

# INQUIRY INTO THE USE OF SCHOOL BUSES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL VICTORIA

17 September 2021

# Child Safety

- In Victoria, mandatory child safe standards have been introduced to help protect children from abuse in organisations. All organisations working with children must take steps to prevent abuse and cannot assume that child abuse does not, and cannot, happen within their organisation.
- Victorian organisations that provide services, including student transport, or facilities for children are required by law to implement child safe standards to protect children from harm.
- The standards provide three overarching principles for organisations to cover:
  - the cultural safety of Aboriginal Children
  - the cultural safety of children from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds
  - the safety of children with a disability.
- The Department of Education and Training abides by these standards and requires transport operators delivering student transport services for the School Bus Program to do the same.
- The Department of Education and Training will strengthen its child safety advice to transport operators to align with the new child safe standards that will be introduced from 1 July 2022 (i.e., extra requirements for child safety, guidance, new training etc).

# Victoria's current School Travel Initiatives

The Victorian Government supports access to education through an array of school transport initiatives, including:

- **Students with Disabilities Transport Program (SDTP)**, which provides different types of transport assistance for eligible students attending their designated government specialist school;
- **Conveyance Allowance Program (CAP)**, which provides a financial contribution to eligible families towards the costs of transporting their children to school
- **School Bus Program (SBP)**, which is available in regional/rural areas, and operates on a separate network to the public transport network
- **Public transport concessionary fares and travel passes**, which support student travel by offering reduced/discounted fares on public transport services
- **School special bus services** that provide additional capacity and/or route deviations to the public transport network to help students get to and from school during school transit times; and
- **Public Transport services** that are provided throughout Victoria operating on set timetables.

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# The Department's School Travel Initiatives

Through the Department of Education and Training, access to education is provided through three separate school travel support programs, this includes:

- **Students with Disabilities Transport Program** (~8,850 students, statewide)
  - Provides bus and taxi transport assistance across Victoria for eligible students to attend their designated government specialist school.
- **Conveyance Allowance Program** (~37,000 students – rural and regional)
  - Provides a financial contribution towards the costs of transporting children to school.
  - Available for eligible families of government and non-government schools, where the school is outside of the metropolitan conveyance allowance boundary.
- **School Bus Program** (~58,000 students – rural and regional)
  - Operates on a separate network to the public transport network and supports government and non-government school students to attend their nearest appropriate school.
  - The Department of Education and Training sets the School Bus Program's policy and procedures, and administers the Program at the school, region and corporate level; this includes the School Bus Management System.
  - The Department of Transport contracts, funds and manages the 1,461 contracted bus services to deliver the School Bus Program's travel support services.

# School Bus Program

## Overview

- Established in 1944, the School Bus Program provides school travel support for approximately 58,000 – 60,000 students across 300 school bus networks throughout regional and rural Victoria.
- The School Bus Program's core eligibility criteria is established under Victoria's *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017, Part 10: Transport and travelling allowances*, which identifies:
  - The minimum eligible travel distance of 4.8km from school.
  - A priority order for supports to government and non-government students.
  - The Transport Special Cases Consideration Panel: an appeals mechanism for families with complex and compelling circumstances that require consideration outside of policy.
  - Opportunities for other travellers to access spare capacity on available services:
    - No cost: Pre-schoolers (4+ years-old), students accessing further education, teachers, interstate travellers.
    - Fare Payment: Ineligible travellers (not attending nearest school), adult travellers.
- The School Bus Program Policy and Procedures 2016, further defines the administrative, operational and, policy requirements for students, families, schools, bus operators and departments.

# School Bus Management System

- Developed in 2015, the School Bus Management System enables:
  - families to apply online to access School Bus Program services; and
  - provides clear information for route planning and in emergency management situations.
- Where deployed, networks utilising the School Bus Management System report:
  - less dispute about eligibility/equity;
  - improved application of the SBP policy; and
  - less administrative time spent coordinating buses at schools.
- In early 2021, development and coordination of the School Bus Management System transferred from the Department of Transport to the Department of Education and Training.
- In 2021-22 the Department of Education and Training will continue to explore system technology enhancements to further develop the School Bus Management System's ability to manage new technology, be more user friendly, more interactive and offer improved emergency management.



LIVE NETWORKS		
Benalla	Bendigo	Casterton
Delegate	Emerald	Hamilton
Monbulk	Pakenham	Pyramid Hill
Stawell	Traralgon	Upwey

# School Bus Program – Opportunities

Any reforms to school student transport assistance will need to be cognisant of changing school demographics, the nature of journeys between home and school, and the rapidly evolving nature of technology.

## Improved Technology

- School Bus Management System development and a staged deployment to include:
  - Improved application options; students and adult travellers (ad hoc and permanent).
  - Technology trials to continue development of a School Bus Management System ‘smart card’ to improve traveller access and information.
  - Develop and integrate ‘live mapping’ for emergency management purposes.

## Consolidation

- Consolidate travel fares and products to provide a single statewide student ticketing approach.
- Convert under utilised School Bus Program services to public transport services providing greater public transport travel options in areas with highest demand i.e., metro fringe and regional cities (Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo etc.).

## Improved Flexibility

- Review policy application requirements for known travellers i.e., TAFE, VET, VCAL students and teachers.
- More flexibility for services to attend kindergartens and outside of school hour care programs.
- Simplified route modification processes and redesign of the policy for extensions to incorporate students attending any school.

## Fleet Opportunities

- Enable greater traveller accessibility with future vehicle replacements with a fleet that meets the *Disability Discrimination Act* requirements.
- Consider opportunities for the introduction and trial of CCTV and GPS tracking for emergency management.
- Development of a ‘School Bus Management System application’ to support student travel and monitoring on buses.
- Identify opportunities for secondary supervision on buses under existing contract arrangements.

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