Submission

No 11

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL ZONE SAFETY

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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety

School zone safety

Introduction

I am the spokesman for the National Motorists Association of Australia, a small group of people who are interested in road safety and campaign (without funds) for positive road safety, but this submission is being made under my own name for logistical reasons primarily that most members of our group are interstate or currently overseas.

I also am the Vice President (Policy) of the Lindfield Branch of The Liberal Party of Australia NSW Division

My background in motoring is 50 years experience on the road both here (45 years) and in Europe over some 2 million kilometres preceded by 10 years operating farm machinery off road. I have appeared on a number of TV shows primarily on the subject of speed cameras.

Much of my professional life was in the assessment of proposals for support by the Australian Government for Industrial Research and Development through grants and enhanced tax concessions. Assessment was made on technological issues, commercial prospects, managerial capacity and financial issues. As might be expected I have a particular interest in the standard of research in road safety.

I have also served a term as a Councillor (Ku-ring-gai Council) and was the Chair of the Traffic Committee for that term.

The issue of school zones is an important facet of the overall road safety actions in any jurisdiction. There is one over arching issue which I raise first as it is so fundamental to any consequential consideration.

Research.

The standard of research in the engineering field of road safety is well founded; Anti-lock braking, crumple zones, tyre and suspensions, seat belts, side intrusion bars etc are examples. Research on operating matters however is often of a poor standard, unavailable or non-existant.

There appears to be no research on where, when, how and why school children were being involved in road accidents (I use accidents as I presume these were not deliberate incidents). Without this it is not possible to determine accurately whether or not the current strategy has had any effect.

Crash Cause Analysis is the fundamental research on which any counter measure should be based however when it is badly done it creates distortions and these lead to ineffective measures. An example of this is that the NSW RTA claims that between 40% and 46% of fatal crashes are caused by speeding however the UK annual statistics generally show that exceeding the speed limit is a contributory cause to some 12% (although the latest year showed some 17% possibly due to changes in limits towards the end of the previous government). A variation of this magnitude can only be attributed to investigation methodology.

Sourced from a family member who was a Traffic Officer in the West Yorkshire Police the UK Serious Crash Investigation system is in two parts. The first is the on-site determination of what happened consisting of measurements and calculations to determine trajectories and speeds with an examination of wreckage for mechanical issues. Matters such as the co-efficient of friction at the site were confirmed by using a police vehicle to test skid resistance. A computerised system of graphic analysis of damage compared with known crash test results was being developed to assist this stage of investigations.

The second stage is to determine why the crash happened. This is conducted by officers qualified under the UK City and Guilds education system in the special crash investigation course. This part would show why those involved did certain things eg was there an optical illusion causing an error of judgement etc. This was carried out by police because they have the appropriate inquisitive powers. The outcome of these two stages is a factual report of what happened and the reasons (contributory causes) it happened. They do not determine culpability; the decision to initiate any prosecution is taken by senior officers not directly involved in the investigation.

It appears that in NSW the police carry out the first stage and probably to similar standards as the UK but the second stage is done by the RTA. It is alleged that this largely consists of searches through witness statements for words which might be associated with speed such as skid, jackknife (trucks), fast etc. There appears to be no investigation why these events occurred. The RTA does not have investigative powers and thus cannot follow up suspected causes nor verify statements.

Suggestion 1

That crash cause evaluation be raised to the UK standard and be carried out by sworn police officers of high calibre. Prosecution decision to be taken by senior officers not directly involved in the case.

Objective:- to obtain improved crash cause analysis for input into policy decision making.

Emotional impacts on policy

It appears that much safety policy is driven by emotion rather than analysis of costs and benefits. Examples of this are statements such as “Survival at n kph is 5%, survival at half n kph is 95% therefore reduce speed to half n kph”. While this may look attractive the proponents are actually saying that it is permissible to crash into someone at low speeds as they will only be injured, possibly severely, but not killed. The prime objective of safety should be to avoid the impact in the first place.

Similarly there is a tendency to blame the other person for all crashes and, where children are involved, to develop restrictions on others whether or not this is relevant.

While these pressures are hard to resist in political life the provision of sound research findings and the public availability of the whole paper not just synopses would assist.

While I was a Councillor there were numerous times that residents made representations for particular counter measures for real or perceived dangers. In looking into this the detailed information about crashes was refused by the RTA on privacy grounds. This not only inhibited investigations and hid causes but it also prevented explanations being given to the complainants.

Suggestion 2

Information on incidents including causes be made available without fear or favour in order that any actions or otherwise can be publicly justified. This may mean changes to legislation on privacy. Publishing the full research exposes it to assessment and review by interested parties.

Age and other factors.

There is insufficient public knowledge or research on these factors however it is reasonable to assume that High School pupils should be more aware of road safety issues and the principles of self preservation than primary school age children however this may be partly counter balanced by a higher tendency to horseplay. With a change to education and discipline there is no reason why High School age children should be treated as other than adults. See education.

There is no apparent evidence to show that major roads are more or less likely to be the sites of accidents compared with side roads. Observation however suggests that in most cases major highways are not used as pick up/drop off zones by parents. It is also mooted that major roads are so obviously dangerous

that more care is taken by pedestrians, even young ones, so that, paradoxically, they are safer.

Alternative treatments.

The principle aim of road safety, as noted above, is the prevention of impacts. To this end separation of traffic and people is an ideal. While this is not possible on all roads there is no reason why major roads should not have separation treatment where there are side roads to establish pick/up drop off points. Kerbside fencing would effectively keep children and vehicles separate; it would also prevent pick up/drop off on major roads.

Crossings.
In some cases pedestrian controlled lights on major roads may be suitable particularly for older children and relatively low numbers of pedestrians. Being pedestrian controlled means that they would only be in use when needed resulting in maximum safety with minimum traffic inconvenience.
The ultimate in separation is the overbridge. These can be equipped with lifts at each end at reasonable prices and would be most applicable at high usage points and where schools are bisected by roads. The cost of these can be offset by advertising in compliance with RTA guidelines. An example of a high standard overbridge can be seen on Epping Road between Delhi Rd and Wicks Rd at the small shopping complex. This crosses 6 lanes, a wide median strip and two wide nature strips/footpaths with lifts at each end as well as stairs and is fully enclosed. The pay back time from advertising is believed to be 20 years.

Ku-ring-gai Council approved in concept such an overbridge at Lindfield Public School on the Pacific Highway however the RTA chose to install speed cameras instead (I believe 4). The cost of these would have gone a long way to paying for an overbridge.

Suggestion 3

a) All major roads ie Highways be surveyed to show where kerbside fencing and pedestrian controlled traffic light crossings/overbridges could be installed.
b) That such places be prioritised
c) That a program of installation be funded at a significant level and that advertising be used to recover costs and accelerate the program
d) That when installed the current temporally variable speed limit be removed as redundant.

There are some stretches of Highway that have very long school zones. The Pacific Highway between Warrawee/Turramurra and the F3 Freeway has a stretch of over 2 kilometres of school zone. (Warrawee Public School, Knox Grammar and Abbotsleigh Girls). This appears to be excessive to most motorists

and there seems to be good reason to re-examine this area and give it a high priority under suggestion 3. Note that there are traffic lights at Warrawee Public and Knox and both lights and an overbridge at Abbotsleigh.

Priority should be given to treatment at long stretches of school zones on Highways and where there is a mix of primary, high schools and private schools to ensure that conditions are optimized.

There are many schools with different attendance days and times which results in unnecessary application of school zone limits. Private schools often have different term times and some schools have different attendance times. Motorists have reason to be aggrieved if they are penalized when a school zone restriction is inappropriately enforced and equally so when the school has a non-standard time as the times on the signs are not readily discernable being of standard size and in red which is difficult for those who have poor colour sight. The Snowy Mountains School at Jindabyne is one example of this.

Using a “One size fits all” approach even with minor variations means that restrictions are too frequently unnecessary and are perceived to be unnecessary leading to contempt. The use of flashing lights has been most useful to those who are not aware of term times (the RTA’s insistence that we should all know the intimate details of term times in various States adds to its reputation of intransigent arrogance) and for those from interstate. Flashing lights should be universal but it appears that the RTA has selected the most expensive options and this has slowed down installation; some P&C groups have made up their own at very low cost.

Flashing lights could easily be programmed for the specific installation ie the times could be altered according to the needs of the school thus minimising restricted times but enhancing the perceived appropriateness thus giving more credence and likely obedience to the restrictions. This would eliminate the concerns where limits are imposed but the school is closed. It would require a change in the law to impose limits when the lights were flashing instead of specific times.

Suggestion 4

a) The program of installing flashing lights at school zones should be accelerated
b) The RTA re-examine the costs associated and explain why the costs appear to be exhorbitant
c) The flashing lights be programmed to the specific needs of the schools and that the law be changed to accommodate this by making restrictions apply “While lights are flashing”

Education

Road safety education programmes in schools appear to be minimal although there are some good exceptions. The CARES project runs a program available to primary schools at the former police driver training school site at St Ives. There is a mock road layout with signs, crossings etc and a supply of bicycles. Children are taught some basic road rules under the supervision of police. A similar facility was opened on the Central Coast under their guidance in 2007. This program has been highly commended and is supported by the NSW Police and the RTA.

I cannot recall either of my children receiving any road safety instruction at school. In dealing with the teaching profession on such matters I have observed a reluctance to be involved. In one case the Principal of a large primary school, supported by his staff, refused to even hang out warning flags at a crossing wanting Council to provide a person to do this. The disparity in costing of a few moments action by a person on site compared with having to dispatch a Council employee twice a day should be obvious. There are also indications of ideological complexities within some of the teaching profession where the motor vehicle is seen as an evil. In terms of safety the motor vehicle is a part of the scenario which has to be taken into account.

There is an attitude that the rules are absolute and can be relied upon for protection; nothing could be further from the truth. A motor vehicle is required by law to stop at a pedestrian crossing if someone steps on to it. If the driver for any reason does not see the pedestrian and fails to stop he/she may suffer a penalty. The pedestrian will almost certainly suffer a serious injury. It is important therefore that any educational approach moves from rights to responsibilities and that this includes the responsibility to protect yourself. It is simple as you are stepping from the kerb at a crossing or lights to glance each way to ensure that traffic is stopping. Self preservation is fundamental to safety. If safety is taught in schools on a self preservation foundation it will have benefits in all aspects of life not just on the roads.

Road safety education can be taken further to include some basic matters in driving but it is beyond the scope, capabilities and funding to include driver education in the school curriculum.

Parents could also benefit from some fundamental safety knowledge; simple things like not parking on the opposite side of the road to the school which encourages the very young to run across the road. It is no good blaming the other driver for the situation that you have created.

Suggestion 5

a) A curriculum for general safety education with some emphasis on road safety be developed from kindergarten through to final years of school based on the fundamental concept of self preservation.
b) That Principals accept some responsibility for safety around the schools eg putting out safety flags, using disciplinary powers for unsafe behaviour, taking the message to parents through P&C organizations.
c) The safe cycling programs as provided by the CARES facility at St Ives (and now at other sites) as described above be supported and expanded throughout the State.

Inappropriate school zones.

The “One size fits all” concept criticized above has other issues. There are schools which are set so far from the road that a school zone is inappropriate and some which have been laid out with no consideration for safety.

Some examples

Tudor House near Moss Vale is located so far from the public road that attendees do not go to the road during the week yet there is a school zone. However on Saturdays sports activities are much closer to the road when the school zone is inoperative.

A public school on the Pacific Highway north of Frederickton (north of Kempsey) near the site of the “Kempsey Bus Crash” is set well back from the highway with the entrance from a side track. It is evident that all pick up/set down activities are well off the road (circa 100 metres) with essentially no exposure of children to the road but a school zone is on the Highway.

At Belrose there is a Christian Covenant school which is set back from Forest Way by a very large playing field itself hedged off from Forest Way but there is a school zone. Recently a bus stop has been built on Forest way to service this school. It is surprising that this has been permitted as it encourages children to go to this 80 kph divided road. It would be more appropriate to have insisted that the school field be fenced off and the bus stop be located at the school away from the main road by several hundred metres. Perhaps safety was not considered.

Suggestion 6

a) An audit be undertaken of all schools commencing with those known to be set back from roads with a view to fencing or other means of preventing children accessing busy roads
b) Depart of Transport, RTA and local Authorities ensure that, where possible, pick up/drop off zones for both private and public transport are

located away from busy roads. New bus stops for schools should not be permitted on busy roads.

Extended timing.

In the ACT school zone timing is across the school day from about 8.00 am to 4.00pm. even though there is no activity through almost all of this period. Similarly there are 24/7 school/pedestrian activity zones in Victoria. The application of these without any justification gives rise to opposition by drivers who then treat them with contempt.

Suggestion 7

School zone times should be confined to the times when children are entering and leaving the school grounds at the beginning and ending of the school days.

Enforcement

As far as possible school zones should be designed so that they are naturally obeyed. The concept of them operating “When lights are flashing” is designed to minimise inadvertent breaches. Enforcement methodology is of two basic types, police and cameras. Cameras are favoured by those who are primarily focused on punishment rather than problem solving. Some of the problems associated with cameras are the delay in apprehension; a bill in the mail days or weeks after the event is meaningless to most; lack of identification of the driver leading to “point swapping”; inability to check the sobriety of the driver, their legality in driving or the roadworthiness of the vehicle or for any other misdemeanours. Although police operations are not as ever present as cameras they can not only carry out these checks but can also ask the driver why they broke the rules which may uncover some unsuspected reasons for inadvertent breaches.

Cameras tend to be located on the area where it is most likely that children will cross the road; if this is at a light controlled crossing a speed camera is redundant as vehicles will be stopped. In any case the natural instinct of a driver is to check the speedometer at that point which means their focus is on the dashboard instead of the road and surrounds. I have never heard of a crash on the dash, they all seem to happen on the road. There are also timing issues with cameras. If they instantly change at the commencement of the school zone time there is a danger that a driver whose clock is not perfectly correct may be inadvertently exceeding the limit by a considerable amount or even may have been legal until the instant of change. It is believed that this last point has been responsible for drivers being booked for 40 kph over the limit in Brisbane’s Clem 7 Tunnel as a variable limit can switch from 80 kph to 40 kph and if a driver is at a camera point at that instant can be accused of being 40 kph over the limit and subjected to massive fines, points loss and suspension. This is unacceptable.

The use of a numerical standard to define dangerous actions is fraught with difficulties; a transgression within a few minutes of the change over time of the limits might be worthy only of a caution; the same level of transgression at the time when children are about might be worthy of a serious penalty.

Suggestion 8

a) Enforcement be carried out by sworn police officers and offenders stopped on the spot for full processing and checking.
b) If cameras are retained there is a “grace” period at each end of the speed zone time.
c) Consideration be given to charges other than exceeding a speed limit for higher range breaches. Eg Adaptation of an old UK charge of “Driving without due consideration for other road users”. (This is a subject in its own right)

Michael Lane
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