

## PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

### TRAVEL REPORT

#### **Samantha Greay – Portfolio Holder, March 2023**

The Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) provides travel assistance to school and tertiary students who are geographically isolated. The two main types of travel support are:

- Subsidised fares for air, bus and train travel for eligible students who live within the defined remote area (DRA) of Western Australia.
- A road travel subsidy for eligible students who live anywhere within Western Australia, but who must be driven in a private vehicle more than 56 km from home to the nearest:
  - Appropriate government school with boarding facilities offering classes in the grade or level in which the student is enrolled, or
  - Regular passenger transport (bus stop, airport or train station - please visit the TransWA – Plan Your Journey website for regular passenger transport hubs and routes), or
  - A school bus service operating between the student's home and the school they are attending.

At present, when applying for a refund or travel voucher through STSS, a student is only eligible to submit a request for flights via the most direct route by air/bus/train between the principal family home or usual place of residence and where they are being educated. ICPA (WA) wrote to Minister Saffioti outlining a need for flexibility as there are times when students may need to travel to an alternative town to meet their families if, for example, the family has been at a School of the Air camp.

At the 2022 ICPA (WA) State Conference, three travel motions were presented related to the eligibility criteria of the STSS Road Travel Subsidy, which is now precluding members from receiving the Road Travel Subsidy. Responses to correspondence advised members to email 'richard.roberts@transport.wa.gov.au' as cases will be assessed on an individual basis. To date, no response has been received by those members who sent emails.

ICPA (WA) has written to the Minister of Transport, Hon Rita Saffioti, MLA several times and have informed her that we meet 3 times a year in Perth requesting a delegation meeting to discuss the eligibility criteria, again, with no response received. ICPA (WA) would greatly welcome the opportunity to clearly outline how the application of the Road Travel Subsidy eligibility criteria is not appropriate to rural locations. When the proximity to a transport hub, aka a bus stop, makes you ineligible to receive the Road Travel Subsidy even if that bus services only travel to Widgiemooltha, as acknowledged by On-demand Transport, questions need to be answered how the eligibility criteria is assisting rural and remote families with equitable access to education.

ICPA (WA) wrote to John Bailly of School Bus Services (SBS) and also had a successful meeting with him at the July face-to-face meeting to discuss members school bus issues and how to lodge a concern or complaint. Mr Bailly explained the process on the website to follow to lodge a concern and speak with the Contact Officer responsible for the area. This information has been forwarded to members.

Feedback from ICPA (WA) members who use the Orange School Buses suggests that there is a lot of confusion with the terms 'eligible' and 'complimentary' and this was also the feedback from Mr. Bailly. Members often feel that the rules that SBS are governed by do not fit with the complexities of distance, schools, education needs and families in regional Western Australia.

In mid-2021 there had been an ABC News article outlining the major impact that removing a bus route can have on our families and towns, siting Munglinup where there was the possibility that a route may close. Unfortunately, the issue with the Hyden bus routes remains unresolved after a number of meetings.

In August 2021, ICPA (WA) welcomed the news that the Minister for Transport had referred the School Bus Services policy to a parliamentary committee for review. In October ICPA (WA) submitted in an extensive submission to the committee and attended as witnesses at a public hearing to discuss matters raised in the submission including the operation of the Policy.

### **SCHOOL BUS SERVICES REVIEW 2022**

The first School Bus Services review in 25 years was conducted in 2022. The *'Bus Fair'* report was released in December 2022 some of the key recommendations included:

- Enhancing collaboration between the Department of Education and the Public Transport Authority
- Providing greater notice to the community when Transport services expand to replace school bus services
- Enabling families to keep their child on a wait list seat while also receiving a conveyance allowance
- Creating a formal process for parents and careers to appeal decisions made by school bus services
- Establishing a dedicated complaints management process
- Improving school bus service advertising and application processes for families
- Making information for applicants more accessible, including providing information in languages other than English; and
- Updating guidelines to include information on conduct of school bus contractors and drivers

In total, there were 40 recommendations from the Bus Fair report. The Government's response accepted 28 in principle, supported 1 in principle and noted 11 recommendations. One of those 11 was the recommendation to review the conveyance allowance. ICPA (WA) have been advocating for an increase to this allowance for a number of years, so here's hoping!

Travel in a State the size of Western Australia is going to be costly for any purpose. From 1947 a State scheme had been in place to assist isolated children to access education but was limited to two free return flights annually. Lobbying by ICPA (WA) resulted in the scheme being extended to three return fares from 1976. The current entitlement is four return trips for students under a subsidised fare. In 1977 the State Government agreed to subsidise part of the cost of travel from a child's home to the nearest approved regular passenger transport service, known as Road Travel Subsidy. It was a significant benefit given the vast distances travelled by many remote families every year just to reach the nearest airport, bus or train service.

In a submission to the Minister for Transport regarding Road Travel Subsidy in October 1988 ICPA (WA) recommended the Road Travel Subsidy rate be increased from 9c/km to 20c/km. Interestingly, some 34 years later the current rate of Road Travel Subsidy is 22.04c/km.