

School Bus Policy

Consultation Paper – Transport Canberra and City Services

Submission by
The Association of Independent Schools of the
ACT (AISACT)

August 2018

Introduction

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT (AISACT) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the consultation process on the School Bus Policy.

The ACT independent school sector provides a diverse range of schooling options to families living in the ACT and in the surrounding region, and to families needing boarding school facilities.

Independent schools play an important role in providing educational alternatives to those provided by the government sector. The ACT community is multicultural and diverse and the independent school sector reflects this. It should be a basic premise that parents should have a choice, where possible, about where their child is educated. There are many reasons underpinning parental choice, including pedagogical style, learning environment, faith, values, gender, school culture and pastoral structures.

Independent schools have emerged in direct response to community demand and have a long history of accepting an educational leadership role in the national capital, and a shared role with governments, in setting up schools in the ACT.

In the end, it is about parents finding a school which provides the best 'fit' and, therefore, the best opportunities for success for their child.

All students, irrespective of where they are educated, are entitled to a high quality of education, and it is the responsibility of governments to provide a suitable level of funding for all students to achieve quality outcomes.

The Association represents all eighteen independent schools which together educate 14,514 students, or around 19% of the ACT school population (29% of ACT high school students attend Independent schools). Enrolment in Canberra's Independent schools has historically been very strong, and have seen a 21% increase in student enrolment over the past 10 years.

Independent schools in the ACT have a wide range of student populations, with the smallest school having 27 students and the largest over 1800 students.

Issues

This is a major change to transport policy and it will have an impact on students and families attending Independent Schools in the ACT who currently utilise either dedicated school bus services, or route buses.

The focus is on the safety of students, and the ability of bus services to ensure not only safety to and from home, but also factors of timeliness and ease of use, as students need to arrive to school ready to begin their learning - not rushed or late.

Concerns

The Association rejects the hierarchy of the prioritisation of the different travel options to school as set out in the new School Bus Policy.

The premise of Active Transport does not show any acknowledgement or understanding of the provision of education by Independent schools, who attract students from across the ACT to attend their chosen school. Independent school students are very active in their daily participation in school based activities, and it could be perceived that this is a direct obstacle placed on Independent school students to support the government's new transport policy direction.

The provision of regular frequencies throughout the day has little relevance to Independent schools. Independent schools operate with the expectation that all students are in attendance from the beginning of the school day until the end. In this context, there is little relevance for an increase in the frequency of bus services going past the school throughout the day. This also applies for year 11 and 12 students.

Independent schools cater for children from kindergarten to year 12. Of the 18 Independent schools, 13 cater for both primary and secondary students, 2 secondary only and 3 primary only. It is important that younger students who attend Independent Schools are considered and catered for in any bus transport proposal.

The potential for congestion at interchanges at particular times of the day, especially in the morning with school students and commuters, is a concern. Not enough detail has been communicated to schools and their communities as to the process, systems and structures which will be put in place at these integral transition points to provide confidence that all commuters – adults and students – can feel supported and safe during this part of their journey. These transition points are to become significantly more important in this proposed new transport system.

The potential for congestion at schools, should more families feel the need to drive their children to school due to the new transport policy, is also of a concern. In fact

the very premise of this policy to encourage more usage of buses may well have the opposite effect.

A lack of a clear communication strategy around the implementation of this major change is a concern. As stated, what is proposed is a major alteration to the provision of school bus services in the ACT, and all changes, timetables, structures and supports for students and their families, who are used to the reliance on the dedicated school bus services, should be communicated clearly, and with enough lead time to ensure confidence in such proposed changes.

The data at present available for families and schools is lacking in clarity, particularly around the maps and the information about dedicated bus services, the start of routes for “S” routes, and regular route, and a timetable. This lack of detailed information has the potential to cause confusion and instil a lack of confidence in the proposal. A communication strategy that promotes the support to be implemented in transition in to any changes and to assist in addressing the community perceptions around Interchanges if more students will be utilising the Hub and Spoke services is vital.

The Association encourages Transport Canberra to engage with individual Independent schools regarding the proposed changes. Member schools have been encouraged to become involved in this consultation as it relates to their school.

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT acknowledges there is a need to ensure that the best possible bus service is available to students to travel to their schools and that student safety must always be everyone’s focus. This is a major change proposed to the existing school bus services and therefore needs to be well communicated and consulted with those whom it will impact on.

Andrew Wrigley
Executive Director
Association of Independent Schools of the ACT
August 2018