

## MOTION

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### SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY

Mr BROCK (Frome) (16:25): I move:

That this house urges the State Government to review the current DECD School Transport Policy in its entirety and to achieve a policy that—

- (a) is forward thinking and addresses individual educational needs within a 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian educational context;
- (b) enables local communities to address contextual need as promoted through the DECD 'Brighter Futures' restructure;
- (c) is constructed around the current educational 'Birth to 18' priority agenda;
- (d) recognises the need for all students to access educational support services regardless of the private versus public debate, the preschool versus primary debate or the primary versus secondary debate;
- (e) places equity for all at the centre of the reform; and
- (f) aims to eliminate educational disadvantage for country students.

I would like to refer members today to the current Department for Education and Child Development School Transport Policy. This policy has been in operation since 1985. There have been some minor changes made since this date. It was established to suit the educational requirements and transport issues for regional children and various regional schools in that time. Since this date, there have been numerous changes and, I might mention, changes for the betterment of education for our children.

There has been a lot of involvement with curriculum standards from the commonwealth government, and as recently as November last year, the universal access was released by the commonwealth government. This policy means that kindergarten children can now access up to 600 hours per annum before starting school. This could cover up to 18 months to achieve depending on their date of birth. I might add also that I understand that these children will have priority on the DECD bus services in regional areas.

The state's Brighter Futures educational policy has also been included since the commencement of the current School Transport Policy which started in 1985. Recently, Premier Weatherill signed up for the national educational

reform agenda, also known as the Gonski school funding reforms. This will greatly enhance our educational opportunities, but will the current policy suit this new addition? It is a good question.

The current policy deems that any child who bypasses a government school to attend a school of their choice is ineligible to access DECD school buses. The only way they can access the DECD bus is if there are vacant seats that have been allocated to eligible students. Education is compulsory in Australia, and parents have the right to choose where they send their children. Families who exercise their right of choice are being discriminated against by a policy that has become out of touch, firstly with the rural sector and also the ever-changing opportunities for education.

The current policy needs to consider the numerous changes that have occurred since the implementation of the current school policies, and school children attending metropolitan schools can ride their bicycles to and from schools, but due to unsuitable roads, distance and lack of public transport, country students have no other opportunity to get to their school other than by the DECD school bus. All students attending non-government schools are deemed to be ineligible for school bus services; however, as mentioned previously, they can be accommodated should seats exist.

Country families are now faced with various complications. The following scenario highlights how unfair and inequitable the current policy is. A family has three children. One child attends the local government high school and is eligible for school bus. One child attends a non-government primary school and is ineligible for school. The other child attends kindergarten and is ineligible; however, they get a seat under the universal access clause which requires that person to have a priority on the bus.

The parents in this family need to make the trip to town to deliver one of their children to their school of choice, but the other two children can travel on the DECD bus. If they choose to drive all three children to town, since they are driving to town anyway, they risk losing access to the bus seat under the 50 per cent usage ruling. Country communities are small and rely on good community spirit and involvement to survive.

The current DECD policy is divisive and erodes community spirit and goodwill. It is difficult for neighbours to understand and accept why one family may be provided access to a school bus when another one is not, when their children attend the same school. The role of educators is to teach, whether it is a government school or a private school. These teachers do a fantastic job and the future of our children is in their hands. They have a very responsible task and we all appreciate this greatly.

It is not the role of our educators to transport students, again, whether government or private students. I ask the question: who has the role and management of transportation for our students? I am led to understand that in the country it is under the control and operation of DECD, yet I also understand that, in the metropolitan schools, transport operations are undertaken by the Department of Transport.

The current policy states very clearly that primary and non-government school students attending non-government schools, who reside more than five kilometres or more by the shortest more practicable route from the nearest appropriate government school, have a right to use existing bus services to travel to that government school.

There have been numerous occasions where a particular size bus has been utilised on a school run and, then, because of cost savings, this bus, which may have already had spare seats to be able to transport ineligible students, is then sent to another location and a smaller bus has taken its place. In that case, it creates a lot of confusion.

In the case of the Burra-Farrell Flat to Clare school bus, there are now students who are attending non-government schools in Clare who are being excluded from travelling on the school bus. This has come about as a result of the department replacing the original bus with a smaller bus, which now causes great concern to those students who elect to attend a non-government school. The old bus had no air conditioning and no seatbelts, and the new smaller bus is complying with the new requirements for all school buses to have seatbelts and air conditioning.

It is the democratic right of the parents to send their children to a non-government school but, at the same time, we must ask: why are parents choosing private schools in lieu of government schools? Students attending a full-time approved course at TAFE may travel on the government bus, but again, only if there are spare seats. I ask how students are to get to TAFE or another suitable training facility if the buses are removed and replaced with smaller buses.

The accreditation of school bus drivers is managed by the Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure, however, the control and operation of the bus services themselves is under DECD. This process appears to be confusing, and this is another reason why I believe a review of the current policy is needed. This review should not be seen as political pointscoring. It should be implemented to ensure the future direction of our regional school students so they are able to achieve the best opportunities with their education, in the same manner that metropolitan students have available to them.

When I first came into this place, I endeavoured to get a select committee to look at this very issue, and that was to look at school bus operations and their usage. However, this was not successful, and I was greatly supported by the opposition at the time. Since then, the policy has basically remained the same. However, since this time, there have been great changes and, as I mentioned, these changes are for the better for our educational opportunities, but still the policy remains basically the same.

I would strongly ask the minister to at least look at the policy to ensure that it is relevant to today's environment, and also to ensure the best utilisation of these services so regional locations are best served. I commend the motion to the house.

Debate adjourned on motion of Mrs Geraghty.