

The school bus: an opportunity to reduce rural and regional social exclusion

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Content

2

1. Rural and regional transport disadvantage
2. Arguments for making wider user of our school buses
3. Barriers to this happening
4. An opportunity to tackle bullying
5. The importance of taking a more integrated approach
6. What a 'freed-up' school bus system might look like

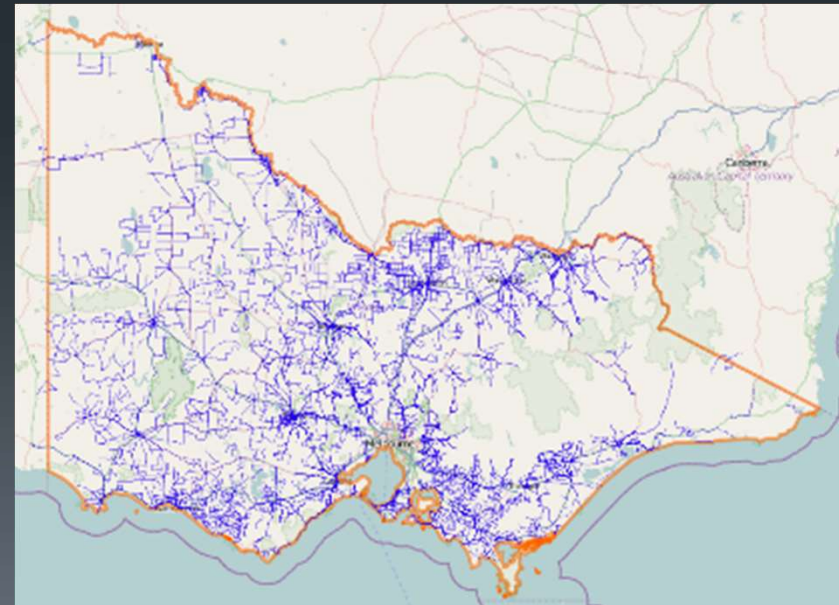
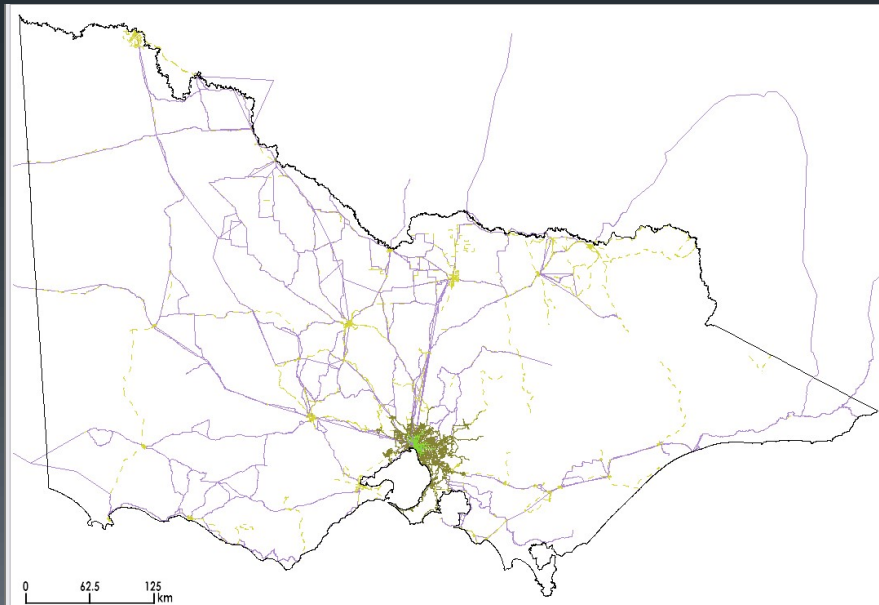
1. Rural and regional transport disadvantage ³

- Those living outside the major cities tend to be more reliant on cars for personal mobility
- Those unable, or preferring not, to drive face increased risks of mobility-related social exclusion and lower wellbeing
- Groups most likely to be at risk are older people, youth, people with a disability, people with language difficulties (e.g., recent arrivals), those on low incomes, those with little or no car access, women and single parents
- Our Victorian and South Australian research highlights children (including pre-schoolers), youth, and single parents with young children
- Lower income people are moving more often to rural areas, seeking lower rents in rural areas
- Lower rents => fewer travel options

2. The opportunity provided by our extensive school bus network

4

- The school bus is the main means of travel to/from school in rural Victoria (~65,000 children)
- >30 million kilometres travelled a year (about twice as many as Melbourne's route buses)
- Operate on 191 days a year
- Potentially available to cost-effectively carry other passengers, on school runs and at other times



Q. Why open school buses to wider use?

5

A. There is considerable unmet travel need in rural areas

General conclusions are:

- Rural and regional PT services very limited
- Community transport is doing agency determined transport for their aged/disability/youth clients, for mainly medical or welfare services
- There is extensive unmet transport needs



3. Some barriers to freeing-up the school bus in Victoria⁶

- I. The system is tied up in bureaucratic/administrative knots (esp. eligibility criteria)
 - Which make it hard for pre-school children and post-school youth to use the service and virtually impossible for others

- II. Funding silos limit scope to deliver more integrated mobility solutions
 - There is no strategic transport approach for transport on a catchment area basis

- III. Fear of a very serious but unlikely event (child sexual abuse; stranger danger)
 - Protective measures can be put in place
 - Of greater concern appears to be the bus stop
 - Another form of serious abuse (bullying) is present, without a strategic response

4. Bullying on school buses: An under-recognized concern

- Bullying is common on a school bus (e.g., 2 incidents per 25 min. ride)
 - Verbal bullying, psychological intimidation, physical, sexual harassment
- Bullying can be a serious risk to mental health
 - Consequences can be depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness, insomnia, decreased school performance and avoidance of school
- Witnesses to bullying can experience negative mental health outcomes
- Where a bystander intervenes (or bus aide in the US), they can stop the bullying about 50% of the time – increasing if training is offered
- When the victim is assisted by a bystander, the victim feels safer and at less risk of having negative outcomes
- Thus, other passengers on a school bus may reduce bullying and also lower any risk of other forms of abuse

5. The school bus system should be part of a coordinated place-based, locally run transport system⁸

- Getting the best use from available transport resources requires integrated regional transport planning
 - ‘Transport’ is partly funded by other departments – health, education
- Integrated planning should involve governments and local communities identifying and prioritising transport needs and the best ways of meeting those needs
- Making better use of school buses is a simple and cost-effective way of improving rural and regional accessibility opportunities

6. What a 'freed-up' school bus system might look like⁹

1. Determining school bus routes should be one part of integrated regional accessibility planning
2. State Government should continue to contract private providers to provide the school bus service BUT as part of an integrated place-based accessibility system
3. A Regional Accessibility Planning and Delivery Committee should (among other things)
 - Determine regional needs and priorities
 - Set guidelines for allocating spare seats on school bus services and
 - Identify priorities for wider use of school buses out of school hours for service delivery (e.g. providing town route services in smaller communities)
4. The State should remove regulations restricting school bus use
 - Include priority for pre-school children and parents and post-school education students

'Freed-up' school bus (Continued)

4. Student tracking introduced at regional level
5. Measures to restrict child abuse and bullying on all public vehicles and waiting/loading areas:
 - Open school buses to the travelling public
 - Driver has training in grooming behaviour and intervention in bullying
 - Volunteer travel on vehicle where there are some concerns
 - Driver has right to refuse entry where passenger is not fit to travel
 - Actions to improve safety at bus stops
 - Undertake research about child safety on buses

Alternative model: The school/route bus where all people are acceptable!



**Victoria:
65,000
children travel
on a school
bus,
886,000 don't!**