

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 August 2021

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Mr Andrew Dalglish, President, Victorian Principals Association;

Mr Colin Axup, President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals; and

Ms Gail McHardy, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** The Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would also like to acknowledge my fellow committee members that are present here today: Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mr Tim Quilty.

To witnesses giving evidence: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected by law. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Ultimately all transcripts will be made public on the committee's website.

We welcome opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 to 15 minutes—obviously the fact that there are three of you, I am happy for you to go over if you need to—to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Could you all begin by stating your name and position for the Hansard record and then start your presentations. Over to you.

**Mr DALGLEISH:** Thank you, Enver. I suppose because there are three of us, I might jump in first. I am Andrew Dalglish. I am the President of the Victorian Principals Association, and I thank the members for the opportunity to address the committee this afternoon. The Victorian Principals Association has just on 1000 members, and we are the peak body which represents primary school leaders across Victoria. As per our submission, our association is supportive of the extension of school bus services to the general public. This support, however, is very much contingent on the retention of the two key features of the school bus program policy already in place, those being that the primary purpose of the program is to transport students to and from school but also that feature too that students must be safe while travelling on the school bus service, and we have certainly outlined much of that in our submission and are happy to discuss that further through questions later. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. A very good submission, by the way. Gail, do you have any opening comments?

**Ms McHARDY:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you, Chair. I first wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we each work and live, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders as the First People. They have never ceded sovereignty and remain strong in their enduring connection to land, water and culture.

My name is Gail McHardy. I am the Executive Officer of Parents Victoria, and my pronouns are she and her. Parents Victoria, often referred to as PV, is the state parent organisation representing families in Victorian government schools. PV has represented Victorian government school families since 1925 and throughout our service and support to parents and carers across metropolitan, rural and regional areas. We have always acted in the best interests of young people and their families—our children, our concern. As stated in our submission,

PV worked in conjunction with the Victorian Principals Association, also known as VPA, and the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, VASSP, as we hold similar views on this inquiry.

PV does not object to the extension of use of school buses to improve public transport for members of the public in rural and regional Victoria. However, we have been clear that our organisation requests that the committee ensures that any recommended extension or use of the school buses, one, continues the primary focus of the school bus program to transport rural and regional students to and from their schools and, two, does not compromise compliance of the school bus program with ministerial order 870—child safe standards. Additionally, our organisations ask the committee to consider the request for an extension of the tech school arrangement for school buses for other school educational purposes and community groups. PV looks forward to hearing the outcomes of the committee's inquiry in hope that future solutions will be found and actioned in collaboration with our local schools, communities and government to enable more Victorian rural and regional people to have accessible transport regardless of where they reside. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that, Gail. Colin, would you like to make any opening remarks?

**Mr AXUP:** Thank you. Good afternoon. My name is Colin Axup. I am the President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, or VASSP. We are the peak professional association for principals and assistant principals in secondary government schools. As an association, and as my colleagues have said, we are supportive of the extension of school bus services to the general public, contingent on the retention of those two key features of the current school bus program, being the primary purpose is to transport students to and from school and also that students must be safe whilst travelling on school bus services.

We would also like to advocate the extension of the bus service to utilise the unused bus capacities to support the current government's tech schools initiative. The tech schools provide programs that usually cannot be provided by schools, especially in rural and regional areas. Currently schools are able to request access to the school bus service, as we have outlined in our submission, and we would like an extension to that to enable schools to use that service for other educational purposes—for example, excursions, access to swimming and athletics carnivals and other specialist programs—and also for community groups for travel excursions to local venues like senior citizens clubs, for example. If this could be achieved within that 4-hour contracted period, this would obviously greatly improve the transport access for rural and regional Victorians.

I look forward to being able to answer any questions, and I would also note that in a previous life I was principal at a country school—namely, Stawell Secondary College. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thanks for sharing that with us, Colin. It puts it into context. I might start by going around to committee members and inviting them to ask questions because I know they are very eager. I might start with Mr Barton, Mrs McArthur and Mr Quilty, in that order. Mr Barton, please ask a couple of questions.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Andrew, Colin and Gail, thank you. I will just say from my own position, first, I absolutely guarantee from my own point of view the school bus program is about the school bus program and that will not be changed. There is no variation. That is its job, and I do not think I am speaking out of turn. When I first raised it I had correspondence with the minister, and he made it perfectly clear that that is not going to change. Kids' safety—that is not negotiable. None of us in this committee will be going anywhere down that track.

But there are some genuine concerns from families, and we have heard from them through their submissions. I see on some of the notes here that you have made some recommendations around the safety, and I think if we want to move forward we have to make sure the parents come with us as well. In terms of reserving and saving, if we just think about how this would work, how would you feel about this: we say for the first half a dozen seats in a bus everything has to be prebooked—you cannot just be at a bus stop and jump on. That cannot happen.

Cameras in school buses—I am surprised it is not already happening. I think that has just got to happen. Also the possibility of supervision—either a bus monitor or parents volunteering on that school run in and out. With my commercial background running a small business for 30 years I would want to know how I would make that bus work 12 hours a day and obviously not 191 days a year but 365 days a year. I would like to hear your views about that stuff.

**Mr DALGLEISH:** Look, thank you, Rod. We certainly have a degree of support around that. If there were a structure in place to reserve seats, then absolutely they would need to be prebooked. And it would absolutely also be contingent upon availability of seats, as mentioned. The process in place, certainly to support families' concerns, would be that potentially a working with children check would be a part of that process, but that is not something that is going to happen overnight. It would have to be done well in advance to allow those processes to be undertaken.

The other part of that—and I come from a primary school background—is that generally it is the secondary schools that do much of the administration of the rural bus routes. That may be something that Colin could comment a little further on as well.

**Mr AXUP:** I am happy to. Cameras, I agree—many schools nowadays have CCTV cameras throughout for added safety and security of the school and the environment. In public transport there are cameras, so there is a degree of logic in that. Secondary schools tend to be the bus coordinators in country towns. Certainly Stawell Secondary College, when I was there, was the bus coordinator for the area, for our district, and there are obviously some challenges around managing that.

The concept of supervision on buses—we would argue that it would need to be a person of purpose who was solely there for supervision. It cannot be the bus driver. Their role is to drive the bus. It could be possible to look for volunteers or to go along that model of the euphemistic lollipop person that many schools have out the front. That would be that added layer of protection that you would need to look at, but obviously there is a commercial aspect to that, and that is that it would increase cost to the buses.

It is probably important to note that in a rural bus service we have mixed ages that run on those buses, from obviously young primary through to senior secondary, and we manage it based on a series of staff members being at the bus stop when the buses arrive to deal with any issues that may arise in the process. Secondary schools would tend to make senior students bus captains, if you like—leadership positions—who the school trusts to hopefully, one, use their peer influence on the bus but also to be able to come to us with any concerns or issues in the process as well.

**Ms McHARDY:** I would like to add, just following on Andrew and Colin's comments and responses, that we further, through a community lens, a parent's lens, totally acknowledge and do not wish to diminish the fears and concerns that have been raised by some of the submissions by parents directly, but have to be all mindful as a society that we can mitigate risk, but we cannot remove it.

So in keeping with what Andrew and Colin said, there are a number of measures that could be taken for the protection of our children if the public were to share the bus with students. As you know, in our submission it was predominantly that we were suggesting outside the window of the students being on the bus. But if there was a particular reason—because we are mindful, too, in other submissions there were also questions raised around early childhood access to programs, and so timings in that regard. So certainly we need to have the protocol and processes in place to ensure the safety of everybody as best we can, in keeping—and what capacity would be available to do that.

But I would also add in relation to the volunteers, from Parents Victoria's specific view, we are very mindful of the reliance on parent volunteers. And in fact with all the reviews that have been done around our rural and regional communities, and coming during a pandemic with COVID, we have had a lot of employment impacts. So here is an opportunity, everyone, that a government could turn their mind to around local employment: giving some opportunities to people in those rural and regional areas to take on those responsibilities as a whole community, a holistic approach. So I will just leave that there, Rod, but I look forward to further questions.

**Mr BARTON:** If I may just go one more little comment, more than anything, that would be a good little project for senior members of the community, because I think seniors can offer something. I am just saying. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Rod, thank you. I might on that note pass over to Mrs McArthur to ask a question.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I am not sure about that segue, Chair. Now, excuse my ignorance. Can you gentlemen just clarify what the difference is between the Victorian Principals Association and the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals. Are you all in this together, or are you in separate silos?

**Mr AXUP:** Mrs McArthur, I would put it down to my association being more of a mouthful, because we have got more letters in our acronym. So VASSP is the state secondary principals association; the VPA looks after the primary principals.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I was hoping there was a delineation. Yes. Well, good. Now, there are two school bus systems operating, I am learning. That is the bus system that covers the disability sector to go to special schools. Can you just help me here? Who makes the decision about who can get on those buses—the principal of the special school, some government authority? How do people get on the bus or how are they not allowed to get on the bus if they are in that category attending a special school?

**Ms McHARDY:** Gail here. I am happy to respond to that initially.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Gail.

**Ms McHARDY:** I think it is important for the committee to know that the Department of Education and Training would be your first port of call in relation to that question. They would be to elaborate on that. Peter Nelson would be the person to contact in that particular relevant division, and he would defer to others if needed in answer to some of those questions. But there is a particular process, and there is also a special consideration panel in relation to who qualifies within the school bus program policy in regard to those buses. But certainly there is a range of services that are available. But there are certainly clear processes and policies that are stringently adhered to.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So it is not just up to the principal of the school.

**Ms McHARDY:** No, it is not, and it is a very clear process. There are, like, a whole lot of criteria that people have to meet. You know, it may be based on family hardship. And I need to declare a conflict of interest or just make this declaration: I am appointed as the community representative on that panel.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Okay. All right.

**Ms McHARDY:** So I do see submissions and things. And it is really important that people in the community are aware that that is done with due diligence, and it is incredibly reasonable and fair.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So not everybody can get on it?

**Ms McHARDY:** That is correct.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** It might be determined by what—income or something?

**Ms McHARDY:** It is determined on the needs of the children, as you would understand, in particular, because in the society we live in today we have a whole lot of reasons why children are moving around the state to different schools—due to family violence and a whole lot of other reasons. But they are not the only reasons sometimes some children cannot attend a particular school. But I probably would prefer not to go into too much detail because I think those responses should be coming from government.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Okay, perfect. All right. So we seem to be on a unity ticket here. At least the two principals association members seem to agree that there is room for the community to get on the bus if there is space and if there are safe procedures and all sorts of protocols put in place and maybe—I do not know about this elder person being a monitor; it might be a young person could be a monitor as well, but anyway—a person to be able to monitor it and bookings in advance. Can I just get confirmation you are all in agreement on this?

**Mr DALGLEISH:** Mrs McArthur, I certainly think that in general terms we are. I think one of the important parts of this would definitely be centred around clear communication to families, and particularly families of primary school age children. That trust would need to be very clearly there to alleviate some of their anxieties and concerns, as we have already discussed through our presentation—not only our presentation but our submission—around ensuring their safety.

**Ms McHARDY:** And Mrs McArthur, I would like to add also that, in keeping with the Country Education Partnership and obviously their submission as well in relation to local solutions to local problems and keeping in context more, and I think my opening remarks, around the local collaboration about what best works, that

way schools, where they know their families and they are working with their families—those issues can be worked through. So you can then obviously build that strength and that trust and confidence.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might pass over to Mr Quilty to ask a question and then to Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr QUILTY:** Okay. We have heard that the biggest safety risk to kids currently on school buses is other kids—bullying and physical violence—and it has been suggested that actually having adults on the bus will improve the safety of kids travelling. Do you have a comment on that?

**Mr AXUP:** I will start. Look, I think it is all contextual. Yes, you are right, some of the issues on the bus obviously are student to student. As I said earlier, when I was at Stawell that is why we would have had staff members waiting at the bus stop as the buses arrived—to deal with those issues as they arose. We would often be alerted by the bus driver, who obviously was stopping on the way through, picking up students, and if there were any issues would try and deal with them but would then telephone ahead and actually give us a heads-up of what was potentially occurring so we knew what we were dealing with, if you like, when the bus arrived. Yes, you could potentially argue that an adult would make things safer, but we also know that not all adults are necessarily equipped to deal with young children or even teenagers who want to get up to mischief. I think if we had supervision on a bus, supervisors, regardless of their age, regardless of their employment category, would need to have some form of training to help them deal with those situations.

**Mr QUILTY:** And we have also heard that in the city obviously kids are travelling on public buses with mixed adults and children. That presumably is not an issue with ministerial order 870, so why would it be a problem with the school-only buses?

**Mr AXUP:** I might just jump in there as well, given that at the school that I was principal of most recently a significant number of the students—in fact 90 per cent of the students—would catch some form of public transport to access the school. There are a couple of elements to it. Public transport does actually have cameras, so there is already an added layer of security, if you like. We as schools will still deal with issues. We deal with passenger complaints, if you like. We will have members of the public contact the school if students misbehave. We do not necessarily, obviously, know which student it is, but we then will engage with the student body to remind them of their responsibilities. I think when you are looking at public transport, because of those added layers, if you like, of protection of public transport, that is probably why there is not an issue. As Gail said earlier, this is about risk mitigation not removal of risk, and I think the comment that Mr Barton made at the beginning about the concept of cameras on the school bus service would be a positive one, for example.

**Mr QUILTY:** Okay. Thank you. I had something else about increasing capacity, but I am not sure what it was, so I—

**The CHAIR:** No, we will get an opportunity to go around again, and we have got until 4.15 pm. I might go to Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Chair. I just want to get an understanding. If you were looking at expanding the school bus system more widely to the community, would you be more supportive of a model whereby—and this is premised on the basis that we are able to put processes in place that obviously deal with securing the primacy of students to and from school but also addressing all the safety issues—members of the public could simply ring up and book a place if it was available to access the bus, or would it be a more nuanced approach whereby there was more coordination, particularly in regions or areas, to look at other educational needs and community organisations and those sorts of factors to try and tailor the service to address those sorts of needs? I think it was our first presenters today, the Stanleys, who spoke about regional accessibility committees in the Warrnambool area that look at what factors are in those regions to better tailor those sorts of metrics. You talk about governments taking the initiative and using that for access, whereas if you had it open as a booking you would not necessarily be able to tailor it to community groups needs. It would be first-come, first-served, if you like. Are you able to comment on that?

**Ms McHARDY:** I am happy to respond, Andrew and Colin, first to this one. I think, again, highlighted by some of the other submissions is that it is tailoring, as you say, Mr Tarlamis, what is the local demand in those particular communities. According to our submission, as you understand, this is why we are saying that having that flexibility after the students are off the bus—that is how we communicate in those communities about what is successful and useful for them to then tailor and schedule their needs around what is available for that

service. It is going to be certainly important as a coordinated approach and a collaborative approach about: what are the services that people want to access, but what are the community groups and the other groups that see that need? For example, I refer to even the Mallee Family Care service, which did a submission and attended a hearing describing some of those on-demand services. The only difficulty with that, of course, is that we have to have a little bit of flexibility and reasonability about what is practicable for not just the provider but also everybody in the community for it to be reasonable to everybody.

**Mr DALGLEISH:** And, Mr Tarlamis, I tend to agree with Gail that that flexibility to be able to meet the local community needs is very much what is going to drive that need and the nuanced approach to it, and it absolutely has to be underpinned by the capacity of the provider to be able to do that in a sustainable manner, not just one-offs all of the time if they are trying to plan or forward plan their rosters, their drivers and the use of their buses.

**Mr AXUP:** I would just add that I think education needs to be, if you like, at the top of the list of reasons to access the school bus service. I know that sounds almost a given, but beyond students attending the local primary—going to a local primary or secondary school—it is about access to education. And we also know that in rural areas young people who are especially having access to vocational training or apprenticeships are not yet 18, therefore they cannot get a licence. Even if they can get a licence, they do not necessarily have access to a vehicle. We are giving them an opportunity to be a little bit more independent and therefore be also able to access education as well. I think that is a really important thing to remember in the process, that this is ultimately about access to education. The added bonus, if you like, for the community is that added transport capacity or capability that may exist. But I think education is first and foremost, the most important consideration.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Tarlamis. I think some of the questions I had listed that I was planning to ask have already been answered. So we have already discussed the idea of an adult volunteer or adult supervisor of some sort, volunteer or not; and that security cameras may enhance safety. Another one that was raised was GPS tracking. I guess as technology improves and parents are more technologically savvy they can keep track of where their children are in terms of the journey to school and back. Are there any other safety measures that come to mind? What do you think about—open to all of you, Colin's comments or Andrew's or Gail's—I guess GPS tracking of vehicles and also on the school buses and also any other safety measures you think could be improvements in any iteration of the current or a future program?

**Mr AXUP:** Well, most young people in this day and age have mobile phones, so by virtue of that they would therefore have access to some form of tracking device, various apps and so forth. You could argue that, you know, the use of those apps could be one of the requirements to access the bus service, which would make at least the individual with that phone, or make the phone, trackable or more trackable than it already is. You know, the GPS of the bus of where it is, that is not dissimilar to, obviously living in the city, the TramTracker app, for example, so you can track the public transport that you are looking for. So it would make sense and obviously the technology exists to enable that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Colin. That is an important point, actually. Obviously when most of us went to primary school we did not have a mobile phone, and most of us probably did not have a mobile phone until the end of high school. So it is good to put it into perspective with children in schools these days. Andrew or Gail, do you have any other suggestion?

**Ms McHARDY:** I am happy to add here that we know that on our public transport system the protective services officers, the PSOs, have been quite welcomed and utilised in giving people a high level of sense of safety and security. Again, this is probably more metro rather than country areas, but then again here are some further employment opportunities for our rural and regional communities. Particularly there may be times it might be a flexible workforce that can be utilised for that purpose too. As Colin highlighted earlier, schools are relied upon, particularly our secondary schools, in relation to supervising bus stops and things, if they are on alert to some certain behaviours that may be occurring, which comes back to Mr Quilty's question around bullying et cetera. So there are all these other things that we have in existence that maybe we can sort of put our mind to about how we can stretch those to other communities where they do not often get the benefit.

**Mr DALGLEISH:** And just probably reinforcing again what Gail mentioned earlier on around risk and what potentially level of risk we are prepared to tolerate, because we certainly cannot eliminate all risk, whether it be on public bus or even on school bus routes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. I do not have any more questions at this stage, so I will give committee members an opportunity to ask further questions. Mr Barton and then Mr Quilty, then Mrs McArthur. We will go in that order. Mr Barton.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. I do not know if you can answer this question. We had someone present earlier today saying Catholic students have trouble getting access to a bus service. Do we know in rural and regional Victoria how many kids want to be able to use a school bus service and are not able to use it? Do we know those sorts of numbers? Do we know what the rejection rate is?

**Ms McHARDY:** I personally could not answer that question. I think that is something you would have to turn to obviously government and obviously the Catholic diocese for, because obviously they are a responsibility of the diocese. I am very mindful that, again, there are certainly arrangements in place that are obviously worked upon in relation to applying to get access to our state bus system from the non-government sector, but also there are other charter buses the independent schools run. And some of the Catholic schools do that themselves as well. So again, I am from an organisation representing parents in government schools, so I am not the person to ask in this instance unfortunately, Mr Barton, but yes.

**Mr BARTON:** I probably used the wrong example by using the Catholic schoolkids, but outside of the Catholic schoolkids, are there kids not being able to get on a school bus when they probably should?

**Mr AXUP:** I could talk from experience in Stawell. There is a Catholic primary school within Stawell, and students going to that primary school could access the school buses.

**Mr BARTON:** Okay.

**Mr AXUP:** But having said that, our school buses were never full, so there was capacity. So the question may be to the department, who would have the data about capacity and about the rules around that. Certainly when I was at Stawell it was never an issue in that respect, but I could imagine that that may not be the same in other areas, because it would come down to capacity.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes.

**Mr DALGLEISH:** The other part of that, Mr Barton, certainly with some of our schools or families that live in more remote areas, where they are applying for bus routes that may in fact be required to be changed, they may get to a level where the bus may not go directly to the property but the family may actually then drive to a point where they can actually join a bus route.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. Thank you. That is all. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** A very good question, Mr Barton. Mr Quilty, did you have some additional questions? Mrs McArthur?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Yes. Just following on from Mr Barton's question, while you may want to restrict access for non-government schoolchildren to getting on a school bus, what about if students need to get on a bus that goes past the nearest government school to another government school? Shouldn't they have that choice?

**Mr AXUP:** Again I would answer only based on my experience at Stawell. Stawell is surrounded by a number of small rural primary schools. Parents made a decision that they wanted their children to go to the government primary schools within Stawell itself, either Stawell Primary or Stawell West, and they would therefore get on the bus and therefore theoretically go past the rural primary school to go into town.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** And they were allowed to do that?

**Mr AXUP:** Yes.

**Mr DALGLEISH:** In that case, Mrs McArthur, the families are required to pay for that if they are going past. However, if they are going to an independent or Catholic school, that is not necessarily a requirement.

**Ms McHARDY:** Just a follow-up remark: if they are getting, let us say, a free seat on the bus if they are from a non-government school sector, there have to be extenuating circumstances; it just cannot be because of choice. I think, again, if you were to read the school bus program policy—it is accessible on the website—it is very clear about what criteria people have to meet. There certainly is a very, as I say, rigorous application system to cover off, to ensure it is fair and equitable to the people who are applying.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Well, it may be on the website, but should it be changed? Shouldn't any student be able to get on a school bus and go to the school of their choice?

**Ms McHARDY:** Interesting question, Mrs McArthur. We are advocates for public education, so I think our answers are going to be very, without being disrespectful to the non-government sector, public first with the public purse.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** But it may be that, as Colin has suggested, the nearest public school is substandard and they need to go past that one and get to another one, even another government school. Why should they have to pay if they want the best educational outcome for their children?

**Ms McHARDY:** I will flip it for you, Mrs McArthur. We have independent schools that charter buses into country towns that are taking children from our public schools into their private institutions. So I will leave it there, but I will let Colin and Andrew, if they have got anything further to add—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** That may say more about the government schools than the non-government schools.

**Ms McHARDY:** Well, that all depends on federal funding and state funding, so I am not going to get into a funding debate, but—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Parent choice and outcomes might be a factor.

**The CHAIR:** Please, Mrs McArthur, I think we are going a bit off the terms of reference.

**Ms McHARDY:** Right off track.

**The CHAIR:** I will direct everybody back to the terms of reference. I appreciate the debate and—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Okay. I will go back to the terms of reference, Chair. Thank you for your indulgence. We were getting to a point where we needed some sort of, I do not know, app or something to get on the bus. Can we go down the QR path? We are addicted to QR codes in recent times. Even children can probably manage a QR code, probably better than people like me these days. Would that be a possibility of providing some sort of assessment of where everybody is going and where they have come from and where they got off and got on et cetera?

**Ms McHARDY:** Look, the QR code obviously in theory should work, but unfortunately because we are talking about rural and remote communities there are going to be obviously certain coverage aspects, and I think some other submissions probably on the technological aspects of some of that stuff would be problematic. But certainly in theory it does make sense, and certainly students, as Colin said, are far more digitally savvy than most adults are.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** That is it, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mrs McArthur. On that note, Mr Tarlamis, do you have any additional questions?

**Mr TARLAMIS:** No, Chair, I do not.

**The CHAIR:** I do not have any additional questions. Many of the questions I had were kind of teased out by fellow committee members. On that note I want to thank the three of you for a very informative session and public hearing. It was intriguing to get your insight. I want to thank all of you and your organisations for the

amazing work you are doing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I know the education sector is one of the most greatly affected, and thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to appear before today's public hearing. Thank you. On that note, committee members and the public, that will conclude our hearings for today.

**Committee adjourned.**