

Submission to:

***Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Inquiry into Extending School Buses for
Use by the Wider Public to Enhance
Mobility of Regional and Rural Victorians.***



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Terms of Reference

That the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by no later than November 2021, on extending school buses for use by the wider public to enhance the mobility of regional and rural Victorians, including, but not limited to:

- (1) an independent analysis of the transport disadvantages experienced by regional and rural Victorians, specifically youth, the elderly and low-income households;
- (2) investigate the potential social and community impacts of improving mobility options by widening the mainstream school bus system and an analysis of the examples and trials from other jurisdictions both locally and overseas;
- (3) investigate technology and systems that would be effective in ensuring child safety on mainstream school buses;
- (4) identify any existing or potential barriers to allowing public access to the mainstream school bus network;
- (5) identify the spare capacity of existing assets in the school bus program and how that might be used to enhance public transport options in regional and rural Victoria; and

- (6) investigate the costs of extending mainstream school buses to the public and how a fare system would function.

Who is BusVic

Victoria's bus and coach operators have worked hand-in-hand with Government since 1944. For nearly 80 years, Industry and Government have collaborated on projects that have improved Victoria's economic competitiveness, environmental resilience and social wellbeing.

Bus Association Victoria Inc. (BusVic) represents 400 bus and coach operators who provide route bus services, school bus services, school special services, charter and tour and intra and inter-state coach services, including V/Line services, across the state. Victoria's bus and coach operators are mostly small, trans-generational family firms which are deeply embedded in their local communities.

BusVic's vision and mission are:

VISION

Perpetual resilience and relevance of Victoria's bus and coach operators.

MISSION

- . To represent our members' best interests to Government in forging the world's best public transport culture.**
- . Work in partnership with Government and stakeholders for the increased use of buses and Public Transport as part of the development of more sustainable transport systems.**
- . Advocate for the safety, cost effective, and demand responsive capability of buses and the social, environmental and economic benefits that accompany them.**

Executive Summary

Victoria's mainstream school bus network has been exclusionary since its formalisation in 1944. There is an opportunity to 'open up' this network (make it more inclusive) to the wider travelling public and increase the extent of accessibility to mobility options in regional and rural parts of Victoria. This could be done by revising some of the rules associated with eligibility and implementing new operating requirements to increase public safety on the buses. If some necessary measures were implemented, substantial economic and social benefits would flow not just to these often isolated and transport disadvantaged communities, but to the State in general.

Current State

Public transport services in regional Victoria are incomparable to the scope of services available in metropolitan Melbourne. Regional public transport services consist mainly of PTV funded and inadequately timetabled route buses in most regional centres, V/Line inter-city coaches and V/Line trains. In rural Victoria however, public transport services are scant. Connectivity from rural areas to regional centres and metropolitan Melbourne is poor at best. As a result, the lack of transport options in rural Victoria sees the private car remain the dominant mode of transport for those who live and work in rural Victoria.

Victoria's mainstream school bus network has been an exclusionary, or closed network since its formalisation in 1944. Currently consisting of 1500 contracted school buses, only eligible students can access this 'free' school bus network if they satisfy the criteria set out in the Department of Education and Training's (DET) School Bus Program Policy and Procedures.

School buses presently travel 31.1 million kilometres a year, more than double the 14.3 million kilometres travelled by regional route bus services. The network carries over 65,000 students a day at an annual cost to the State of \$300 million. (Stanley & Stanley, 2020).

The operators of school bus services in regional and rural Victoria are mainly transgenerational, small to medium mixed family businesses who are very much community leaders. The long-term nature of family firm bus operators is one of their key characteristics, as they tend to have lengthy tenures and anticipate long careers, not only for themselves but also for their children. Operators' family community status and identity are important to them to build a reputation for the future. (Lowe, 2016).

The policies pursuant to the mainstream school bus network is managed by DET, whereas the network is implemented and managed by the Department of Transport (DOT).

The present Victorian rural school bus network sees government funded but privately owned buses used for 2-3 hours in the morning and afternoon on each school day (about 198 days a year). Outside of these hours, the school buses often sit idle and are sometimes used by the owner/operator to do complimentary and discounted community trips, school excursions and small amounts of weekend and school holiday charter work.

In Victoria, policies and regulations relate to the eligible age of the passenger (5 to 18 years) and the requirement to live 4.8 kilometres or more from the nearest school. Additionally, *post-secondary students and apprentices* may travel where all the following conditions are met:

- the distance from where they live to public transport is 1.6 kilometres or over;
- written undertakings are given to the coordinating school principal that other transport arrangements will be made if seating becomes insufficient due to an increase in the number of students with a higher priority of access to travel, or a smaller vehicle, is engaged for the service;
- written references are provided;
- seats are available on the bus;
- the person has been out of education for less than two years;
- there is no additional cost incurred by the government and;
- they re-apply to travel each school term.

Pre-school children in Victoria, who are four years and over, can travel if three written undertakings and confirmations are made to the school principal, such as the child can travel independently, there is room on the bus, the child is met at the bus stop and written approval is given by the principal controlling the bus.

The parent of a pre-school child can apply to travel on the school bus subject to available seating.

The public can travel if the conditions relating to post-secondary students (except the time from school) are met, plus the following:

- if a fare is paid in advance of travel;
- a 'working with children check' is completed;
- a criminal check is completed.

Because of these onerous current conditions, virtually no non-students use the school bus system.

School buses *may* be widened beyond school students under current regulatory/policy provisions but there are very tight restrictions on who can make use of the system and under what circumstances. This tight definition on eligibility has its origins in the reality that the services in question are intended to be school bus services, not public transport services, and service provision is usually funded from an education budget, not a transport budget, even if the transport department is contracted to deliver the service (itself or by private contractors).

Thus, prospective wider societal benefits from service provision, such as enhanced social inclusion or improved regional labour market flexibility, do not enter into calculations on service economics or financing. Such 'silo thinking' is a major barrier to improved regional mobility, as illustrated for the UK by Gristy (2019). It requires whole-of-government thinking to knock down functional barriers. (Stanley & Stanley, 2020.)

Providing wider access to spare seats on existing school bus services and using school buses when it is not required for the contracted service has been discussed in Victoria for more than 20 years. It seems there are three main reasons or barriers as to why no change has ever been introduced.

First, there is a perceived concern about child abuse on school buses. Second, inadequate capital and recurrent budgets to new equipment and operating expenses. Third, the silo-like mentality of the present rules associated with the carriage of non-students on school buses.

Spare capacity, existing alongside unmet regional mobility needs, characterises much of the Victorian dedicated school bus network, the major means of providing travel to/from school within rural and regional Victoria. (Stanley and Stanley, 2020). Poor accessibility to public transport causes social and economic disbenefits, particularly for those who cannot or will not drive, including but not limited to social exclusion, public health issues, subdued local reinvestment and stifled regional development.

Other Jurisdictions

Australia

Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania do not allow non-students to travel on their dedicated school bus networks.

In New South Wales, regular passengers are permitted to use dedicated school bus services only if there is capacity. The operator can charge a fare based on what would apply for the same distance travelled on a regular passenger service. TfNSW are presently rolling out a “Transport Connected Bus” product in regional NSW which allows the public to access online trip planner information for dedicated school bus services. (BusVic is currently funding a trial of Melbourne-based technology with more capability than the NSW trial on 5 route buses in Melbourne’s north.)

In Queensland, adults and students who are not eligible for assistance under their conveyance system are able to travel on kilometre-based bus services as fare-paying passengers, subject to the following conditions:

- Fare-paying passengers will be carried only if spare capacity exists after all STAS eligible students are catered for.
- Travel for adults will be available only if space exists on the bus after all students, both eligible and ineligible, have been accommodated.
- The passenger pays the appropriate fare direct to the bus operator.
- The local bus operator is responsible for monitoring the space available on services and for determining the priority for this space. Adequate advance notice should be given by the bus operator to parents/guardians/ students of any intention to withdraw transport from fare-paying students for any reason.
- Operators are to advise all applicants of the conditions of travel.

- continued availability of space for fare-paying passengers cannot be guaranteed. Access to the service and any extensions provided for fare-paying passengers, may be discontinued through the following circumstances: Increased numbers of eligible students, approaching the maximum gross vehicle mass of the vehicle, school/route closures, reduced size of the bus.
- The carriage of fare-paying passengers is a commercial arrangement between the bus operator and that passenger. It is the operator's responsibility to ensure that they have the appropriate compulsory third party insurance for the number and type of passengers carried.
- Bus operators and principals have the authority for the discipline of students where necessary.
- Adult passengers are subject to the sole authority of the driver of the vehicle in terms of behaviour standards. The driver has the authority to remove adults whose behaviour is not appropriate.
- The Department of Transport and Main Roads may, in the public interest, grant or withdraw approval for fare-paying passengers at any time.

Overseas

While many countries offer a dedicated school bus service, it is only one form of transport to school for children: children can walk or cycle where the distance is relatively short, use public transport (if available), or travel by car. The share of modes used by children to get to and from school varies greatly between countries.

On school days in the US, 480,000 yellow school buses carry twice as many passengers as public transit.

Most children in the UK travel to school by public bus; however, there is an increasing trend to use dedicated school buses outside London, although confronting growing funding pressures.

In New Zealand, use of the school bus is diminishing, being replaced by private cars (Gristy 2019).

The use of dedicated school transport is rare in The Netherlands and Germany. In the Netherlands children commonly walk or ride a bicycle to school. In Germany, public transport timetables may be adapted to meet the timetable of school children, as is the case in New York City (Stanley & Stanley, 2020.)

Desired State

Turning the mainstream school bus network from an exclusionary one to an inclusive one would dramatically increase the potential for those without a car to get from home to work or their town centre, reduce social exclusion and increase economic activity in many parts of rural Victoria – many parts which have seen population, social and economic decline for some time.

If DET's Guidelines were changed so the public could more easily access the school bus network, rather than just eligible students, we would see a far more efficient use of scarce resources. We would also be improving the extent of accessibility to mobility options available to many isolated rural and regional residents.

The Regional Network Development Plan (May 2015) consultation process and subsequent report identified this as a key outcome to improve connectivity in regional Victoria, yet nothing has been introduced.

Necessary Measures

To introduce such changes, several initiatives would need to be actioned:

1. DOT should fund operators to fit participating buses with GPS's so the public could see where their children's bus is on an app, just like metropolitan and regional route buses have.
2. DOT should fund operators to fit participating buses with cameras to record activity on the bus.
3. The existing regional route fare structure should apply so all non-student's travelling on the bus pays the appropriate fare. Each bus should also be fitted with a ticketing system, preferably one that is consistent the metropolitan and majority of the regional route bus network. If this is cost prohibitive or just not possible, a system that interfaces with the existing regional bus and rail ticketing system would probably suffice.
4. The DET Policies and Procedures in respect of eligibility and authority to travel would need to be revised. Particularly pages 14-15. The present authority to travel process should be replaced with a simpler process where all non-students who wish to use the school bus request access to the service on-line and approval is given by the School Principal. In considering each application, the School Principal, or their nominee, should consult with the bus operator and other local stakeholders about the request.
5. Non-student passengers travelling on a school bus should have to sit in a specially allocated seat.

6. Measures to address child assault and bullying on all public vehicles and at waiting/loading areas should be introduced. This initiative could include adults travelling as passengers on the school bus. It would also be of benefit for bus drivers to be given some training on signs that bullying or inappropriate interaction may be occurring. An online system should be available for Operators to report any suspect or inappropriate behaviour by non-students to the school.
7. The school presently provides current student lists to the operator. Non-student's names should be provided to the operator in a separate list, and all non-students should be obliged to carry and provide photo ID upon the drivers request.
8. The rules should be updated so the driver has the right to refuse entry where a non-student passenger is considered not fit to travel by the operator or the driver.
9. Applications for non-students to travel on school buses should be denied if there is an existing equivalent contracted route bus or V/Line coach service already in place.
10. The State Government should work with the Bus Association Victoria Inc. to finalise and implement these measures.

Pilot

To test the integrity of the necessary measures listed herein, BusVic will fund the pilot of a Safe School Travel pilot ICT solution for 12 months on 5 school bus services in the Castlemaine area as of May 2021. The ICT pilot will consist of: In Vehicle Monitoring System (IVMS) or GPS; cameras; driver communication system; smart card reader machine, and; the full capability of the Connected Bus Solution route monitoring package. Amongst other things, this package will enable parents to monitor the location of their child's bus.

The pilot system will be monitored constantly, and regular reports will be generated to evaluate its effectiveness. A final report will be sent to the DET/DOT and the completion of this innovative pilot.

Benefits

Accessibility to Mobility Options & Service Improvements

If the concept of 'free' school buses being available to the public is supported, the extent of services in regional and rural Victoria has the potential to change from that of Figure 1 to that of Figure 2.

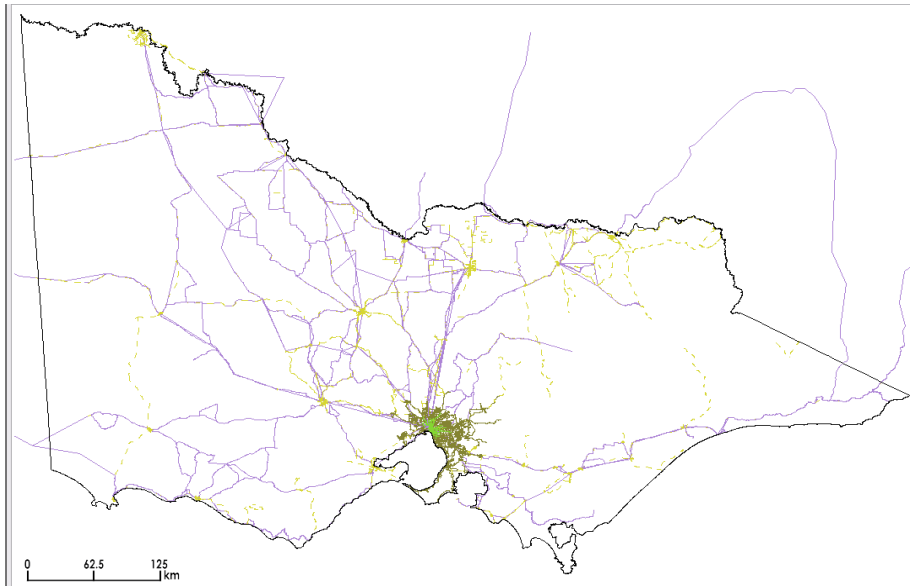


Figure 1
Train, tram, V/Line coach and PTV route buses

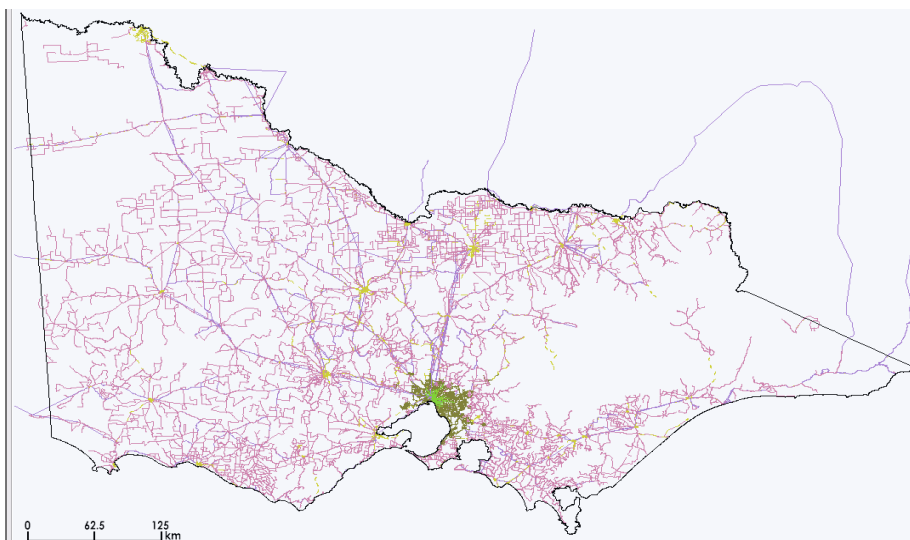


Figure 2
Train, tram, V/Line coach, PTV route buses and PTV school buses

The obvious benefit associated with allowing dedicated school buses to carry non-students will see a dramatic increase in the number of transport services available in regional and rural areas for Victorians to access. Services would be available to the public in areas where there has historically been no public transport.

It is important to note that the objective in making more transport options available to the public in regional and rural areas is not to shift existing passengers from established contracted route or V/Line services.

Reduced Social Exclusion and Improved Wellbeing

If the concept of 'free' school buses being available to the public was supported, social exclusion could decrease, and personal wellbeing would improve.

Victorian residents are more likely to be at risk of mobility-related social exclusion and reduced wellbeing, because of a shortage of travel options. The consequences of a lack of transport can be quite severe, contributing to isolation, unemployment, poorer child health and development, an increased risk of family violence and reduced ability to access medical and dental services. Thus, providing affordable travel capacity is important for personal welfare (and economic productivity) in regional areas, with a high monetary value. The wider use of school bus services provides one opportunity to increase regional mobility opportunities in Victoria (Stanley & Stanley, 2020.)

Stanley et al. (2011) confirm that personal wellbeing will improve the more that they have travel options that meet their needs: they are able to get around reliably, can find transport so they can travel, are able to travel when they want to travel, can get to places quickly, can find the time to travel when they need to, are able to get to public transport stops/stations and can cover the costs of their transport. The authors put an estimated value of \$20 on each additional trip taken.

Reduced Bullying

deLara (2008) interviewed 30 rural bus drivers, who reported that bullying and aggression took place daily on school buses, most considering this to be a significant problem. Bullying commonly occurs in situations where there is a lower level of adult supervision. The presence of adult passengers on a school bus may well reduce the incidence of bullying behaviour between children, even more so when information is available about successful intervention approaches (Stanley & Stanley, 2020.) Cameras on board school buses will also reduce the likelihood of bullying.



Improved Cost

Using available spare seats on the journey to/from school effectively has minimal marginal cost. Marginal costs of using the school bus at other times of day would also be low, since the school bus contract covers capital costs and most bus operators will often be glad of the opportunity to make further use of the vehicle, at moderate cost.

Conclusion

This Submission asserts Victoria's current mainstream school bus network is exclusionary and needs to change to become inclusive. The opportunity to 'open up' this network to the wider travelling public and increase the extent of accessibility to mobility options in regional and rural parts of the State is here and now. BusVic proposes the 'opening up' of the mainstream school bus network be done by revising some of the rules associated with eligibility and implementing the necessary measures designed to increase the safety and security on school buses. We assert that if these necessary measures as described herein were implemented, substantial economic and social benefits would flow not just to these often isolated and transport disadvantaged communities, but to the State in general.

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