

Student Transport Assistance Policy Framework

Inquiry

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School Bus Contractors

a) Eligibility criteria for students to qualify for transport assistance

i. Nearest appropriate school;

At present a student who resides more than 4.5kms from their nearest appropriate school is eligible for a school bus service subject to certain conditions.

I believe that any student in rural areas who lives on the route travelled by the school bus, should be classed as an Eligible Student, and allowed to be picked up by that bus. Even if they live within 4.5kms from the school.

If a student lives on or near an existing Bus Run, that student should be able to catch the bus and be classed as an Eligible Student, even if the school they attend is not the nearest appropriate school.

We have cases where a student is an Eligible Student for lower primary years, then they transfer to a school in another town, by catching a connecting bus, to attend an upper Primary school, followed by years 7 to 10 at a High School, and they are classed as Complimentary passengers.

Then when they are in Years 11 and 12 at the same school, and travelling on the same buses, they are classed as Eligible Students once again.

There are no bus services leading to what would be their nearest appropriate school, and they live further than 4.5kms from any other bus service

In these situations, they should be classed as Eligible Students for all years of study.

In another instance, we had students who we were told should be attending Wagin School as it was their nearest appropriate school. However, the road suggested by School Bus Services leading to that school was not an all weather road, and had signs at the start of the road stating the road was not to be used when wet. The local Shire confirmed this on enquiry.

ii. Access to spurs;

Any Student who is attending their Appropriate School should be eligible to have a spur of any reasonable distance, so long as the length of the Bus Run does not exceed 90 minutes loaded.

At present you cannot get a spur extension on an existing spur.

This is an outdated policy and creates hardship in some cases, by causing parents to travel excessive distances to meet the School Bus.

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

Most rural families use a particular town for shopping, banking and rural services.

In most cases these are the same towns where the students attend school.

By sticking rigidly to the nearest appropriate school principal, School Bus Services is not taking into consideration the social and community factors.

In the majority of cases, there is no additional cost involved in allowing the students in i. above to be classed as Eligible Students.

b) The types of transport assistance and entitlements to be provided to ensure students can undertake an appropriate education;

The current types of assistance for rural students are School Bus transport or Conveyance Allowance.

The eligibility rules for School Bus Transport need to be more flexible to meet the needs of a rural population – eg; Eligible vs Complimentary students, Spurs and Route alterations.

The Conveyance Allowance is also too low. A car cannot be run on the amount paid by the Department for Conveyance Allowance.

Students undertaking S.I.D.E. studies should be allowed to use the school bus to attend schools and be classed as Eligible Students even if they are only travelling on the bus one or two days per week.

The current rule that you have to use the bus at least 60% of the time to be classed as Eligible, is not fair and equitable, and should be changed.

In some cases, students request to be picked up at a stop that was used several years ago, and has not been used for some time.

School Bus Services should recognize these Historic pick up locations and also Spurs when assessing requests for Transport Assistance.

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

As stated previously, the rules around regularity of use should be revised to allow S.I.D.E. Students, and those who may not need to use the school bus on a nearly full time basis, such as V.E.T. students, or due to medical reasons, to be classed as Eligible Students, and not Complimentary.

In some cases, School Bus Services does not take into account local knowledge when assessing the size of buses at bus replacement time.

I know of cases where 39 to 41 seat buses were required to be purchased by contractors when the contractor knew from experience that less than 10 students per day would use the service. Their knowledge was ignored.

In another instance, where a tender for a new contract was requested, The required bus size was a 27 seater.

On querying the school to be serviced, I was told that there would not be more than 12 students on the service, but was also told that a smaller bus would not be accepted. This cost additional money to provide the service.

In this same tender, it was requested that the bus turn around at a driveway on a circular road. When we drove over the route, we could not even turn a 4 cylinder sedan around at that stop safely or within the road way.

After being notified of this problem, the tender was amended to allow the bus to travel the full length of the circular road.

If due diligence had occurred on behalf of School Bus Services prior to the letting of this tender, these problems would not have arisen.

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

At present, the process seems to be hap hazard, with too much reliance on looking at maps and not physical inspection of sites.

Cases are common of Contractors being requested to cross over roads when there is a dual carriageway with a median strip in the middle, and there is no way to cross the road. These do not show up on maps, and if the contractor had been asked for input, prior to determining the route, there would have been a suitable alternative route suggested, which would have led to a saving in time , money and frustration with the system.

In Rural areas, contractor knowledge of routes and bus stops is an invaluable resource. So, to, generally, is information from the relevant Local Authority.

On several occasions, School Bus staff have contacted contractors, myself included, to find out the most suitable place for a stop, or route alteration, taking into account, safety, sight distance, the ability of the bus to turn around and other potential hazards.

This information should be used more often.

e) I have no knowledge of this area on which to comment

f) The contractual arrangements with service providers, including the appropriateness of current school bus contracts, and payment arrangements, and previous contractual arrangements and the manner in which they were created;

At present there is the Evergreen Contract Model, the Tendered Rate Model and the Request for a Quote model for short term services.

The safety of school children and the travelling public is of the utmost importance in the School Bus Industry.

Therefore it is imperative that the Evergreen Contract Model is retained and reinforced as the preferred model as it has as its core the safety of the school bus and passengers, and it is funded to enable all the School Bus maintenance to be performed at a high standard, while allowing the contractor to earn a living from the operation of the school bus.

The Tendered Rate Model is a means of obtaining the lowest possible price for the provision of the service, and if this model is continued to be used, it will lead to a reduction in service standards in the area of bus maintenance, and driver standards, because the operators will not be able to afford to maintain their buses to the required standards given the much lower daily rates being paid for the tender.

We have already seen cases where operators have won a tender, not been able to operate the service at the tendered rate, and handed the contract back.

The contract was re-tendered, and the very same operator submitted a slightly higher rate, and was awarded the contract once again.

This should definitely not be allowed to occur.

The Lowest Price is not always the Best Value for Money.

There have been many cases where particular contractors have been awarded services through the Request for Quote system, which were supposed to be for up to one year, and because of various factors, these services have not been put out to tender, and have remained with the operator for periods in excess of eight years. In many cases, only particular operators have been asked to provide a Quote for such a service, leading to the impression that some operators are being favoured over others.

This also occurs when a contractor has part of his service removed to be added to another contractor's service to shore up the second contractor to the detriment of the first, or to create a new service to be tendered out.

One issue with the current contractual arrangements is Section 19 of the Contract;

- a. In the event of an Exercise of Option by Authority, the value of the School Bus is determined by the Valuer – There is no definition of a Valuer evident in the Contract.

b. In Sections 19.10 and 19.11 of the Contract, Authority's Right of Access to and use of Depot, and Authority's Right binds Subsequent Owners, this is an unfair and unrealistic expectation on the Contractor and subsequent purchasers or Lessees of the Depot premises, and may not be enforceable at law.

g) The resourcing of the School Bus Services division with the Public Transport Authority;

Even though Staff numbers have increased over the years, there appears to be an increasing turnover of Staff, either due to overwork, insufficient training or other reasons within the workplace.

It appears in some cases that Applications for School Bus Services that "can take up to 10 working days to approve", are being held up for the maximum time, whilst in other cases, approvals can be finalized in a couple of days.

Another problem is that Staff are moved from one portfolio to another within a short space of time, leading to a lack of continuity of knowledge pertaining to particular Bus Run events and historical information Stops, Spurs and Routes.

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis on Recovery of Costs through the TDV system, which has greatly increased the Administrative workload on Contractors. Much of this Cost Recovery is due to buses not running on Pupil Free Days, and there has been no disclosure by School Bus Services on the Staff costs involved in recovering the balance of monies from TDV's.

Recovery for TDV's should be limited to Pupil Free Days not run.

h) The appropriateness of the Conveyance Allowance as an alternative to Transport Assistance.

Conveyance Allowance does not cover the full cost of operating a vehicle to transport a student to school, and does not cover any amount for a wage component for the vehicle driver.

The Conveyance Allowance needs to be increased and paid for the return trip from home to the nearest School Bus Stop, or School, both morning and afternoon, At the Government rate for running a motor vehicle.

General: Remote Depots – Where a Contractor operates School Buses remotely from his/her main place of business, there is no allowance made for additional Administration Costs, such as Computers and Printers used by staff at remote locations, or transport costs to ensure Maintenance and Safety issues are complied with to the high degree required by the Contract.