



Hon. Paul Lucas MP



Queensland
Government

Our ref MC12612

Your ref 445-05

Minister for
Transport and Main Roads

30 MAY 2005

Mr Neil Laurie
The Clerk of the Parliament
Queensland Parliamentary Service
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Mr Laurie

**Re: Petition lodged in the Queensland Legislative Assembly No. 445-05
- Eligibility Criteria for School Transport Assistance Scheme**

I refer to a petition lodged by Mr Peter Wellington MP, Member for Nicklin on 9 March 2005, in Parliament in relation to the School Transport Assistance Scheme. The principal petitioner was Mr Kel Anu Inlakesh-Wearne.

I wish to acknowledge the excellent work done by schools and school communities. Our State school teachers and administrators are to be congratulated for their initiatives and innovative programs developed to prepare young people for life after school.

The School Transport Assistance Scheme (STAS) provides transport assistance to eligible students. The scheme exists to provide assistance to students who are disadvantaged through distance or low income circumstances in accessing their nearest school. The main aim of the scheme is to provide an alternative for students who do not have any school facilities in their area.

Under STAS, transport assistance is provided subject to a number of Statewide policies and guidelines. The reason for these guidelines is that the scheme, with a budget of more than \$130m, is one of the largest assistance programs funded by the State Government. With such significant funding each financial year, the Government must ensure that assistance available under this and other schemes is distributed in a consistent and transparent manner throughout the State.

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Queensland Transport (QT) is aware of the changing education landscape. It is important to remember, however, that changes across the state vary considerably. For the petitioners, it appears that the choices have increased with greater opportunities now available in their area. There are many other areas of the state where choice is very limited.

In many rural areas, populations are declining, as are school enrolments. This often means reduction in facilities and curriculum, or even the potential to have the local school close.

In an overall sense, to change STAS to enable payment of assistance to bypass the nearest facilities because of personal preference would very likely see the demise or reduction in size of many rural education facilities, if applied in those areas. It would also mean an inefficient use of taxpayers' funds to both invest in schools in local areas and also fund travel past these same schools. Neither outcome would be a good community or whole of Government outcome.

STAS seeks to achieve, within a finite budget, to balance transport assistance to the nearest school in lieu of the provision of school facilities while also ensuring a consistent level of benefit Statewide. This has a whole of Government outcome in that it also allows Education Queensland to plan facilities according to population in a given area.

I understand that the petitioners are requesting specific transport assistance to school of choice if the school chosen is within 1.6km (for primary school students) or 3.2km (for high school students) of the closest school. While this may appear a reasonable solution to the petitioners in addressing the particular issues faced by them, it would not be equitable in comparison to the parents of the 500,000 students in Queensland who fund the full cost of travel to school each day, often for journeys longer than these distances. I am therefore unable to approve the additional assistance sought by the petitioners.

This decision does not infer that I would want to dissuade the petitioners from making decisions about the schools their children attend. However, they need to be aware of their personal responsibility for the travel arrangements for their children within available transport resources when they travel past the nearest school.

I thank the petitioners for their interest in this matter.

Yours sincerely

PAUL LUCAS MP
Minister for Transport and Main Roads