



Speech by

STUART COPELAND

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

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SCHOOL TRANSPORT ASSISTANCE SCHEME

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (12.20 p.m.): The state government's management of the School Transport Assistance Scheme for the past three years has created endless financial and emotional upheaval for families across Queensland. Nowhere is this upheaval more evident than in the communities of my electorate of Cunningham. For approximately three years Queensland Transport has undertaken the task of correcting anomalies in bus boundaries. These corrections to the boundaries have meant that many families who had been sending their children to a school for years using the assistance scheme are no longer eligible for that assistance. These families have been informed by Queensland Transport that, if they wish to continue receiving assistance, they must remove their children from their current school and place them in an alternative school which is either closer or has a more cost-effective bus route. The decision fails to take into account parents' choice or the structure of the local community. With a bureaucratic stroke of the pen in a far removed office, a change can be made with little regard to the consequences. Sadly, the human face of these decisions is forgotten and, on the ground, people's lives are being turned upside down.

I would like to highlight some examples in my electorate where this situation has occurred. One family in question resides in the Brookstead district approximately 22.4 kilometres from the Brookstead State School. For five years they had been approved to receive free bus travel to Brookstead State School for their eldest son and for three years for their second son. The children were well established at the school as were the parents, who volunteer and participate heavily in the school community.

The family live on the property of their employer and the children travel with their father within the property to his place of employment, which is on the Brookstead bus route, and catch the bus to that school. However, 10 months ago they were absolutely astounded when they received a letter informing them that they would no longer be eligible for school bus assistance to the Brookstead State School. Instead, they were advised to change their children to the Cecil Plains State School, which is located 18.2 kilometres from their residence on the property. As honourable members can imagine, the children were deeply distressed at the prospect of being torn away from all their schoolmates and teachers and put into a school where they would not know a single person, let alone considering the cost of things such as new uniforms that the change would cause.

These decisions do not just affect the family. The Brookstead State School is a small school and the loss of two students puts the school at considerable risk of reductions in school entitlements in the areas of staff allocation and general school funding. Brookstead State School is a fine small school that provides quality education. To see its resources cut due to a decision such as this would be devastating to that community. I have fought hard for this family and for their community to have this decision overturned and to allow commonsense to prevail. This, however, has been to no avail.

From this one example it is patently obvious that decisions being made on the School Transport Assistance Scheme are having a massive effect not only on the families but also on the communities. This example is by no means unique. My electorate office is frequently contacted by families, schools and local government representatives informing me of similar cases right across the electorate. Through discussions with my colleagues on both sides of the chamber I have been told that this is a major problem right across the state. One colleague even said that if I do have a win I should let him know how I did it because he has been unable to win any of his cases.

Another example is of a single mother of five children who lives out of town and works in an abattoir to provide a living for her family. She drops her children off at her parents' place on her way to work. The children catch the bus to and from Pittsworth and her parents care for them until she finishes work. However, she has now been told that, because she lives on the Mount Tyson bus route, the

children must go to school there regardless of the fact that she would have no-one there to care for them either before or after school when she has to work.

The department often says that children must go to the closest school, but even this is inconsistent. I have one small school currently without any bus at all. They want a bus route but have been unable to get approval for it largely because it will have a detrimental effect on an existing route. However, that existing bus route takes children to a school that is about the fourth or fifth closest from where it picks them up. So the closest school argument simply does not hold water.

There are problems right across the Cunningham electorate, including Millmerran, Cambooya and especially Clifton and issues relating to the Clifton State High School. I fully acknowledge that a framework in relation to the bus travel is vital, however commonsense has to prevail and individual cases must be examined on a case by case basis. I urge the minister to examine the whole issue of school transport assistance and to show compassion when making decisions that have such a dramatic impact on communities. What is required is a complete overhaul of the bus policy for the entire state which puts the people of Queensland before government and provides flexibility and choice for Queensland families right throughout the state.
