of Education and schools, with templates for managing incidents, needs to be developed.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the PTA ensures robust auditing of incident management plans, and that these plans are made available to schools and Local Emergency Management Committees.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the PTA and the Department of Education develop protocols and procedures to ensure effective communication between agencies, contractors and schools in the event of an incident.