

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 August 2021

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Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Associate Professor Janet Stanley, Principal Research Fellow, Urban Social Resilience, Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne; and

Adjunct Professor John Stanley, Adjunct Professor, Bus Industry Confederation Senior Fellow in Sustainable Land Transport, University of Sydney.

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

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to 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 the Chair. I wish to acknowledge my committee members that are at this hearing today: Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Rod Barton and Mrs Beverley McArthur.

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 the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. 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. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome any opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Would you please begin by stating your names for Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you.

Visual presentation.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you. I am Associate Professor Janet Stanley from the University of Melbourne. John?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: And I am Professor John Stanley from the Institute of Transport and Logistics, part of the University of Sydney.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: We have just got a couple of slides here that we will talk through fairly quickly, and we welcome any discussion and clarification you might have about what we are saying. We are going to talk about rural and regional transport disadvantage; the argument for making wider use of the school buses; barriers to this happening; how it is actually an opportunity to tackle a big problem with schoolchildren of bullying; the importance of taking a more integrated approach to transport—a place-based integrated approach—and a little bit about what a freed-up school bus system would look like.

I think a lot of the submissions that you have received do talk about how disadvantaged rural people are about transport. In the rural areas you are more reliant on cars because the public transport just is not there to get round and get your basic things. The research we have done shows that there is a lot of lower wellbeing and a lot of social exclusion in rural areas in Victoria. You are probably fairly familiar with the groups. This is older people, youth, those who do not have a car for some reason or who cannot drive. We have done research on this in Victoria and South Australia, and we particularly wanted to draw attention to preschoolers that are disadvantaged. We know how important preschool is for children, and a lot of rural children cannot get there. Lower income people are moving to rural areas at the moment with the housing crisis we are experiencing, but although they get lower rents, they get fewer travel options, so they are disadvantaged in a different way.

The opportunity that is provided if we do manage to use the school bus network for the public also—you can see that very clearly on the maps here. The one on the left is the public transport available in rural Victoria. The

one on the right is the spread of the school bus system. So you can see it is just far more comprehensive and frequent, and the school buses travel a lot more than any route bus services in rural Victoria.

Why should we open the school buses to wider use? Well, it is really to address the extensive disadvantage that rural people are experiencing. People in rural areas are more disadvantaged, particularly certain groups of people, and there is a great unmet transport need in rural areas. Community transport is there, but community transport is actually targeted to certain people for certain things, and most of those things are determined by the agency who owns the transport, so they are not open widely to the public.

Some barriers to freeing up the school bus system: at the moment if you look at the legislation around the school bus system, it really is tied up in huge, bureaucratic knots, and the complexities do apply to travelling on a school bus when some people can, like for some post-school use, are just amazing, really. It is so difficult you really would not approach the matter, I think. We have got funding silos. We do not look at transport on a place-based approach, so we do not have integrated mobility. We do not understand transport in rural areas, basically.

Looking through the submissions, it seems that a lot of the submissions are actually supporting opening up the school bus, but some of them are expressing the barrier of child abuse on the school bus, and I can talk to that a bit more in question time if you wish. My PhD is actually in child abuse and neglect, so it is a topic I know quite a bit about. And it really does not occur on a school bus internationally, but there are measures that can be put in place in case the chance does.

So one of the bigger problems and an unrecognised problem that is actually occurring—not something we think might occur—is bullying, and this has been shown recently, particularly in research, to have a very severe effect on some children. And while we talk about bullying in schools quite a bit, there is almost no discussion about it on the school bus, and some research shows that there are about two incidents of bullying every 25-minute ride on a school bus, so it is quite a serious problem, and you can see there in the slide how it can adversely impact some children. And the positive thing about it is that bystanders actually can make a difference, so if you introduce the public on a school bus, often where they intervene in a bullying incident about 50 per cent of the time they actually make a difference, and when the victim is actually assisted by a bystander they do feel more protected and the impact is not as severe. If you put other passengers on the bus, then simply they can reduce the incidence of this victimisation, which actually is occurring now on school buses.

So the school bus should be part of a coordinated, place-based, locally run transport system, and we need to plan to do this, where we could actually introduce funding for transport from other departments like Health. People need to get to the doctor. They cannot get to the doctor, therefore they get sicker, therefore their health expenses are larger. So it is not unreasonable to ask them to contribute to the transport costs. So making better use of school buses is a simple and a cost-effective way to improve rural transport and accessibility opportunities.

So what might a freed up school bus look like? We need to determine how the school bus routes could be integrated. We should continue to pay contract private providers as part of an integrated place-based transport system, and what we have done in Warrnambool in Victoria is set up a model regional accessibility planning delivery committee, who decide who needs what, how best to get where and what transport should be used for what, and it has actually worked very well. The state should remove the regulations around the school bus use.

Student tracking is being introduced on many school buses, and this could keep going, and we can put in many measures to restrict child abuse and bullying on public vehicles, where they actually occur. Thanks. That is it.

The CHAIR: That is a fantastic presentation. I really enjoyed the link with bullying and access to preventative medicine and a whole bunch of other social issues. So I might kick off and ask the first question, because it is a question probably on the mind of all committee members, and as Chair I have been inundated with a number of emails about the issue of child safety being one of the biggest concerns by stakeholders. With your background, Dr Stanley, could you please explain measures or steps that could be taken to reduce that risk?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Yes. If you look at who perpetrates child abuse and where it occurs, I have done a search of the international literature and I could not find any incidence of it occurring on a school bus. Where it

actually occurs is in parks, in streets, actually in the school and in homes. It is most unlikely to occur on a school bus, but of course you cannot say definitely it will not. A bigger problem where a couple of incidents have occurred, unfortunately, is the school driver. I could only find two news media reports on that. And actually there have been a couple of incidents internationally at the school bus stop, so where there is not adult intervention there.

But where you put an adult on a bus with the children, there is a lot that can be done to observe what is happening with the kids. There is an instinct if people see that a child is being victimised—most adults will step in and try and stop that. There is a lot that can be done about informing people about grooming, which might be the problem on the school bus, if there is any, where you might regularly see someone that is not particularly known or is identified as a problem in the community sitting next to a particular child. If you know what to do there, you can kick that person off the bus, separate them from the child. So there are many things that can be done to alleviate the possibility of it occurring, but the possibility is very slim.

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: For example, most of the seats on the school bus are going to be taken up by schoolchildren, and if you are freeing up available school bus seats you could say it is the first two seats in the bus and so the other people sit there and the children sit behind.

The CHAIR: That is interesting. I like the fact that you have brought in international experiences. I have not read of many experiences of this kind of abuse taking place on school buses either—I did my own search—but I did notice that the incidence of school bus bullying is quite common. As someone who used a private school bus at some stage of my secondary schooling, I could see the potential for that and also in the environment with a lot of young children being unsupervised. But it is an interesting take.

I would like to ask just one more question, and it is about that map that you demonstrated—I guess the current network of school buses. It is fantastic. It shows the reach and I guess the success of the program that it does reach all corners of our state. There was a discussion you raised about streamlining or integrating those options. Would either of you like to comment on that?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: Yes, certainly. I mean, the notion of integrated regional transport is a pretty big idea. There are not many places in the world that actually do that. A lot of people talk about it, but it is not very common to have it happen. And so we actually see the freeing up of spare seats on school buses as a very small first step to a much bigger future in that space, and we are going to talk about some of the work we were involved in in Warrnambool that recognised the need for more integration. It got a range of different stakeholders together at a regional level to talk about what are the priorities and how can we deal with those. Some of the agencies that had spare capacity with their vehicles were prepared to make those vehicles available part of the time to fill holes, but that still sat alongside other services rather than being fully integrated with it.

So I think if Victoria could take some initiative here it would constitute something that is internationally path breaking—but it should not be that hard to do. It is really about putting a lot of the separate pots of money that individually go into transport—out of the health budget, the education budget and the transport budget—into a common pot, and if you lock those funds up like that, then you can genuinely try and identify the priorities on a regional basis, not in the silos that our current systems are leading to.

The CHAIR: Well, that was actually an interesting point you raised, because I think it was in our previous hearing that one of the witnesses talked about some of the program being governed by different departments—education and transport—and you are right, to a certain extent there might be silos. They are interesting points, and later on in our hearings we will have the departments appear before the hearing—so some questions for me to keep on notice for them. But I really appreciate that.

I might pass on to other committee members, and I also acknowledge that Mr Quilty has also joined us. I might pass on to Mr Rod Barton. Mr Barton, do you have a few questions?

Mr BARTON: Funnily enough, Chair, I do. Dr Stanley, John, how are you? I just want to ask a little bit about the preschoolers, because we all know how important they are and I know the government is doing a lot of work about kindergarten and those services for families. What research have you got around perhaps people not getting the kids to kinder or preschool and all those sorts of things? What can you tell us about that?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Yes, we have done quite a lot of research on this in Victoria and South Australia, and one of the problems is that children cannot get to preschool if they are in rural areas, particularly farm worker families and more isolated communities. One of the problems with the school bus is they can apply to put the child on the school bus, but it is very, very difficult to get a parent to go with a child. Now, I would not like a child of mine at three to go on the school bus by themselves. It just should not be the case. It is very clear that the parents should automatically be allowed to take the child on the bus to preschool. So this is one of the reasons why preschool children are missing out on this educational opportunity, and if you miss out on one or two years of kinder, then you are actually back for the rest of your school.

Mr BARTON: You are behind.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Yes.

Mr BARTON: Have you any evidence just around the safety? Because it is clearly coming through—people are very concerned. Have you any evidence that suggests that opening up to school buses would be more dangerous than kids using public transport today in rural and regional Victoria?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: There is no evidence about this, no—or on route buses or any buses. The way adult child abusers operate is they actually like to get the child away by themselves to groom them and to train them and to make them feel comfortable. You cannot do that on a school bus where there are lots of adults around. The only problem that I have found that occurs a little bit is actually that older adolescents on the school bus have been found to actually victimise some of the younger children—apart from bullying. It can be assault or something more severe. That is a problem because there is no adult supervision around these children. If you had adults on the bus, it would be much less likely to occur. And the poor old bus driver is really responsible for the safety of driving that bus. They are often quite concerned when you speak to them that they cannot do anything about the chaos if that is occurring at the back of the bus because their job is to get those children there without a bus accident.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. Chair, I have got other questions, but I can come back. We can let everybody else have a go first.

The CHAIR: Mr Tarlamis, do you have a question?

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes, Chair, I do. Thank you, Dr Stanley and John, for presenting today and your submission. A lot of the submissions that have come in have talked about the importance of protecting the primacy of the school students having access to the bus services and, if opening it up to the public, that not being compromised in any way. So that would suggest that if we were to open it up to the wider community we would need to have some form of a booking system for the public, even if you were to have those reserved rows at the front. In some areas that may suggest that there would be more availability than in other areas, because from what we have heard in some areas there is currently a shortage of supply and in some areas there would actually be a lot of supply. Would that pose some problems in itself in the sense that if there are different availabilities from day to day, aligning appointments with availability, if that fluctuates, may create issues as well? So if you were to, say, book a doctor's appointment on the basis that you are going to catch this bus service, but then when you try to book you cannot get in because you are not sure whether it is going to be available—for instance, if a student pulls out or cannot go. That fluctuation might change if it is always that primacy of it being available for students first. Do you see that as being a problem?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: You are going to get situations where that is going to happen, because this is really a matter of probabilities, isn't it? There are a certain number of children who are eligible to travel on the school bus, but at any point in time you might only get 80 or 90 per cent of them doing that, because they have things before school they have got to do or commitments afterwards that require other things to happen. It can be really not much more than an estimate of 'Well, we're going to typically have three or four seats available, so we're prepared to make those available for people', but not anybody can turn up and get on the bus. It is really three or four seats, and in the first instance do you actually have to apply—to indicate to do that? And occasionally that is going to go wrong, but that still would give more people an opportunity for better mobility than we have now. It is not going to happen very often, because most of these things are reasonably predictable—that on Tuesdays you can expect a certain number of people to not be travelling on the bus. In winter or spring it might be different. So I think these things are probably reasonably predictable, but you will

have an occasional hiccup. As I say, I think that if you can give four or five people a trip they would not have otherwise had much more often, that is a better thing to do—and be prepared to wear the occasionally hiccup.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: And the other thing is the education department. If the number of children on a school bus is diminishing, they will change it to a smaller bus. We would argue: why on earth would you do that? The costs are about the same. Or they might amalgamate some routes, which gives children a much longer ride, which we know is not healthy or good for them. So this sort of behaviour, these sorts of practices, I believe could change and give more people more opportunities if we did not do these.

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: It is also a reason why you have got to look at the whole thing in an integrated way, because we are really talking about getting better school bus stuff in the end. But the real solution is to look at all the needs on a regional basis, and that then gives you a whole range of other resources that you could call on if you needed to deal with the sort of problem that you are talking about. You know, the taxidivers ought to be part of that system, so that if you need that system you just say, ‘Look, we’ve got somebody out there that needs to get from A to B. Can you go and do it?’.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. Obviously school buses do not run during school holidays. Would you envisage that additional services would be put on during that gap period so there would be some sort of service running during that period as well to try and pick up—

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: Absolutely. That is the whole notion of having an integrated system so that the system operates all year. It could be different. It can differ at different times of the year, but that needs to be driven by the local needs—how the local people see that.

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: And also there are some examples. Port Fairy I think actually during the day when the school bus is parked in the school grounds waiting for the trip home, does a route bus service around Port Fairy—around the town. There are all sorts of initiatives like that which could use the spare capacity.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Quilty, do you have a question?

Mr QUILTY: I did miss the presentation, but what I was going to ask was basically what you led on from then. We have the buses sitting around during the day. What is the potential for using them for the transport routes during the day between school pick-ups and drop-offs?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: Yes. Well, you are going to have the resource availabilities there, and it is a case of trying to work out what the local needs are. We talked about the importance of identifying the regional needs, not just little piecemeal things. The school bus is one step towards a better system at a regional level as a whole, and the fact that there are buses sitting around during the day—you are not going to use them all full time during the day to meet regional needs, but you can certainly use some of them to meet the needs that the local community identifies as its highest priorities.

Mr QUILTY: That is all I had.

The CHAIR: Excellent. I might pass back to Mr Barton, who had a couple more questions. Mr Barton, over to you.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Dr Stanley, we know every route is going to have its own circumstances, but from what I have been led to believe there are plenty of opportunities where the buses are two-thirds full and it might actually lead to the operator then saying, ‘You know what? I’ll move from an 18-seater Coaster bus to a 28-seater bus and vow to serve the community better’. Do you think there is a potential for that?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: I will leave this one to John.

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: Look, I think there certainly is, but I come back to the point that this stuff needs to be looked at on a regional basis, and then you can identify all the opportunities, you know. And they are going to expand very quickly if you do that because, to give you an indication, two of the major markets for

public transport are people under 20, who do not drive, and older people. In Melbourne 24.3 per cent of the population are under 20; in regional Victoria it is 30 per cent. For over 60s it is 19 per cent in Melbourne and 34 per cent in regional Victoria. So you have got two out of three people in regional Victoria who are in those kinds of age groups that are, you know, going to be candidates—big candidates—for public transport compared to 43 per cent in Melbourne. It is a much higher proportion. We do not give them the service. I think what the department has to worry about is that this is going to cost a lot. Well, that is the point we made earlier—there is money being spent by the health budget, there is money being spent by the education budget, there is money being spent by the transport budget; put all that together, there is a lot of money already being spent and a lot of it I would say is being wasted that you could use to deliver much better reasonable outcomes for mobility.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, John. The idea of opening up the school bus is not anything new. I certainly lived in a rural part of Melbourne, Victoria, and I am certainly aware that transport options were zip and we were desperately in need. I suggest this has sort of been floating around for more than 20 years. Why haven't we been able to progress this? What is the thing that is stopping people from progressing this?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: My belief is it is the concern about child abuse, and I think it is possibly also the concern about where this might go beyond that. I think we are big enough now to confront those issues. Janet has made the point that child abuse is really grossly exaggerated as an issue in this sense, and we are increasingly understanding that you cannot break government up into silos, because if you do you are going to deliver suboptimal outcomes for the community. So it is time to look at things in a more integrated place-based way, and if you do that you open up lots of opportunities. You are not going to blow the lid off your budget, because there is a lot of money already going in. You are trying to make better use of what you are doing at the moment across the health budget, education budget and transport budget for accessibility purposes.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: And the other thing we have found is there is an awful lot of community buses sitting in a garage for most of the week. If you can bring those buses in, you have got a wonderful system—bring them in to the general public. In fact we have got figures about how little community transport buses are used.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Dr Stanley and John. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks for that. I have one question, actually, or one additional question. It was about: are there any jurisdictions that you know of that allow adults or the general public to use school buses also?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: I think New South Wales in their country areas have buses that are used by everybody.

The CHAIR: That is interesting you raise that point, because I appeared on ABC radio in the country and one of the callers or the caller before I appeared gave that experience—that she grew up in Tamworth and at the time when she was growing up they were allowing the public to also use school buses. I am not sure what era that was, but yes, that was an example given. So you believe possibly parts of New South Wales?

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: And it is common in Europe, where they actually recognise the importance of route buses, everybody using them. They do not actually need to have the same amount of designated school buses because, you know, they actually recognise the importance of public transport for everybody.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Yes. A lot of cities or areas in Europe just do not have school buses because they have got a great service of route buses. Why would you have a school bus?

Mr BARTON: Yes. That would be the right goal.

The CHAIR: Yes. I understand. Do any other committee members have any additional questions? Mr Barton, it sounds like you might have one more.

Mr BARTON: No. I think Dr Stanley and Mr Stanley have done a sterling job presenting their submissions today.

The CHAIR: On that note, I wish to thank both of you for your contribution and presentation. I found it very informative. If any other questions appear or if committee members that were not able to make today's hearings have some, could we send them through, if needed, and would you be happy to respond to those?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Yes, of course. And if you wanted some of the details of facts about some of these background things, I am happy to send the figures and things if you wish me to.

The CHAIR: That would be very helpful, and I might get our secretariat, who assist us in preparation of the report, to reach out if they need some more facts and figures, some statistics. That would be really helpful.

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: Chair, we have got a new paper coming out very shortly on school buses. We can perhaps send you a copy of that, which has got a fair bit more information in it.

The CHAIR: That would be excellent. I would really appreciate that. I look forward to receiving that in due course. And on that note, the committee will now take a short break. I want to thank the witnesses again for their contribution and presentations.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY: Thank you.

Adjunct Prof. STANLEY: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.