

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

Ms VICKI DOBSON

Organisation Name:

Your position or role:

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

My name is Vicki Dobson and I work in the early years education sector in Victoria. I have experience in regional, rural and metropolitan education and care services, ranging from long day care programs for 0-6 years, outside school hours care programs for children aged 5 – 12 years and sessional kindergartens for children aged 3 – 5 years. Having lived in regional areas, I have experienced the school transport network as a student and as a caregiver. I have overseen educational services in 3 of the top 10 local government areas for social disadvantage.

I ask for the following considerations to be taken into account when considering changes, adjustments or extensions to the current bus services in regional areas that include school aged children.

1. At all times access to education for all students in early, primary and secondary school services must be the priority focus when considering extending the school transport network services. This means that there should be no priority system required to allocate seating for students – including to private or non-government schools delivery an educational program that is at least partially eligible for state or federal government funding. Distance should not prevent parents and students having a choice in where they source their education. Increases to the number of students in the area should reflect the provision of transport services.
2. There is some provision currently for non-school aged – kindergarten – students to access bus transportation to their early years education program in rural areas. This access should be available to all students in all early years programs where there is no existing public transportation access. In the very rare instance that a kindergarten service is located in a township or regional area that does not have a primary and/or secondary school present, a transport service must be made available to these communities to ensure that all children are able to access a quality early childhood education.
3. With the introduction of two years of funded kindergarten, there is expected to be at least an 80% increase in the number of children accessing government-funded early years education programs. This increase can support the viability of existing transport networks in rural and regional areas if these children are permitted access.
4. Many primary schools are unable to offer a viable, cost-effective, on-site after school care program to support working or vulnerable families. Allowing providers – privately or school operated – access to the bus transport service via school-to-school transportation would allow the development of viable hub programs that are safe for students to access and mitigates risk to providers.
5. Primary care givers of students should be able to access the bus transport network in order to attend meetings and events at schools. This should be extended to consider that these family members can also use this time to access critical support agencies and networks that are generally located in the regional centre that the educational facility is located.
6. Access of the general public to the school transport network must not come at the expense of students. Where capacity is reaching maximum limits of the existing network, expansion of the existing resources should be implemented, which would then support the use of the service by other community groups. This access should be at the same fees as other public transport functions.

7. There are buses currently in use that have multiple entry points i.e. front and mid-section. Modifying these buses to permit student only access at the front of the bus and adult only to the rear could assist in mitigating potential risk to young students.
8. Modified access to buses should be considered in environments where secondary school students are traveling with early years or junior primary students. This minimises exposure of the younger students to conversations and behaviours that are inappropriate for their age, but appropriate for the older students.
9. Modified access could also assist when traveling from school to school for outside school hours care programs. This would permit drivers (and where present, attendants) to easily identify if all students have disembarked where required.
10. Most public users of the system, under the current model, would be required to spend up to 7 hours in the township. This is not a realistic experience for most users and in some communities may encourage loitering and inappropriate behaviours. It would also place pressure on vulnerable members of the community to 'justify' their time 'in town' and in itself become a barrier to use. As part of this service extension, consideration would need to be made to offering at least one other timetabled route – likely midday – to provide community members with a choice of how long they are spending within the township. This could minimise the exposure of students to general public, as well as removing barriers for community members accessing the service. It may also potentially increase the viability of the service provided by the transport networks or allow for a greater variety in the fleet composition, with some smaller and some larger vehicles being utilised.
11. Where there is one service provided as part of the school transport system, the general public will need to be required to reserve their seats prior to accessing the service. This will reduce the risk of overcrowding and potential inappropriate interactions from frustrated passengers who miss out.

Thank you for your time.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1:

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Vicki Dobson