

PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

TRAVEL REPORT

Arlene Sutherland – Portfolio Leader, March 2025

As the song goes *“The wheels on the bus go round and round or do they?”*... Sometimes they do not. During 2024 the Travel Portfolio once again focused on the challenges encountered by rural and remote students accessing education, including bus runs being terminated within two weeks of them starting and, sadly, it not being communicated well enough to the families and bus contractors!

At the preceding 2024 State Conference, five motions were presented addressing a range of issues. The Lakes District Branch presented four motions, including one advocating for an increase to the payment rate per kilometre for the Public Transport Authority (PTA) conveyance allowance to align with the business expense rate of 85 cents per kilometre by the Australian Tax Office (ATO).

ICPA (WA) appreciates the increase to the allowance in early 2024, which saw an increase of 26.20 cents per kilometre (25.24 cents per kilometre up to 55.6 cents per kilometre), which was well received as this was the most significant increase in almost 22 years! However, this allowance is still one-third less than the ATO rate of 85 cents per kilometre. ICPA (WA) will continue to advocate for an ever-hopeful increase and to match payment to the ATO.

The Meekatharra Air Branch presented a motion that parents receive a conveyance allowance for driving their children to Distance Education (DE) and School of the Air (SOTA) camps.

During October 2024 face-to-face meetings in Perth a State Council delegation convened with Ms Olivia Crowley, Chief of Staff and her colleague at the office of Hon. Minister Saffioti. The discussion highlighted the challenges faced by geographically isolated families, particularly the importance of School of the Air camps, which are an integral part of their education. Some families may need to attend these camps three or four times a year, with each camp lasting a week.

For one of our families, the mother works on the station and has to take one week off work then drives 650 kilometres each way, a total of 1300 kilometres to attend, with no financial assistance. When we suggested a conveyance allowance for these school camps the response given to ICPA (WA) delegates from the Ministers office was one of surprise that there was no such allowance for these educational camps. ICPA (WA) will continue to gather details of just how many families are affected by this allowance gap in the system!

Correspondence was sent to address this issue, and we were grateful to receive a letter from the Executive Director of TransPerth System, Regional Town and School Bus Services (PTA) addressing our suggestion. Unfortunately, we were advised that the Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) states there is no provision for students attending school camps, which is frustrating as the wording of camp may have been misinterpreted. They recommended we take this matter directly to the Department of Education.

ICPA (WA) will continue the advocacy for this allowance to be made available to these isolated families going to educational school ‘camp’... no tents/camping involved!

Lakes District Branch put forward a motion to advocate the Department of Transport to review their policy and criteria regarding the Student Travel Subsidy Scheme (STSS) Road Travel Subsidy (RTS) and increase eligibility for rural families.

A letter was written to the Hon. Minister Saffioti, Minister for Transport highlighting many examples of families who have been deemed ineligible due to the complicated criteria with the transport hubs and the timetabling

of buses i.e. there is a bus stop in the town but it will come through twice a week and then the student would have to change buses and some cases take two days to make a four hour trip.

ICPA (WA) was grateful to receive communication from the Manager On-Demand Transport Customer Service, Mr Richard Roberts, where we discussed the matters raised by ICPA (WA). The Department of Transport acknowledged that the eligibility criteria for the Road Travel Subsidy have historically been strictly applied, particularly in relation to timetabled bus services, regardless of the frequency of the service.

Previous approaches from ICPA (WA) have highlighted this aspect of the subsidy, which has prompted a commonsense application of the eligibility criteria by the Department over the last 18 months. Factors such as the age and safety of the student, frequency of the bus transport and any other extenuating circumstances are now considered before a decision is made on a subsidy application. This is a great move forward.

The Department informed ICPA (WA) that rejected applications for the subsidy in the examples we provided have resulted in the approval of the subsidy. In the last year, applications declined by the Department have been for trips that have been outside the two-week school term/semester dates requirement, exceeded the allowed trips per year or where incomplete paperwork has been submitted.

In our letter, ICPA (WA) also pointed out to the Department of Transport about differences between rural and metropolitan areas, in that the metropolitan areas have Smartrider cards (students travel for free for the year) as to why this could not be rolled out to rural and remote travel subsidies and not be conditional.

NOTE: As of February 2025, the Free Travel with Student Smartrider is again available for all metropolitan students)

The Department of Transport contacted the Public Transport Authority to ask this question, and they were advised that free transport to school is generally available to all students across the state. The only exception being if rural and remote students do not have access to a school bus service, in which case these students are eligible for a conveyance allowance....but as ICPA (WA) have found, you must meet the criteria!

One of the issues we hear a lot from our members is the communication and notice given for changes to bus schedules, even terminations! Hence two of the motions put forward at the 2024 State Conference were requesting that School Bus Services (SBS) ensure that families and bus contractors receive a minimum of two (2) weeks advance notice in the event of any alterations or cancellations to a school bus route.

This unfortunately does not always happen which also brought another motion put forward requesting that ICPA (WA) advocates the Minister for Transport and the Department of Transport to provide additional staffing, training or restructuring of the School Bus Services (SBS) division to support regional and rural families to ensure open, collaborative and timely communications in determining school bus routes.

ICPA (WA) received correspondence from the Public Transport Authority (PTA) and referred them to the following: They informed ICPA (WA) that the Minister for Transport asked the Legislative Assembly to refer the current Student Transport Assistance Policy (STAP) framework to the Public Accounts Committee for review and following an extensive consultation they tabled their report 'Bus Fair' on 18 August 2022 which included the following recommendation.

Recommendation 35:

"That the Minister for Transport should ensure the Public Transport Authority supports School Bus Services staff to improve their communication with school bus contractors through the development of a communications protocol with clear response and resolution guidelines. School Bus Services should be sufficiently resourced to ensure staff have the time to consult and communicate well".

The PTA, as part of implementing Recommendation 35 has commenced the creation of a new planning and contract support section within School Bus Services to undertake reviews of school bus networks to ensure

they are effective and efficient, with a longer-term planning strategy to meet customer needs both now and into the future. In addition, the PTA has published additional information on its website to provide guidance on establishing community School Bus Advisory Committees linked to their local schools to help with information dissemination.

The PTA also said while the above changes will bring better planning and communication outcomes, it is envisaged that there will always be a period of uncertainty for student placements and short notification periods to affected families for bus route changes to accommodate new applications. This is primarily due to the considerable number of last minute or late applications that are received for transport assistance which can also result in the removal of complimentary students from a service at short notice in favour of an eligible student, where the bus has seating capacity issues.

Unfortunately for some of our families, the above has not come to fruition as a family in Lake King contacted ICPA (WA) with a bus problem. Basically. The family started their first term in 2025, only for the bus to be terminated after two weeks and no notice was given to the families or the contractor. ICPA (WA) again have contacted School Bus Services to see what can be done about this situation as the impact of no bus means the families trying to drive their children to school and also the other issue of the possibility of not being able to attend the local primary school full stop, resulting in the numbers declining at that school.

During our face-to-face meetings in February 2025, our State Councillors met with Mr. Anthony Cattai, Operations Manager with School Bus Services (SBS). We were able to have a productive discussion about the School Bus Advisory Committees (SBAC) and the importance of having them and local knowledge on the 'ground.' The SBAC link has been firmly inserted into the SBS policy for all bus users to see and use; we discussed the best way to encourage families to make sure within their school communities, Parents and Citizens groups to ensure they have registered. Our council suggested that within our advertising and reach on social media, ICPA (WA) grab the attention of our Bus Committees and encourage them to register and we hope that SBS will fully utilise the knowledge that these committees have.

ICPA (WA) also discussed with Mr. Cattai another issue for a family who live 120 kilometers from Esperance and has four children, two of whom attend Esperance Senior High School (ESHS) and the two other children attend Condingup Primary school. The family are trying to get the bus closer to the gateway so that they can ensure that the two older children can get onto the bus for Esperance Senior High School and then the parents can make it back in time to their home to get the younger two children on their bus to Condingup Primary School. At the moment it is proving almost impossible due to the distances they are having to drive to get these children on the bus.

The family contacted ICPA (WA) with their problem and asked if we could assist. ICPA (WA) have been in communication with School Bus Services, have spoken with the bus contractor and also local government representatives in Esperance. We are still hoping that School Bus Services can offer a better solution for the family to make their daily lives more functional and productive. At the moment the family are under a lot of pressure just trying to get their children to be able to receive basic education. ICPA (WA) hope that there will be a positive outcome soon. School Bus Services have been very communicative with regards to this situation.

One point that became clear during this discussion is that when using Google Maps to view bus routes, which are accessible to anyone with a computer or phone, some of the route mappings are inaccurate due to road numbers not being marked on certain roads. For example, the family in Esperance encountered this issue. ICPA (WA) found, through consultation with the family, that Apple Maps provided more consistent results.

In the last 12 months ICPA (WA) have also had some other bus situations which we are grateful to say have worked out well from all the hard work by families, ICPA (WA), Public Transport Authority (PTA) and School Bus Services (SBS).

One such situation;

A family were given the grim news of no bus for their son heading into Year 6 in 2025, and then informed the mum (let us not forget it generally falls to the remit of the mum!) that they would need to spend the day driving approximately 2 hours to get their older children to high school and then repeat getting your younger child to primary school, and then doing the same in the afternoon!

The family reached out to ICPA (WA) with their plight and sent a very comprehensive breakdown of their bus situation. On reading the information the suggested solution made perfect sense, but alas School Bus Services (SBS) and the Public Transport Authority (PTA) did not completely agree. ICPA (WA) wrote a letter to School Bus Services advocating for a change to this decision.

During our face-to-face meeting in October 2024 with Ms Olivia Crowley, Chief of Staff, office of Minister Saffioti, we discussed the Yuna bus situation.

One of our State Councillors who attended the meeting is from the Yuna community and had firsthand knowledge of the area/roads/logistics of what SBS were actually asking of this family and also of the proposed solution. The Ministers office took the information on board and our councillor was able to point out to them on the map what was a good road and not such a good a road; we were asked to send another letter with further information and the Ministers office would take another look. Further to this meeting, the story was captured by GWN news, various radio stations and also social media platforms. The result after much work by many bodies including the Yuna community, the bus thankfully was reinstated for this child to be able to attend his local primary school and be able to complete his Year 6 schooling with his peers. A very happy ending...

Additionally at the same time, the Kondinin community were also granted reinstatement of their bus service after an absence of 10 years.

But wait there is more. A small school way down on the south coast at Gairdner Primary School, sadly a school with falling numbers, has resulted in the remaining students and their families deciding they would have to move schools, a very heartbreaking decision. One family moved their children to Jerramungup (decision purely on accessing a bus), the other family decided to go to Bremer Bay Primary as they were south of Gairdner so was the obvious choice.

However, when applying for bus transport to Bremer Bay Primary they were told initially they would have to meet the bus at a junction 13 kilometres away, the problem with this was the road was not really a suitable road to be driving on a daily basis; hence the family were then told they could meet a bus at a junction 23 kilometres from their home, the family live 24 kilometres from Bremer Bay Primary so hence the family were left with travelling to and from school every day in their own vehicle 96 kilometres.

The family got in touch with ICPA (WA) and a letter was written to School Bus Services (SBS) ICPA (WA) advocated for this decision to be looked at again and to please look at another option to get this family access to education. The family had got to the stage as many families do when they have a bus crisis that they were actually not sure how their children were going to access education.

ICPA (WA) can thankfully report that SBS and PTA looked at the situation and were able to provide a bus for this family that would collect them at the gate and take them to Bremer Bay Primary.

ICPA (WA) appreciate the communication and meetings we have been able to have with SBS and the PTA. We look forward to the continued support from these governing bodies and endeavour to help each other and forever empowering that our country students education matters as long as ***'the wheels on the bus do indeed keep going round and round...'***