

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

Mr Andrew Dalglish

Organisation Name: Victorian Principals Association

Your position or role: President

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Friday 11 June, 2021

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Submission to the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee - Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria

Who we are

The Victorian Principals Association is a professional association of 972 members from rural, regional and metropolitan Melbourne areas, that recognises the opportunities and challenges that are faced by educational leaders. The VPA is the voice of Victorian government primary school leaders and actively advocates for them on the complex role of school leadership. It is a network of school leaders with a focus on the wellbeing of colleagues ensuring they are **connected**, **united** and **empowered**. The VPA provides a range of key services and support for leaders in Victorian government primary schools. Through the VPA school leaders are kept up to date with information that affects the education sector, provided with professional learning opportunities and are advocated for at State, Federal and International levels.

Purpose of this Submission

The Legislative Council Economic and Infrastructure Committee has invited submissions to its current inquiry into the use of school buses in rural and regional Victoria. Primarily this inquiry intends to consider how the use of school buses could be extended to the wider public to enhance the mobility of regional and rural Victorians.

Our Association is supportive of the extension of school bus services to the general public. This support however is contingent on the retention of two key features of the School Bus Program policy. In this submission we seek to ensure the Committee is cognisant of the need to retain these two features if any modification is proposed by the Committee to the program's operation. These features are vital to the way education can be delivered to young people in rural and regional Victoria.

In addition, this submission proposes the extension of an arrangement for the use of school buses by some schools for the Victorian Government's Tech School initiative to all schools in rural and regional Victoria as well as community groups. This extension would improve, at relatively minimal cost, access to transport for schools and community groups.

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Features of the School Bus Program which should be retained

Feature 1 – The primary purpose of the School Bus Program is to transport students to and from school

The School Bus Program was established by the Victorian Government many decades ago to provide transport to and from school for students residing in rural and regional Victoria. Many of these areas had (and still have) none or limited public transport services.

The program continues to successfully provide these services to over 70,000 students using over 1,500 bus services. It is fair to say that most of these do not have alternate means to travel to and from school.

The importance of supporting rural and regional students to travel to and from school cannot be overstated. Education outcomes for rural and regional students are generally lower than those for their counterparts in metropolitan Melbourne.¹ Whilst these outcomes reflect many factors it is clear making it easier for students to actually get to school is critical.

Our rural and regional schools work hard to improve the education opportunities and outcomes for their students. For these efforts to be translated into improved outcomes we need our students to be able to get to school. Given that the School Bus Program is the only viable available transport for many rural and regional students to get to school it is critical that the primary focus of the school bus services continue to be getting students to and from school.

Whilst we are supportive of opening up school buses to support the mobility of the general public (subject to concerns about child safety discussed in the next section of this submission), any opening up cannot reduce or restrict students getting to and from school every day on time.

Students utilising the School Bus Program services in effect have reserved places on a school bus (via their school bus coordinator). This guarantees students transport to and from school. This primacy of school students having the first call on school bus services should be retained in any considerations and recommendations from the Economy and Infrastructure Committee.

¹ The **2019 Report to the Victorian Minister for Education by the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students** (refer https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ExpertAdvisoryPanelforruralandregionalstudents_Report.pdf) states:

In rural areas and regional centres of Victoria:

- students are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than in metropolitan areas
- Year 12 completion rates are improving however government school enrolments are declining
- a lower proportion of students achieve high NAPLAN relative growth from year 3 to 5 than in metropolitan Melbourne.
- VCE results on average are below those of metropolitan Melbourne.



Feature 2 – Students must be safe whilst traveling on school bus services

Providing a safe environment for students is a key requirement for schools. The *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic) and *Minister for Education Ministerial Order 870 – Child Safe Standards – Managing the risk of child abuse in schools* are two critical legal requirements which support schools to provide this safe environment.

In particular, *Child Safe Standard 6 (Strategies to identify and reduce or remove risks of child abuse)* of the Ministerial Order requires schools to actively identify and manage risks to child safety. Whilst schools are not directly responsible for the safety of children whilst they travel on school bus services, our Association recommends to the Economic and Infrastructure Committee that any consideration of the extension of school bus services to the general public complies with the Child Safe Standards.

Any extension of the bus services must identify and reduce or remove any risk of child abuse the extension might create for students.

Students from prep year to Year 12 travel on school buses. Currently the Department of Education and Training, Transport Victoria, bus operators, families and schools have in place arrangements to manage the risk of child abuse on school buses. These arrangements include:

- Codes of conduct for students, bus drivers and bus operators (with associated processes to deal with any breach of these codes)
- Bus drivers must have Working with Children Checks
- Stringent checks of members of the public applying to travel on school buses²
- Parents and/or guardians being responsible for the supervision of students at bus pick up/departure points
- Schools being responsible for the supervision of students when dropped off and picked up at school.

Students using school bus services are aged between 4 and 18 years old. They are children. The Economic and Infrastructure Committee must ensure any extension to school bus services complies with the Child Safe Standards. This is particularly relevant for very young students in Foundation to Year 2 who are developing their awareness of safe behaviours. The risk of child abuse should not be increased.

One strategy to achieve this which the Committee may wish to consider is to reserve the first 2-3 rows of seats in each bus for members of the general public. Signage to this effect would need to be placed in plain sight to bolster the authority of the bus driver to enforce this rule. This arrangement would of course only be relevant for school buses which have spare capacity to carry the general public.

² Currently the School Bus Program Policy requires members of the public to complete an application form (Form 4 – Application for permission to travel – General public) before travelling on a school bus. Applicants must provide two verbal reference checks and, in some circumstances, also provide written reference checks, criminal checks and Working With Children checks.



Opportunities to improve access to publicly funded transport

It is refreshing that the Economy and Infrastructure Committee is using this inquiry to investigate opportunities to improve the access of rural and regional communities to public transport using the School Bus Program.

Our Association would like to advocate for the extension of arrangements put in place by the Department of Education and Training and Transport Victoria in recent years to utilise unused capacity in school buses to support the current Government's Tech School initiative.

The Victorian Government in recent years has established ten Tech Schools in regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne. Each Tech School is physically located on a university or TAFE institute campus. In regional Victoria Tech Schools are in:

- Ballarat – Federation University
- Bendigo – La Trobe University
- Berwick – Chisholm TAFE Institute
- Geelong – The Gordon TAFE Institute
- Lilydale – Box Hill Institute
- Morwell – Gippsland TAFE.

Tech Schools provide STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) activities and opportunities to students from participating government and non-government from secondary schools in their local government area. The students are generally in years 9 and 10. The core activities provided are full-day experiences for the students attending the Tech School.

The Department of Education and Training uses the School Bus Program to provide transport to local schools for their participating students to travel between their school and the Tech School. The arrangement is quite simple and operates well:

- A participating school 'books' a school bus ahead of their Tech School 'day'
- On that day a school bus, rather than returning to its operator's bus depot after its load of students arrive at their school in the morning, remains at the school
- The students from that school going to the Tech School then board the bus and travel to the Tech School. The bus then returns to the operator's bus depot
- In the afternoon the arrangements operate in reverse – the bus travels from the bus depot to the Tech School and transport the students back to their school in time for the end of the school day. The bus then commences its usual school bus transport service.

A major advantage of this arrangement is the cost of transport. School Bus Program bus services are contracted by Transport Victoria for four hours service in the mornings and a further four hours in the afternoons. The four-hour contracted service requirement commences when the bus leaves its bus depot. Under the arrangements the Department implemented, the Tech School only has to pay the bus operator for the additional kilometres the bus service has to travel. This is because the service is delivered under the

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Transport Victoria bus service contract and the Tech School extension bus run occurs within the four-hour service period contracted by Transport Victoria.

This arrangement provides bus services for the Tech School and the students in a way which is easily organised, considerably cheaper than if bus services were individually contracted and with all the safety requirements built into the School Bus Program. For regional bus operators it provides opportunities to earn additional revenue from each school bus service.

Our Association requests that the Economy and Infrastructure Committee consider the extension of the 'Tech School' arrangement for school buses to:

- Schools for other educational purposes and experiences (for example all day excursions to local places such as school swimming and athletic carnivals; participation in specialist programs at other schools and tertiary education providers; and other excursions)
- Community groups for travel excursions to local venues (for example Senior Citizens Clubs to travel to a regional centre or area of interest for a day trip).

If the travel associated with trips such as this could be accommodated in the four-hour contracted service periods in the morning and afternoon, then this would greatly improve transport access to rural and regional Victorians at little cost to the groups or government.

As well as providing greater access to cheaper transport services for schools and community groups, the extension of these arrangements would provide a greater return of value for government from their investment in school bus contracts and additional opportunities for rural and regional private bus operators to increase their revenue.

Summary

In principle our Association does not object to the extension of the use of school buses to improve public transport for members of the public in rural and regional Victoria. However, our Association requests that the Economy and Infrastructure Committee ensures that any recommended extension of the use of school buses to transport members of the public:

- Continues the primary focus of the School Bus Program to transport rural and regional students to and from their schools
- Does not compromise compliance of the School Bus Program with Ministerial Order 870 Child Safe Standards.

In addition, our Association also requests that the Committee favorably investigate the extension of the arrangements used by government to transport students to Tech Schools in rural and regional Victoria to other excursions and opportunities for schools and community groups.

It should be noted that we have developed this submission in conjunction with the Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals and Parents Victoria.

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