Super-schools and the future commute for students and families

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Abstract summary

Schools are one of the building blocks of every thriving community, and convenience is key – it's why most Australian families to choose to enrol in their local school. But how accessible are schools, really? And what do new trends in education infrastructure provision mean for the school commute?

Some states have policies with walkability targets or other standards around maximum distances and travel modes to help achieve this. But there are many communities where families' experience of getting to school and back is long, car-dependent, congested, or even unsafe. As the average Australian primary and secondary school enrolment numbers have gradually grown, so too have the challenges plaguing the school commute.

It's an issue that is poised to continue worsen with the rise of 'super schools' - a model that will see larger, fewer school campuses delivered in urban areas. Seeking to achieve savings on land costs, this approach could ultimately be at the expense of accessibility, requiring more students and families to travel further, and to busier sites.

This presentation will explore these challenges and a suite of potential solutions for a safe and efficient school commute through case studies from Australia and overseas. Using analysis of school sizes and average travel times for various transport modes, it makes a compelling case for better integration of schools planning and transport planning in our cities.

Presentation outline

An outline of the presentation is provided below. This can be tailored according to the length of the timeslot.

Why school accessibility?

Accessibility is critical for schools to help children and family safely and efficiently get from home to the classroom. That schools, especially primary schools, should be walkable from every home in urban areas may seem like conventional wisdom, but it's only partially recognised and protected in policy.

While there are no national targets or mandates on accessibility and maximum distances to schools, state-level school site selection guidelines and requirements for transport assessments are common, including in NSW, Victoria, and Queensland.

Many state and city governments have also taken up initiatives focussed on mode choice, encouraging families to walk, bus/tram/train, or scoot to school, e.g.:

- WA's Your Move: Schools
- NSW's Walk Safely to School Day
- VicHealth Walk to School

But we can't expect families to make these mode choices if they are not safe and convenient.

How we're tracking: school accessibility today

The reality is that for many, walking or taking public transport to the nearest public school isn't a viable option. The majority of Australian children (58%) are driven to/ from school by car most days of the week, and safety and efficiency were cited as the top reasons why.¹

Using Melbourne and Sydney as case studies, we will undertake research to show just how accessible schools are according to several metrics.

[GIS analysis & visuals of the share of residential dwellings in metropolitan that are within 1.5km (~20min walk) of a school (primary and secondary)]

[GIS analysis & visuals of how much of the metropolitan area falls within a 20minute travel time catchment of primary schools and secondary schools – each broken down by mode choice (public transport, walking, cycling, and car), and comparison between inner, middle, outer, and growth contexts]

There are many historical practices and current policies that contribute to the poor accessibility exhibited in many areas, including the drawing of school catchments/zones based on administrative boundaries or geodesic distances that ignore natural boundaries such as waterways and highways/freeways, and a lack of coordinated school and transport infrastructure provision, especially in growth areas.

'Super schools' & what they mean for families and accessibility

There's another trend emerging that's set to fuel these challenges further: rising enrolments and the new 'super school'.

Analysis of historical enrolment data shows that between 2008 and 2023, the average Australian primary and secondary schools both grew by approximately 15%. In Victoria, over that same time, the number of schools with 2000-plus thousand students has more than doubled. This is strategic – governments are now focused on increasing the capacity of schools to accommodate more students before investing in additional infrastructure at new sites, with the goal of saving on land and new building costs. Infrastructure Victoria has estimated that by expanding existing schools and building new ones to larger sizes, the state would save \$1.5 billion by 2036.

In growth areas, this will likely mean that more children have to travel longer distances to reach their nearest local school. For many, this would make active mode choices even less viable. It also costs

¹ Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne (2019), Travelling to school: Habits of Australian families

families – a commute that is 10 minutes longer would come at an annual time-cost to the average family of around \$1,900.²

In established urban areas, this could mean that school sites become more and more congested around pick up and drop off times as any available land is maxed out with school expansions and additional portable/modular buildings.

How we can do better

With school sizes set to continue to swell, a systems-based approach that integrates schools planning with transport planning is needed to support active mode choice and ensure a safe and efficient school commute for all students and families. Some ideas include:

- Redrawn school catchments based on travel times rather than geodesic distances, and set maximum travel times for the siting of new schools
- Targeted planning and investment to remove barriers on school routes (e.g. pedestrian and cycling under/overpasses)
- Traffic management measures such as staggered start and finish times that avoid pick-up/dropoff times that coincide with peak traffic periods
- Formally integrate schools planning with transport planning, especially in growth areas (i.e. school routes are prioritised)
- Dedicated student-only transport services (not just school buses)

[each one of these will be illustrated through a case study]

² Based on ATAP values of travel time, assuming 1 adult and 1.8 children per family commute to a single school site via private vehicle

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