

PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

TRAVEL REPORT

Elyse Donaghy – Portfolio Holder, March 2019

There were several motions presented at the 2018 WA State Conference relating to travel and transport. The issues raised by ICPA (WA) members were complimentary/eligible passenger status on school buses, School Bus Services' closest eligible school distance policy, emergency evacuation drills on school buses and better, more equitable processes for claiming air travel reimbursements. State Council set to work raising these issues with the Department of Transport and the Public Transport Authority's School Bus Services.

School Bus Services

Letters were sent to the Public Transport Authority's (PTA) School Bus Services relaying our concerns that students could be forced to change school due to increases in the number of eligible students, bus route alterations (complimentary students are not taken into consideration for numbers) and zone boundaries. We advised that due to the vastness of our State and the increasing difficulty in keeping families in regional, rural and remote areas there can often be a massive fluctuation of children on any given bus run from one year to the next. School Bus Services policy states that students must go to their closest eligible school, using the shortest practical road route. Some families must travel further than their closest bus run in order to attend their closest school, often many kilometres. A request was made that they consider allowing a case-by-case basis and more flexibility for complimentary students to be deemed as eligible students on School Bus Services. ICPA (WA) are committed to lobbying on behalf of our members to ensure children in rural and remote WA have access to appropriate education, this includes their ability to travel to and from their schools.

A letter of response from PTA was received containing the operational principles that guide how transport assistance is provided. These are as follows;

- a. Parents are responsible for ensuring their children attend school;
- b. Parents should be prepared to travel a reasonable distance to transport their children to and from school or a bus / transport service;
- c. Student transport assistance policy will be applied in a manner that is reasonable, equitable and aims to meet the needs of individual communities; and
- d. Transport assistance will be provided according to published eligibility criteria and an entitlement framework.

We were advised that there is a difficulty with making changes to entitlement for a particular group of individuals as it will have an impact on other communities in the State of Western Australia. Point (c) above, points out that the Public Transport Authority (PTA) will always try to apply the transport assistance framework equitably for all WA families. Due to this policy the PTA will not be able to change the current equal distance rule, because while it may benefit families in the more remote areas of the Wheatbelt and Great Southern, it will cause operational issues in high population areas, for example the Southwest and Peel. However, having reviewed the rule concerning nearest bus service to the residence and nearest school to the residence, the PTA will consider on a case by case basis, requests from families for their children to be able to attend schools in their local community.

Motion A22 was raised concerning implementing emergency evacuation drills each term, on the school grounds, involving only drivers and passengers on school buses, so that students are aware of emergency procedures and bus rules. State Council wrote a letter to the Minister for Transport, Hon. Rita Saffioti MLA, requesting the implementation of emergency evacuation drills for school bus services. In response to the letter, we were advised that the safety of passengers and drivers is of utmost importance to the Public Transport Authority's School Bus Services (SBS). SBS regularly issues guidance notices to contractors which include recommendations that emergency evacuations are practiced regularly. It is a contractual requirement that each SBS contractor must develop and maintain a compliant Safety Management Plan to ensure that the operation has a system in place to identify and manage risks and provide controls and mitigating strategies. The PTA regularly audits contractors to ensure they have compliant systems and procedures to manage safety risks. As a part of this review process, Minister Saffioti has asked the PTA to place a particular focus on emergency evacuation drills to ensure bus contractors and students are well-versed in what to do in the event of an emergency.

Air Travel

Supplementary motion S13 was raised at conference in relation to the WA Department of Transport finding a better and more equitable process for the reimbursement of air travel costs for students. In a letter to the Minister for Transport, Hon. Rita Saffioti MLA, State Council advised that students travelling to and from boarding schools are required to fly at the beginning and end of school holidays when airfares from some regional and remote towns are notoriously high due to tourist seasons in the north of the state, even when parents plan well ahead in booking air travel. We asked that the Department of Transport find a better and more equitable process to reimburse families for the cost of air travel for students accessing the Student Subsidised Travel Scheme.

Minister Saffioti gave the following response, "families applying for the scheme have two options when benefitting from the scheme. Travel vouchers can be requested for travel up to three months in advance and redeemed at travel agents (in person or via email/phone) for the required travel. The voucher redemption process ensures there are no out-of-pocket expenses for families except for any discretionary expenses. Alternatively, families may purchase their own fares and apply to DoT for reimbursement upon completion of the travel. Reimbursement is based on the actual fare plus GST, excluding any discretionary expenses."

Minister Saffioti has been advised that there are very few occasions where the full cost of travel cannot be reimbursed, and this generally only occurs when travel has been booked last minute or changes have been made to an existing booking. The most practical way to ensure the cost of student's travel is fully covered by the scheme is to encourage parents to apply for travel vouchers which can be redeemed when the travel is booked.