TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 27 July 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

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Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Mr Phil Brown, Executive Officer, and

Mr Kevin Phillips, Consultant, Country Education Partnership.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that any background noise is minimised.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via our live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would like to also introduce my fellow committee members present with us here today: Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Tim Quilty, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Mark Gepp and Mr Lee Tarlamis.

To witnesses appearing: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Ultimately transcripts will be made publicly available on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions from the committee.

Could you please begin by stating your names for the benefit of the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you.

Mr BROWN: Thanks, Enver. Phil Brown, Executive Officer of the Country Education Partnership. Can I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we all stand on today, or sit in, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Just as a summary—and I will introduce Kevin, because he did the majority of the work for us in relation to this piece—a bit of background: Country Education Partnership is a peak body based out of Victoria that represents rural and remote communities cross-sectorally across the state. There are about 400 education communities that we represent and are member bases of our organisations. We generally work with those communities that are outside the regional populations, so the 10 or 11 regional populations outside metropolitan Melbourne. This generated a good conversation amongst our membership base, and we collected information through an email system, where people provided us background information that we collated, and secondly, we facilitated two online forums to allow people from rural and remote communities to contribute to that discussion.

I guess in a general sense there are probably two comments I would make, Enver, to the committee. One is there was a very strong view that the status quo remains for those young people who utilise those buses in our rural and remote communities. And secondly, there would be an interest in exploring how we support especially those young people who are involved in apprenticeships, traineeships et cetera accessing the bussing system so that they continue with their education.

On those general notes, Enver, can I introduce you to Kevin? He will walk us through perhaps some of the more specific information that came out. Thank you, Kevin.

The CHAIR: That would be fantastic. Thank you. Kevin.

Mr PHILLIPS: Thanks, Phil. I assume that you have a copy of the submission. Just to give you a brief outline of that, we put the conclusions at the front of that to try to make our position clear from the start and then it follows on with some explanatory information that tries to give a background to why those conclusions

have been made. It is also important to note that the spread of the respondents in the way we went about trying to seek information came from all four regions of the department of education. In addition to that, there was a reasonable spread from all types of schools, which included primaries, secondaries, P–12s, and some Catholic schools had the opportunity to provide information into this response. So we have some confidence in saying that what we are representing is a reasonable view of what exists in the rural communities.

Phil has pointed out that the overwhelming response was to say that the status quo meets the needs of schools in particular. There is obviously a great degree of support given to the bus service. Parents trust it, schools trust it. They have faith in it and they believe in it, therefore I guess that is why their position exists that it remain as it is. The major factor in determining that position was their concerns about the safety of students. That rose again and again: that if the system was to change, there was a belief that that was maybe placing students' safety in doubt.

One of the other key things that was pointed out that I think is important is that the driver of the bus service has a key role to play currently and expanding that role would simply complicate that role and increase the issues around safety. So they were not keen to see that additional load placed on the driver, which would then mean that if you increased or changed the role, there would need to be other adult personnel involved and that would add to the cost of the process.

I think that what I need to try to do is to give you a brief outline of the explanatory section and then obviously send it back to you guys for questioning. The explanatory section starts off and raises some barriers that were raised in the responses, and they have been placed under the subheadings around what the inquiry's key interests are. The key messages are that the barriers are numerous and variable across all the respondents. While it is acknowledged that rural communities and specific sections in those communities do experience transport difficulties and disadvantages, there is not a belief that widening access to the school bus service is going to be the best response. The difference in where school bus services go appears to be an issue. There is limited consistency in the routes and venues they service, and where consistency does exist such as in perhaps pick-up times at 7.30 and return times post 3.30, they act also as barriers for the community because they may not fit in with their needs.

Spare capacity was examined and is in the same boat. There are huge differences across those that have school bus services. Some have waiting lists while others do have some capacity, although that does not seem to be extensive, and there is always a question around those that do have spare capacity about whether there is a need in those communities or whether those routes go to anywhere where community people might want to go.

The biggest barrier, as I have already mentioned, is student safety, but technology was not seen or considered to provide any solace for parents in this area if a change was going to be made. They did not think it would assist in the safety processes that they were concerned about.

The administration of a changed service is of major concern to schools. They do not want to be involved any more in the bus service than they currently are. They do not want to be responsible for additional duties that would be put within the school bus service. The responsibility for community use and users is one that they particularly do not really want to accept.

These are but a sample of the issues that have been raised in the submission, and they of course have been detailed there. While the barriers were the overwhelming concern, some recognised the opportunities. These were often around the specific needs in specific communities, and it tended to be a very special or localised concern where they raised these. The extended use of buses by schools during some of the days of the week was seen to be an idea that could be explored, so that once the school bus arrived at the school it could remain and the school could have access for that day or number of days to do other things, which would assist in the operation of the programs that schools are running. They varied across the state in how they would want to use that.

The other option within that was that the extension of having the bus remain within the community for the day could also be extended to the community. So if the bus was there and the school was not using it between 9 o'clock and 2.30, that could be open for community use, to again increase access for those people during those times, or a specific date could be set aside for community use. These were ideas that came out during the

respondents' returns. Obviously if that occurred, there would need to be a new set of guidelines and regulations and a framework to allow that to operate.

Supporting under-18s, as Phil has indicated, was also strongly suggested as a good idea—providing support for those people who were doing ongoing training or doing apprenticeships, or even part-time work for those of young ages, by providing support where that was possible, but if that was the case, trying to get the administration of that down to a minimalised level. Trying to make changes under the current system is seen to be very difficult, so it would need to be made easier and localised so that it could be responsive to need. The current process was obviously seen to be very bureaucratic in terms of getting changes, so attention to that would be needed for such a thing to be put into place. Overall the concept of local solutions for local transport issues was supported. The variance across the state in providing opportunity for local community to solve those problems seems to be logical. This would require an increase in less formal administration around the bus use and allowing schools and communities the ability to be responsive to local needs.

I think that probably provides a very brief outline about what has been placed in the submission. I guess, reflecting back on the responses that came to me, the community and CEP have been grateful for the opportunity to have input into that proposal, and I guess we wish you well in your deliberations. I will leave us in your hands.

　　The CHAIR: Thank you, Kevin and Phil, because Country Education Partnership seems to have done quite a bit of comprehensive research into the proposal and this inquiry, and the submission is definitely well received. I like the fact that you have given us a broad overview with some of the issues teased out. I might start off with one question but then I will go around the committee. I might go to Mr Quilty, then Mrs McArthur, then Mr Gepp, then Mr Barton in that order, if that is okay.

You did state that there seemed to be, from the investigations or I guess the survey that you did, a push for the status quo to remain by many stakeholders. Is that a reflection of maybe a high satisfaction level with the existing services? That is probably something that you could answer, Kevin.

　　Mr PHILLIPS: Oh, yes. Okay. I was deferring to my senior colleague. Yes, I think that is probably a fair reflection—that the status quo is just simply highly valued, obviously because it works and because parents have confidence in it. It is a bit like when you are comfortable you do not want to mess around with that feeling of comfort, particularly where students or younger people are involved. Alongside that, in saying that they are highly satisfied with the service, where they have tried to get changes to the existing bus services in the interests of students within their school they find that very bureaucratic and difficult to achieve.

　　The CHAIR: Okay, thank you for that. That was just the one thing that sort of stuck in my mind to ask. I might pass over to Mr Quilty, then Mrs McArthur, then Mr Gepp, then Mr Barton in that order.

　　Mr QUILTY: You mentioned there would be support for expanding it to TAFE and further studies and presumably students who are currently on the buses who then finish going to school but continue to use it. Is there a greater opportunity to gradually roll out public uses like that, in that students who have finished school might still be allowed to use the buses and so on, and gradually expand community acceptance?

　　Mr PHILLIPS: Do you want me to keep answering, Phil?

　　Mr BROWN: You are doing quite a good job, Kevin.

　　Mr PHILLIPS: Yes, I think that they are areas that can be explored. But I think take the first step first and then examine how that works and operates, and then the second phase might well be to look at whether that can be expanded. The dilemma about doing this is the number of bus routes and where they go and where they end up and how many people get involved in that. I think that probably is the question that was raised in the responses: doesn't that need further investigation about whether this is an efficient way to go? That is where I think the concept of local solutions to local problems comes out—if a small community can see that they can solve a problem in a particular way or an issue in a particular way or be supportive in a particular way, then trying to empower those communities to make those decisions within a framework that protects them and protects the users as well as protects the government and the system. If you want to have a follow-up, I am happy to try and expand on that.

Mr QUILTY: That is interesting, and I agree that the local solution would be ideal. But currently we have a sort of very bureaucratic model, and as you pointed out it is very difficult to change. So could you expand on the idea of the technology? It seems to me that technological solutions could be a way to go, where we are tracking people who are getting on, they are prebooking and everything is known about it—that should address some of the safety issues. So you can comment on that, but also what about coverage for mobile phones and tracking technology? On some of these routes I imagine there are blackspots and things would not work; technology would be limited.

Mr PHILLIPS: That certainly was a response, that internet provision consistently in some areas does not exist, and would make technology not necessarily a very good solution because of that. When asked that direct question in our survey, people did not seem to have turned their minds to the use of technology in this way at all, and I think that may have come about simply because they made up their mind that they were happy with the service and therefore they did not look at the way that alternatives or other methods could in actual fact work. So I think that maybe it is a bit of a shallow pool that has been provided to you, because people have not turned their mind that way. Certainly they recognise that—I will call them mundane tasks or just regular tasks like swiping on and off on—those sorts of things would be able to be done technologically. But their major concern in that area was in actual fact users who get on a school bus and what we would call the WWC—the working with children—check. Some formal check would need to be made to allow users to get on that bus to give people the confidence that something, at least some process, was in place to allow that to happen. Now, they would need to be able to carry that and then provide that on a checking process on the bus so that the driver does not have any additional work. But I do not think people have turned their minds to those issues.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I might pass over to Mrs McArthur, then Mr Gepp.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen. Do you think that children in rural areas are more at risk from dangerous paedophiles or whatever than children in metropolitan areas?

Mr PHILLIPS: Again, I will give you the response that we received in relation to that, because it was raised. Certainly both sides of that coin were flipped. People pointed out that it is no different for students travelling on metropolitan trains with the community to the community coming onto school buses. On the opposite side of that they were concerned by the concept of much smaller groups and the potential for relationships to build because the interactions were much more personalised. Therefore things like known drop-off points and how far they were from farm gates or how far they were from homes were the issues that were of concern for the people in, I guess, being anti that comparison, if you like. So they had considered it, and I think they took the position that there was more opportunity for things like grooming, more opportunity for things like personalised interaction, than you experience in the metropolitan areas. There were less adults then in the environment to protect them. On a train there are many adults, and if one steps out of line there is the opportunity for others to step in. On a school bus that does not exist. And so I guess that sort of dominated their thinking.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. Would you also accept that change is always difficult? I mean, in my day—maybe yours—my greatest obstacles to getting to school were the plovers that might attack me, or my pony leaping over the school fence and rushing home so I would end up having to walk the few kilometres beating off the elements. A school bus was something that was never dreamt of in my day. So if we are to incorporate new technology, new ideas and change, would you accept that that is an obstacle for a start?

Mr PHILLIPS: Inevitably. If you come from a rural community, you are likely to know that in some directions rural communities can be very conservative. I think where students are involved, where kids are involved, that is where you are going to find a stronger resistance to change than almost anywhere else. Rural communities go the other way and are very inventive and are able to solve their own problems significantly well, but where their kids are involved I think you will find that trying to change something that they feel comfortable with will be a very difficult process. But that is not to say that you do not try, and personally I would not be suggesting that, but I think the respondents are telling us that—that they feel very uncomfortable about it.

Mrs McARTHUR: Do any of your respondents think there is a need for, as Mr Quilty has suggested—students who are finishing school, who have been on that school bus for many years of their life, or those accessing TAFE or even employment do need some form of transport that currently is not available to them?

Mr PHILLIPS: I highly support it. That avenue is highly supported. Where we can ease the burden on parents who currently take up that slack and have to transport their sometimes pre 18-year-olds to a job in another town and take the day out and then collect them at the end of the day, then anything that could assist that is highly supported. And I think opening up that avenue, if that was possible, would not create an issue. The only dilemma about it is trying to link the individual with where they go with a bus service that services it. But that is not insurmountable, and it should be investigated whether it is possible.

Mr BROWN: Can I just add that my first bus trip to my first primary school was on a horse and gig. We have come a fair way. But I think, as we have said in the report, there are two things we have got to explore if we are going to expand the use of school buses going forward. One is to build the trust of our families, because at the moment they are feeling quite threatened by external people and certainly broader community people sitting on the bus with their five-year-old or their six-year-old. I think we have got to build trust, and I think the suggestion of actually growing that broader involvement over a period of time so that trust can be built is something we need to explore. I think a logical first step in that is to actually look at those early exits out of schools—where young people might be going off to do apprenticeships or might be off doing part-time jobs— that might be a way in which we start exploring that. But to go straight in full bore and say, 'Let's open it up to the community', I think you are going to run into a trust issue.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, I mean, also we have heard that we need a very streamlined sort of service. I think with regard to whether people can get to their preferred A to B location, if the bus service is going from A to B as it currently is, if it is that or nothing, they might just have to wear that. I do not think we are suggesting that there should be some sort of limousine service to get everybody to their preferred location from their preferred pick-up point.

Mr Barton interjected.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. Thanks, Rod. If we are going to help young people, especially in rural and remote communities—and I know they have a difficulty with transport access; I have been involved in the L2P program, where it is very difficult to get young people to get the hours up to get a licence in some families, and so that program I think is very valuable, but not everybody can access a car when they have just left school— surely your clients would think that that is beneficial and surely we have the technology to overcome a potential paedophile. I mean, the paedophile might be in year 12 with the five-year-old on the bus. As Mr Barton pointed out previously, the vast majority of assaults in these sorts of areas are usually from people they know, not from strangers. Do they not accept that actually the problem is often in their own known environment, not with strangers? I am not sure how many cases we have got of children going to school on trains or trams in the metropolitan area who have endured assault. Mr Barton might be able to help us in that regard. Is that something you would like to comment on?

Mr PHILLIPS: Well, I guess to pick up on your major point, the rural community we have consulted with certainly support those students having access. They do not place any barriers in front of that at all, in my opinion. Whilst I accept the point that paedophiles can appear from any position and we do not know where they are hiding, the position that parents are taking in this instance is that we do not want to add to that. They might already be there, but we do not want to add to that, so that would be their position, I think, in response to the change that is being proposed.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Kevin. I might pass over to Mr Gepp, then Mr Barton. Mr Gepp.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Phil, and thanks, Kevin, for your time today. I want to continue, although I do not want to just hammer that aspect of your report or your submission, but it was one area that Mrs McArthur has been touching on that stood out, I have got to say, in terms of your submission. I will be frank: when I read the statement there about community members who travel on a school bus would be required to obtain some sort of working with children check, I just sort of scratched my head and I thought, 'How would that work?'. If we are talking about the general public, doesn't that almost by extension mean that everybody has got to have a working with children check? Now, do not get me wrong; I do not think you are going to find anybody on this inquiry or in the Parliament who would not be supportive of greater safety measures for our children. That is paramount for all of us. But I am intrigued about whether or not those people who made those suggestions to you then had some sort of wherewithal about how that system might operate

and then be administered. Let us imagine that if we have got some sort of system but you do not want any additional work for the bus driver, how does it work? I do not understand.

Mr PHILLIPS: I think that is the conundrum—that people could see that by adding this it certainly added work to the bus driver, and that therefore flowed on to them believing that that would therefore decrease the amount of safety that was on the bus. To pick up your point, though, on the WWC stuff, I think that what the respondents were saying there is that is an expectation of somebody working in the school environment and therefore, if we place students in close contact with people on a regular basis, that should be the expectation we have for them in that environment. That would be, I think, their rationale. I am hypothesising a bit about their heads and what they are thinking, but that would seem to me to be what their rationale is—that if you invite community members in, you want to ensure the greatest level of safety, because we now believe there is a good level of safety. If you invite others in, then we want to ensure that that remains, and one of the ways to ensure that that remains is that there is some check on those people who are using the service. That would be their belief, I think.

Mr GEPP: We have working with children, and I know we have talked about paedophilia, but of course there are many other ways our children are transgressed against that we would want to protect our kids from. But it strikes me that a working with children check in and of itself certainly gives the individual who has obtained the check some level of test that they have endured, but experience tells us that there are people who have those qualifications who still transgress against our children. So I am just trying to reconcile that in my mind. But the other thing that also exercised my mind when I was reading your submission—and you have talked a little bit, I think, Phil, about it—was the first extension might be young people going to TAFE. We certainly know in regional Victoria—and Tim and Bev can attest to this as well—when you walk into a TAFE in regional Victoria today it is a kaleidoscope of ages and demographics that exist in the TAFE sector today, and many people have been displaced from previous occupations and industries et cetera and are starting again. So I am interested in this concept about that cohort, that you might restrict it based on age.

Mr BROWN: I guess my response to that, Mr Gepp, was around the notion of a staged process. So it was not sort of necessarily a lockout but a way in which we can build more community engagement with the school bus system and at the same time build a trust level amongst a lot of our parents who have their children go on those school buses on a regular basis. Then maybe one way to do it might be to just stage it out over that time. I understand totally that, yes, the whole TAFE world is a very different one now, and even the university world is a different one as well. So I was thinking more in terms of building the trust as well as actually building an opportunity to expand the opportunities at the same time.

Mr GEPP: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Phil and Kevin. I love the fact that with communities we need to build the trust. I want to just pre-empt why we bought this to an inquiry, this subject. There are two things that the government is absolutely saying—these are the guidelines: it does not affect the school bus service, and we will never do anything to compromise safety. So you can reassure your people that there are two things. We are not going to tip the world upside down. What we are looking at is having—and dare I say it—an Uberisation of the bus services. We have got infrastructure out there, and I will show Uber how to do it properly without causing damage. So what we are saying is that there is an opportunity here. We know it is not going to fit every community.

I just read a report earlier today of a young apprentice. He does not drive. He has had to resign from his job. He has lost his apprenticeship because he could not get to and from work. That is devastating, and the inference in his report from his mum is that he could have used the bus service to have kept going. So that is one of the things. One of the other things that people do not really understand—and I will say this to everyone who comes through—is that we are talking are about bus routes which are already there. There are no plans to change the bus routes at this stage; we are not emphasising that. Then we are talking about going from 400 routes to 1600 routes as well, so it is a substantial benefit to the community for people to move around.

In relation to the people raising the concerns about the safety, did anybody produce any evidence where it was a concern but it was just a gut feeling—they are just not comfortable with this?

Mr PHILLIPS: Probably the truer part is what you said at the end, and what Phil said as well: it is a gut feeling. They are confident in what they have got now. Anything that changes that is likely to make them uncomfortable, therefore they do not believe that change should be made. I think it is a fairly simple line that runs through—that they are happy with what they have got, they do not want to change. So they will put up arguments for why they do not want it to be changed, and one of those will of course be safety because that is their major concern.

Mr BARTON: Can I just put a question to you about the bus operators. Now, some bus operators—and I think we are about to hear from one next—are quite happy with the status quo. But we have also got bus operators who want to expand their service. They want to increase the size of their bus, and they want to be able to do more community work as well. Should they be able to have a fair go as well?

Mr PHILLIPS: Phil, I might defer to you for that.

Mr BROWN: Mr Barton, from a rural community development perspective I think it is a conversation we need to have, absolutely. I think I go back to Kevin's point: for every community that we have a conversation with there is a different scenario. I think one of the challenges we have got in the school bussing environment is the inflexibility and the administrative framework that sits around it at the moment that makes it really difficult for local solutions to deal with local challenges. So I think it is a conversation we need to have, and I think that conversation will be a very different one depending on which community you find yourself in. But I think as an organisation we would not be resistant to exploring the concept of transport being available to the broader community provided it is built with that community engagement and community support going through it, so it is not driven by purely a business mindset that 'I want to expand my business' but it is actually done in partnership with that local community and all those sorts of challenges and barriers that are identified when we talk about school bussing systems can be addressed and overcome in a way that that local community feels comfortable with.

Mr BARTON: I could not agree more, Phil.

Mr PHILLIPS: And I will just add to that because I think we have not made that point, or I have not made that point, that when asked about that people recognised that there was a transport issue and difficulty and disadvantage in many communities—not necessarily all, but in many communities—and they were quite open to having some of those issues solved, and necessarily access for the wider public was one of those that they were certainly willing to consider. In terms of their overall response we have highlighted what their major concerns are, but I do not think that needs to be interpreted that they are antagonistic to looking at sensible, reasonable options that we could put to them as part of a broader conversation.

Mr BARTON: One more, Chair? Just in terms of when the kids are on the bus, there could be—I will call them monitors—a couple of volunteers, and those two people may have working with children checks, or that person has a working with children check, to keep an eye on the kids on that run on the school bus if they have got other people coming on. How do you think that would go down?

Mr PHILLIPS: Yes, they are the sorts of solutions that I think would need to be put up as part of a package of any change. And I think we might have painted the rural community a little darkly here; I do not think they have completely got their eyes closed and their head in the sand. I think anything that is reasonable and does not put at risk their children's safety in any significant way they would contemplate, and such a suggestion as you have made I think is well and truly within that ambit.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. Thank you for that. Mr Tarlamis to ask a question.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Phil and Kevin. I was just wondering, in terms of your engagement with those that you were communicating with and that you represent, was any of the response, was any of the engagement or was any of the questioning around their views about utilisation of the bus service outside of the pick-up and drop-off times for the wider public?

Mr BROWN: Do you want to go, Kevin, or am I—

Mr PHILLIPS: Yes, I will go first. You have caught me on the hop; I am not sure what the questions were now. They were just phrased under the subheadings that your inquiry was particularly interested in. But what happened was that we got that response—that in actual fact people proposed that if we could extend the bus service to use in that sort of post 9 o'clock to 2.30 slot within communities, then they saw that as an opportunity. They saw that as something positive, that in actual fact if that bus use could be made, particularly in those post-primary schools, maybe year 11s and 12s—VCE students—could link across small communities close by, using that bus for a particular day or numbers of days. At the same time it would then be possible that that bus could remain, again for a particular day, for only community use during those hours. So they certainly raised those issues themselves and certainly were not antagonistic to it.

Mr TARLAMIS: Okay.

Mr BROWN: Could I just add to that that I think what we are seeing in rural communities now is schools are actually starting to work very much in a collaborative way to look after their kids. So we are seeing young people going from town A to town B, and they are challenged by transport issues, because generally the school bussing system goes to a point, and to go from point A to point B is a very challenging one. So unless schools have got their own transport system, which many of our remote communities have, then that becomes a challenge especially. So, to add value to Kevin's, I think if we actually flex the management, the administrivia and the inflexibility of the current arrangements to allow utilisation outside that sort of 8.30 to 9 o'clock time and the 3.30 to 4 o'clock time, I think for a student accessing other learning opportunities it would be seen as a real positive. But it could then add value to being seen as a community service as well. So if I pick a place like Ouyen, for example, a lot of those kids do their VET in Mildura; they have to get there. And I would think if you actually put a system together that saw a public system transporting the community from Ouyen, that incorporated students as well as the community, you might get a pick-up in that sense, provided it did not upset their school bussing systems—you know, their 9 o'clock and 3.30 scenario.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thanks. The other point I just wanted to make, and you may want to comment on this, is Rod made the point that by utilising the existing school bus system we will be able to access a service and increase it from 400 to 1600 bus services. I just noticed in your submission you talk about the fact that the school system operates 40 weeks of the year, leaving around 165 days when the schools are not operating. So that would mean that if we were looking at expanding those services, we would need to take into consideration what happens on those other 165 days with the school services, because if we are going to be running the services, we would need to factor in an increase in services for those 165 days so there would not be a gap there, presumably, as well. That would need to be something that is factored into any system.

Mr PHILLIPS: Yes. I think one of the respondents who pointed those stats out I think took great glee in providing them for you—as a major barrier to making school buses a community use thing because in actual fact it is really lucky to be two-thirds of the year that school buses run. Again, that is I think a dilemma, but it is not an insurmountable hurdle.

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes. It is being aware of it. I mean, it is an issue to be aware of when considering what options are available and how you can sort of factor that in—but yes, it is something to be cognisant of.

Mr PHILLIPS: Exactly.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Mr Tarlamis. On that point, I notice that we have come to the conclusion of our allocated time slot. On behalf of the committee, Phil and Kevin and the Country Education Partnership, I want to thank you for the body of work you have put in, for your submission and for your presentation and appearance today. I know a lot of that information is a lot to absorb and a lot of it is very informative, and it will be helpful to the committee as we continue our inquiry. So on behalf of the committee, I want to say thank you to both of you.

Mr BROWN: Thank you, Enver.

Mr PHILLIPS: Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: And on that point the committee will now take a short break for morning tea for 30 minutes. If everyone could be back at 11.30, that would be appreciated. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.