

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW SCHOOL BUS SAFETY COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

BY Kate Washington, endorsed by:

- **Wirreanda Public School P&C Association**
- **Medowie Progress Association**

Date: 27 September 2011

(Please note, a request for extension of time to make this submission was approved by the Committee's Secretariat on 22 September 2011.)

Introduction

Medowie is a small rural community with very little infrastructure to support its ongoing population growth. It is a popular town for young families due to the accessibility of low cost housing.

"Medowie enjoyed 43 per cent population growth in the decade ending in 2004 to earn the title as the fastest-growing area in the State. Its current population of 8,000 is expected to double in the next decade. Twenty-three per cent of the population is of school age." (Private Members Statement by The Hon. Craig Baumann, NSW Parliament, 1 June 2010 hereafter "Baumann Statement");

The community of Medowie, and its representative groups, have an interest in school bus safety because:

- many primary-aged children catch buses to school daily;
- in 2010, 755 children between years 7 and 12 were bussed out of the area each day to schools in Raymond Terrace and beyond. Of these students, 401 attend high schools at Raymond Terrace. (source: Baumann Statement). Other children are bused to public and private schools in Newcastle, Maitland and the Tomaree Peninsula.

Our community's interest in school bus safety has been heightened by serious accidents and ongoing issues involving busses laden with school children.

Safety Issues

▪ **School infrastructure**

The absence of a local public high school in Medowie is a key underlying problem to the busing issues in our community.

There are two public schools in Medowie. In 2010, the combined student population of both schools was 978. In addition, the local Medowie Christian school, which caters for kindergarten

to grade 10, had 287 enrolments in 2010 (www.myschool.edu.au). In 2011, each school has experienced an increase in student numbers, with Wirreanda Public School having 580 enrolments.

All children wishing to stay in the public school system, must travel on buses to attend secondary school.

Outlying areas, including students living on the Tilligerry Peninsula (Tanilba Bay Public School enrolments in 2010, 439 students: www.myschool.edu.au), Salt Ash, Karuah, Williamtown, Tea Gardens, Hawks Nest, Fullerton Cove and Fern Bay also travel by bus in various directions, to attend secondary schooling.

Due to a lack of adequate secondary schooling infrastructure, many children are travelling on buses on a daily basis. This leads to timetabling issues, overcrowding and unnecessarily long days away from home.

- **School routes**

Out of necessity, buses must travel on roads that have maximum speed limits of 80 km/h and 100 km/h. For students travelling from Karuah to Raymond Terrace, this includes a significant proportion of travel on the Pacific Highway.

- **Bus design (including fitment of seat belts)**

Students do not have the ability to wear seatbelts when travelling on school buses. This means that children are regularly standing on buses. Indeed bus licensing allows buses to transport more student passengers than they have the capacity to seat.

This means we have children standing on buses travelling at 100 km/h. It is difficult to even put in words the devastation that could result from a bus, travelling in these circumstances, involved in an accident.

Combined with the dangers associated with driver distraction, discussed below, this is an accident waiting to happen.

Accidents are a reality

“...on Monday 8 February 2010, a Mercedes Benz 1621 bus owned by Hunter Valley Buses and carrying 79 school students on a regular afternoon school run was travelling in a generally Easterly direction along Richardson Road, between Raymond Terrace and Medowie, when the driver felt the rear of the bus wobble. Moments later, he observed through his mirrors, two rear wheels leave the bus...” (Bus Safety Investigation Report – Bus Wheel Separation: Office of Transport Safety Investigation hereafter “Wheel Separation Investigation”).

The incident occurred on a road that runs next to Grahamstown Dam with a speed limit of 80 km/h.

In accordance with the Wheel Separation Investigation:

“There were no physical barriers to prevent a vehicle from leaving the roadway and travelling down into Grahamstown Lake....In the vicinity of the incident location, the road formation slopes away on both sides without there being any barriers against the danger to vehicles if they veered off the road.”

Whilst it is reported in the Wheel Separation Investigation that the bus was licensed to carry 80 seated passengers, students travelling on the bus confirm that there were children standing on the bus at the time of the incident. Indeed, the first eye-witness to the wheels flying down the road behind the bus, was a student standing in the aisle, looking out the back window.

But for the actions of the experienced driver, the children travelling on that bus could have suffered serious harm: *“The driver’s actions in not using the brakes contributed to a controlled stop of the bus and assisted in preventing the bus from crossing into the oncoming lane.”* (Wheel Separation Investigation).

No changes to bus operations have been implemented since the incident. Instead, numbers of passengers continue to increase and the potential of serious incidents increases.

Bus operations

Timetabling raises numerous concerns:

- Students can spend over 2 hours a day travelling on buses. For example:
 - a student attending San Clemente, Mayfield, catches his bus at 6.55am and arrives at school at 8am. School doesn’t commence until 8.45am. He returns home at 4.30pm.
 - a student attending Lambton High School departs at 7.30am, arrives at 8.15am with school commencing at 9.05; School ends at 3.05pm and she returns home at 4.30pm.
 - a student attending Irrawang High School at Raymond Terrace catches her bus at 7.38am and arrives at 8am. School commences at 8.45. If she manages to catch the first bus, she can be home at 3.40pm. Later bus will return her home at 4.30pm.
- Students as young as 11years of age, spend the same amount of time away from home as a full-time worker;
- Students have difficulty participating in extra-curricular activities because of their fatigue and late return.

- Our secondary school-aged children quickly disconnect from the local community because they are spending so much time out of the community and have little opportunity to continue the connections and friendships they developed during their primary school years.
- Families also suffer under the stress and sheer fatigue involved in the schooling logistics. A student experiencing the bus arrangements for her first year of high school, broke down on her return home, crying in her mum's arms "I never get to see you anymore".
- Children can be delivered to schools prior to there being formal supervision at school raising significant security issues.

Driver training and performance, notification and handling of safety incidents

Our community praises the actions of the experienced driver who handled the serious "wheels off the bus" incident.

Given the extent of the community's concern surrounding this incident, it was disappointing that community stakeholders (families, school parent committees) were not informed of the outcomes of the Wheel Separation Investigation. Instead, local media provided a copy of the report to the author.

Other incidents have occurred where students have been left to walk home from both Raymond Terrace and within Medowie itself.

Just last week, students from Irrawang High School in Raymond Terrace were travelling home. They had reached central Medowie when the driver turned the bus around and returned students to school because of poor student behavior. According to a young year 7 girl on the bus, the driver was angry and swearing.

Whilst the driver was prepared to take students back to Medowie, this young girl no-longer felt safe with that driver and waited for a family member to pick her up instead.

Driver distraction including student behavior on buses

This is a major issue and significant factor underlying all the concerns raised in this submission. Student behavior on buses is dangerous.

Currently, it is the responsibility of the driver to "police" poor behavior and identify the offenders. Whereas the driver's main focus should be on driving safely. They should not also be responsible for discipline.

The lack of discipline on buses is exacerbated by the absence of seatbelts. A parent made the following comment about her children's school bus travelling to Salamander Bay:

*“My real concern is children not sitting down **on seats**, they climb, wrestle each other in the aisle, stand on seats, lay across seats etc. In an accident someone will be killed by another child's body hitting them. Seat belts please!!!!”*

A bus driver who had a discipline issue sought the camera surveillance from bus in an effort to identify the offender. He explained to the author that he was not allowed access to the footage due to “privacy issues”.

A parent who regularly travels on a local primary school bus run described the student behavior as “appalling” and felt it was perhaps attributable to a sense of freedom. She suggested that, getting on a school bus means the students are away from teacher and parent supervision and they lose control - not sitting, swearing and disrespectful of adults, bus drivers included.

Poor behavior on buses increases stress on drivers and heightens driver distraction - how can a bus driver determine whose behavior is problematic on a bus when they need to focus on the road?

“Off bus” issues: students moving in and around buses, involving both alighting to or from a bus

The Fern Bay community has had an experience this year that no community should endure, involving a young girl attempting to cross Nelson Bay Road after alighting from her school bus.

Whilst the author is not in a position to comment on the details surrounding that incident, it is likely that the overall numbers of children being bused out of our community adds to the pressure on drivers to maintain onerous timetable requirements.

Education and awareness (for parents, students and bus operators).

When students are issued with bus passes, parents and students agree to certain conditions. However, such terms and conditions may not be discussed at homes. They are not addressed at schools in any formal way.

Similarly, safety surrounding buses generally - getting on and off buses – is not addressed formally in the school setting.

Recommendations

For the reasons set out above, we would like the committee to consider the following recommendations:

1. Retro fit seatbelts to all school buses currently in circulation;

2. Ensure all new buses being used for school transport, include seat belts;
3. Address bus driver distraction by introducing “wardens” (a supervising adult) onto all school buses where there are more than 10 passengers. Bus drivers can then drive and supervisors can be responsible for student discipline;
4. Introduce formal “bus education” into the school environment, involving parents where possible. Such education to address:
 - a) appropriate behavior on buses;
 - b) consequences of failing to comply with the terms and conditions of bus passes;
 - c) safety issues surrounding getting on and off buses
5. Recognize that the sheer number of students requiring transport to and from secondary school in our area is causing stress on the school bus transport system giving rise to safety, student welfare and broader community issues;
6. Future actions and outcomes of the committee should be addressed to the stakeholders of the inquiry, school communities and families.

Contacts

Kate Washington
31 South St
Medowie NSW 2318

Email: kate.washington@hunterlink.net.au
Mob: 0408 144 426

Leisl Kennedy
Secretary
Wirreanda Public School P&C Association
Cnr Brocklesby & Ferodale Rd
Medowie NSW 2318

Libby Dingle
Secretary
Medowie Progress Association
PO Box 39
Medowie NSW 2318