

## Media Release: School Bus subsidy proposed cuts 2008

Western Sydney Community Forum is the peak organisation for non government agencies in Western Sydney, servicing a population of almost 2,000,000 people.

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### **The School Student Travel Subsidy Should Not Be Reduced.**

#### Summary

The State Government has said that they are interested in reducing expenditure on the School Student Travel Subsidy scheme.

Western Sydney Community Forum says that any new policy must not make it more difficult for families to get their children to school or make it harder for people to choose a school that suits the needs of their children.

The discussion about the cost of the SSTS should be focused around accurately charging for the students actually carried rather than whether or not students 'deserve' to be carried.

WSCF would recommend, as soon as it is financially possible, making all public transport for under 16s free alleviating the need for SSTS (but requiring another funding program).

#### 1) BARRIERS TO EDUCATION SHOULD BE MINIMIZED

Anything that makes attending school difficult is a bad thing and the 'hassle-factor'.

While the majority of families are organized and supportive some are not. Children from families that are less organized, very busy or not interested would be disadvantaged by any policy that makes it harder for them to get to school. Even for ordinary, organized families, a policy that creates extra processes for families and schools, such as doing paperwork to qualify for income eligibility levels, will increase the risks that it will be made harder for children to get to school. Some families will not deal well with the extra hassles.

Creating a new expense that children have to negotiate with their families also creates hassles and stresses within families. Children are not always conscientious managing their money or their paperwork (sometimes they are even naughty!). Having to organize ticket money each day, or looking after bus passes that are worth money, or organising paperwork to get their bus passes could present significant complications for children and their families in the 'getting-to-school' process.

Using Family Tax Benefit to assess eligibility is a suggestion, but again this will bring additional hassle to schools and families who need to prove eligibility and make life difficult for working families who are not eligible.

A bus pass system that involves a co-payment from families seems like the least bad option but still presents significant ‘hassle-factor’ to organize for schools, children and families and risks presenting barriers for children to get to school. Unlike the current pass system (which is also very slow and difficult for children, families and schools) any bus pass which is worth money presents a new set of problems. Passes that are worth money create a theft, loss or misuse problem for children as well as safety issues for children who lose their pass and can’t get to or from school. And what happens if a family doesn’t pay for their pass? Do we insist that the child attends the closest school?

Anything that unwinds the SSTS also interferes with another set of policies designed to enable ‘choice’ of school.

For a child and family, being able to choose which school they attend is a good thing. The Government implemented a set of policy principles which enable families and children to choose the school that best suits them and these policy principles are now widely accepted. Unwinding the SSTS would undermine these principles. Reducing the ability of children to travel to school actually undermines the Government’s own policy of specialist schools.

People often assume ‘choice’ is about wealthy children wanting to go to private schools but this is a wrong assumption. Choice of school enables students to better reach their potential by being able to attend a school that better meets their needs; for example, a bright child living in a disorganized family can still attend a selective school based on academic achievement without worrying about the cost of the travel to school. Another example may be, a child who has suffered from bullying at one school may want to travel to another school where other family or friends are who can support them, without worrying about the cost of the travel. For some children there are significant safety benefits from being able to change schools.

## 2) THE SYSTEM SHOULD ONLY PAY FOR THE STUDENTS CARRIED.

Funding should be allocated to the number of children carried not the number of passes issued

The Unsworth Report from 2004 recommended that system should only pay for the students that were actually carried - not everyone issued a bus pass uses the bus. It recognized that there was a significant cross-subsidy in the system which was reducing effective management of the bus system (the SSTS was subsidizing the rest of the route bus system). The T-card project was supposed to solve this problem.

By proposing to cut back on SSTS the government is effectively punishing children and families for a failing of the government - the government was unable to deliver on the T-card project.

It was recognized at the time that this would represent a significant loss of revenue for the bus system and that the other bus system funding

mechanisms would need to be adjusted. These adjustments have been made but we still have not seen the T-card system or an accurate counting of students carried.

**THE SYSTEM SHOULD BE AS EFFICIENT AS POSSIBLE TO REDUCE TRAVEL TIMES, TRAVEL CONGESTION AND PUBLIC 'HASSLE'.**

Any system which slows the system and creates public 'hassle' should be avoided.

A system in which students have to purchase tickets from the drivers would be particularly troublesome and should be avoided. A system like this would create substantial barriers for children getting to and from school as well as huge delays and inefficiencies for the bus system.

Even a bus pass system which involves a co-payment from families presents new problems for bus drivers. Bus passes would become valuable and vulnerable to security problems and there would be additional pressures on drivers to ensure that children had the correct passes or paid their fares. It would create a set of dilemmas for bus drivers who suspected that a child's safety may be compromised but couldn't confirm that the child really had a valid pass because it had been lost or there was some other problem.

Any costs placed on student travel is likely to have two other unintended consequences: more people will transport their children to school by car and long-term support for the bus system will be undermined.

It is likely that many more people will be driving their children to school if the SSTS is reduced or made difficult. This will create more traffic and all of the negative consequences of that; safety, pollution, congestion.

The other likely consequence is that the long-term support for the bus system is undermined. The experience of children using the bus system, with the SSTS, to get to school educates people about the use of buses and provides a core customer-base for the system. Undermining these aspects of the SSTS is not good public policy.

Western Sydney Community Forum would like to recommend that eligibility for the School Bus subsidy has as its highest priority increasing young people access to school in the most streamlined way possible.

Yours Faithfully,

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November 12<sup>th</sup> 2008.