

Question on Notice

No. 313

Asked on 8 March 2006

MR HOBBS asked the Minister for Transport and Main Roads (MR LUCAS)—

QUESTION:

With reference to the contracts and STAS guidelines for school bus operators which do not require school bus operators to use air conditioning on buses even when the bus is fitted with air conditioning—

Why is it that his department will not remunerate school bus operators for operation of bus air conditioners and why does his department continue to breach their duty of care to children by placing them in hot school buses; which even the RSPCA would recommend not putting a dog in?

ANSWER:

I thank the Honourable Member for his question-

Inquiries by Queensland Transport reveal that it is very rare for bus operators to refuse to operate air conditioning when it is installed. However any instance is unacceptable in a hot environment. Queensland Transport is now working with the bus industry to develop regulations for the use of air conditioning on school buses when it is fitted. This is expected to be finalised in the near future.

The issue of air conditioning on school buses is not the same as air conditioning in schools. Students will often be in classes in the hottest part of the day for several hours. In contrast, the movement of the school bus can generate air flow through windows and roof vents and is for a much shorter time period. To put it directly, buildings are stationary and are dependent on air flow through wind velocity, whereas a vehicle is moving at a significant speed which of itself generates a substantial air flow.

Air conditioning in any vehicle can break down, often through the strain of hot and humid climates. Through the development of standardised school bus designs, Queensland Transport is working with the bus industry to deliver lower capital costs through design and production savings. This work will ensure opening windows and adequate ventilation are a standard feature on all school buses in the future, whether air conditioned or not.

The Beattie Government has a proud record of improving school transport, with a funding commitment since 2002 to ensure the state's ageing school bus fleet is upgraded to meet vital safety standards. This commitment is in stark contrast to the previous Borbidge national government, when there was no extra funding program for the replacement of the school bus fleet. Under the Borbidge government, there was also no funding for the operation of air conditioning.

In 2002 the State Government committed \$3m a year over 25 years to the School Bus Upgrade Scheme (SchoolBUS). That funding was augmented last year by \$12m over four years, targeted to further improve buses operating in steep and hazardous environments, through the Steep Bus Upgrade Scheme (SteepBUS).

This funding has assisted in the purchase of 232 new or near new buses since 2002. Of those, 176 are now on the road and the remainder are being built or ordered. If air conditioning was funded as part of this upgrade initiative, there would be about 30 fewer buses providing safer travel for Queensland school children.

If the State Government was to pay extra funding for the operation of air conditioning in 2500 school buses in Queensland, the cost involved would further reduce the number of new or near new roll-over compliant buses.

SchoolBUS subsidises up to 40 per cent (to a maximum of \$120,000) of the purchase of buses up to ten years of age that meet national rollover safety standards. SteepBUS expanded on this last year with additional funding for buses operating on designated steep and hazardous roads covering 100 per cent of the cost of augmented braking systems and seatbelts.

This level of financial assistance has reduced the cost of new buses significantly to allow operators to have the option of funding the installation of air conditioning and other extra features on these buses from their School Transport Assistance Scheme (STAS) payments or other commercial activities.

In addition to the funding provided to upgrade school buses in Queensland, the State Government invests \$140m a year under the STAS. This scheme provides Transport assistance for students who live a specified distance from their nearest state school or a subsidy for students from low income families.

To date, the State Government's priority for school bus transport funding has been to provide access for disadvantaged students through subsidised transport and to also rapidly improve the safety of a bus fleet that had been severely neglected by the previous national party government.