

Policy on the introduction and administration of subsidised school bus services

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1. Foreword

This policy details the guidelines for the introduction of subsidised services and their subsequent administrative requirements.

2. Background

In general terms, kilometre-based contract school bus services are provided to transport eligible school students to and from school. The major emphasis for these bus services is the transportation of distance eligible students, although safety-net eligible students and fare paying passengers may also access these services where sufficient capacity exists. These services are fully government funded.

A small number of services, however, operate on the basis of only partial funding of the service by the government.

Partially funded, or 'subsidised' services, occur as a result of one or a combination of the following factors:

- Extremely long route length.
- Low number of distance eligible students.
- Remote locations.
- Per capita funding restrictions.

These services may be provided by a bus operator who accepts the level of government funding provided. Any shortfall in funding is generally met by the parents involved.

In some cases, groups of parents form a conveyance committee and elect to provide the service themselves. Payment is made to the committee as the operator of the service.

3. Guiding principles

The provision of transport assistance to eligible students in order for them to attend schools must be viewed in the overall context of various types of assistance provided by both the Queensland and Australian Governments.

For example, where sufficient populations of students exist which warrant the provision of a school facility, the government does so in accordance with developed guidelines.

Where insufficient populations of students exist, a range of transport assistance options is made available to transport students to and from school.

Distance education is made available to those students in remote and isolated areas of the state where students are taught at their homes.

Assistance is also provided by both the Queensland and Australian Governments for students who live away from home in order to attend school.

In this context, the provision of subsidised government funded contract bus services is targeted at providing an option to those families whose children would otherwise live away from home in order to attend school and students who may otherwise rely on distance education to satisfy their educational requirements.

4. Eligibility criteria for subsidised services

A subsidised service for the transport of students to school may only be instituted in an isolated area as designated by the Director-General, Department of Transport and Main Roads.

Under the School Transport Isolation Package, an area is classified as isolated where students:

1. reside outside the south east Queensland school transport zone (a map is provided each year in an information statement or is available at www.tmr.qld.gov.au/schooltransport); and
- 2a. reside in the seven week summer vacation zone, that is, the area in Queensland west of the 144th meridian of east longitude or north of the 16th parallel of south latitude and the following centres:

– Alpha	– Eulo	– Quilpie
– Aramac	– Hughenden	– Tambo
– Augathella	– Ilfracombe	– Wyandra
– Barcardine	– Isisford	– Yaraka
– Blackall	– Jericho	
– Cameron Downs	– Longreach	
– Charleville	– Muttaborra	
– Cunnamulla	– Prairie	

OR

- 2b. reside more than 50 kilometres, measured by the shortest trafficable route from the main Post Office in each of the following centres:

– Atherton	– Innisfail	– Sarina
– Ayr	– Kingaroy	– Stanthorpe
– Bowen	– Mackay	– Toowoomba
– Bundaberg	– Malanda	– Townsville
– Cairns	– Mareeba	– Tully
– Dalby	– Maryborough	– Warwick
– Gladstone	– Mossman	
– Gympie	– Proserpine	
– Hervey Bay	– Ravenshoe	
– Home Hill	– Rockhampton	
– Ingham		

In addition to the isolated area eligibility criteria, students must:

1. reside more than 16km from the nearest state school; and
2. reside more than 16km from the nearest approved bus service which can transport the student to school.

It should be noted that the institution of a subsidised service may impact on the following schemes:

- i. The Living Away from Home Allowance Scheme (LAFHAS) administered by the Department of Education, Training and Employment; and
- ii. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme administered by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

As such, consideration must be given to the implications on the recipients of these schemes prior to the recommendation of the institution of a subsidised service.

5. Institution of service

Because of the concessional level of funding applied, subsidised services may only be instituted where eligible students do not have access to any other government funded school transport service.

The minimum number of eligible students required to institute a subsidised school bus service is seven (7). Eligible students must come from a minimum of three (3) different families, in order to institute a subsidised school bus service. It should also be noted that these seven (7) students must reside more than 16km from the nearest state school and more than 16km from the nearest approved bus service which can transport the students to school.

Consideration must also be given to the number of students who would benefit in subsequent years.

Prior to the institution of any subsidised service full consultation must occur with the parents of students involved, the local Department of Education, Training and Employment regional office and the local school community.

Once approval has been given by Department of Transport and Main Roads for the institution of a subsidised school bus service, parents of eligible students may form a conveyance committee. Conveyance committees for subsidised school bus services should operate under the same guidelines that apply to kilometre based school bus services.

6. Route

Due to the nature of funding provided and the length of routes usually involved, initial route design and variations (extensions and deletions) to these services is to be approved by the Department of Transport and Main Roads. This is to ensure that maximum efficiencies in both route design, travel time and cost effectiveness are achieved. These elements will necessitate that the area to be serviced be in the one general direction of the school. Consultation with parent groups will of course be required.

As a general guide the Department of Transport and Main Roads will approve extensions to services on the following basis:

- Where the service is paid on a maximum student per day basis:- extensions (at no cost) are approved if supported by the conveyance committee and operator.
- Where the service is paid on the same basis as a kilometre-based school service:- extension approval is based on the policy applying to kilometre based school services.

Advice from the relevant road authority regarding the suitability of the route must also be obtained.

7. Payment

From 13 July 2009 funding for a subsidised service is provided by one of the following systems:

1. Fixed and variable payments (from capital-based kilometric system)
 - A subsidised service that meets or exceeds the student numbers (including families) for the eligibility for institution of a subsidised service (see section 5), will be paid the NC1 fixed and NC1 variable amounts from the capital-based kilometric system (and adjusted for any increases or decreases that may occur each quarter). There will be no capital payments for these services.

These services will only be paid up to a maximum daily distance of 160 kilometres (loaded plus unloaded)

All subsidised services that are paid on this basis will be reviewed at the beginning of each school year. Any subsidised service on this system will revert to the maximum per student per day system if numbers do not meet the institution criteria at the beginning of a school year.

2. Maximum per student per day payments (subject to limits – see note 1)
 - The maximum amount per student per day is payable for students who reside more than 16km from the nearest state school and more than 16km from the nearest approved bus service which can transport the students to school. This concessional amount is reviewed each year.
 - A maximum amount per student per day is payable for students who reside 16km or less from the nearest state school. This concessional amount is reviewed each year.
 - No government funding will be made available for students who are ineligible for assistance by virtue of current distance criteria.

Note:

1. A subsidised service which is funded on maximum per student per day payment system can only be paid up to the equivalent of the amount available under the fixed and variable payments (from capital-based kilometric system). Transition arrangements apply for a service that would have a reduced payment as at 13 July 2009 under this policy.
2. The maximum per student amounts detailed above are payable for students whose travel frequency is 100% (that is. 10 trips per week). These amounts will be adjusted for students who travel less than 100%. For example, a student who travels to school on Monday morning and returns home on Friday afternoon (that is two trips per week) would be paid at 20%. In assessing eligibility of students, the minimum frequency of travel is 20% (that is. two trips per week).
3. Because of the limit to funding, the level of payment is subject to regular review. See section 8 for details on the requirements for monitoring students and reviewing payment.

7.1 Vehicle Purchase Allowance

From 2014 subsidised services may qualify for a Vehicle Purchase Allowance. The allowance assists the operators of subsidised services with the purchase of a bus. The allowance is \$25 per day and is paid for up to 5 years commencing on the date the bus is introduced into service. The allowance is paid on each day that a service receives a fixed payment. The allowance ceases if the service is closed.

To receive the allowance all of the following conditions must be met:

1. The operator must have purchased a qualifying bus for use on the subsidised service after 1 January 2014. A qualifying bus is a motor vehicle with seating capacity for 9 or more passengers (excluding the driver) that is less than 10 years of age at date of commencement on the service. Determining the age of a vehicle is defined in the Transport Operations (Passenger Transport) Standard.
2. The vehicle must be registered to, and owned by the operator.
3. The vehicle must not be fitted with lap only seat belts.
4. The subsidised service must be operating under the NC fixed and variable payment method. Services on the per student payment do not qualify. However, if during the five (5) year period a service on the NC fixed and variable payment method that is receiving the allowance, changes to the per student payment, the allowance will continue until the end of the five (5) year period, provided the service does not close.

If a bus funded by this scheme is replaced (with a qualifying bus) within the five (5) year period, the allowance will continue based on 5 years from the original commencement date, it will not restart. However, if the replacement bus is less than five years of age at the time of introduction, the five (5) year period will start from the commencement date of the replacement. If the bus is replaced with a bus over 10 years old, the allowance will end on the date that original bus ceased on the service.

If a new operator acquires the service the allowance will continue provided the bus continues on the service. If the new operator purchases a bus for the service, the replacement policy as indicated above will apply.

8. Monitoring students and reviewing payment

The number of students travelling will impact on the level of subsidy which will be paid to an operator of a subsidised service. It is therefore necessary to monitor the number of students and review the level of subsidy on a regular basis

Student numbers are monitored by means of the kilometre operators' exception report each pay period, school verification reports and bus travel assistance applications submitted for new students using the service.

Where the review process identifies that adjustments to the level of subsidy are required, they are made as follows:

1. Services paid the NC1 fixed and NC1 variable payments (from capital-based system)
Any subsidised service on this system will revert to the maximum per student per day system if numbers do not meet the institution criteria (see section 5) at the beginning of a school year.
2. Services paid on the maximum per student per day payment
Any decreases will occur from the start of the following semester.
Increases will apply from the date of commencement of travel by the student involved.

9. Closure

Closure of a subsidised service will occur when the number of students accessing the service falls below a level at which service viability can be sustained.

The Department of Transport and Main Roads will close a subsidised service when the number of distance eligible students falls to five (5). This will usually occur at the end of a school semester. The local TransLink Division office of the department must obtain approval to close a subsidised service from the Manager (School Transport Assistance Scheme).

Student numbers will also be assessed each year by the department on 1 July. Contact will be made with the operator and conveyance committee regarding student numbers for the following year in cases where concern is held regarding the ongoing viability of the service.

In some instances, the operator/committee will apply to close a subsidised service because the number of students accessing the service falls to a level at which the government funding under the per capita payment rates becomes insufficient to maintain viability of the service.

10. Non-operation of service

On some occasions a subsidised service may not operate, for example, because of flood, student-free days, local show holidays or ministerial holidays. In these instances, the following will apply:

For services being paid on the maximum per student per day system, payment will be made on the following basis:

- The per student per day payment calculation, or
- The equivalent of the NC1 fixed only amount which would apply to the vehicle used under the capital-based kilometric system, whichever is the lesser.

For services being paid the fixed and variable payment system (from capital-based kilometric system), payment will be the NC1 fixed only amount.

No payment will be made for services that do not operate in the final weeks of the school year because of the additional week's school vacation in western or remote areas or because the service only transports year 11 and 12 students.

11. Approval process

Any proposal to institute a subsidised school transport service must be approved by the Director (Service Investment), prior to institution of the service. Because of the concessional nature of funding involved, thorough investigation of all aspects of proposals must be carried out before any proposal is submitted for approval.

12. Agreement

A letter of agreement which defines the administration and funding arrangements for each service will be entered into by both the transport provider and the Department of Transport and Main Roads.

