Submission of the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People to the

STAYSAFE COMMITTEE REVIEW OF

TRAFFIC CONTROL AROUND NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOLS

1. The Commission for Children and Young People

1.01. The Commission for Children and Young People was established by the Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998. The Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

(a) the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children are the paramount considerations

(b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account

(c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children: s10.

Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

1.02 It is one of the principal functions of the Commission to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies and practices and services affecting children: s11(d).

2. This submission

2.01 The Commissioner is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the STAYSAFE Committee’s inquiry into the effectiveness of current traffic control strategies around New South Wales schools.

2.02 The Commissioner’s statutory responsibilities are limited to children and young people under the age of 18 years and this submission will be restricted to issues affecting this age group.

2.03 It has been estimated that in New South Wales more than 600,000 primary school children travel to and from school every school day. When pre-schoolers and secondary school students are added it is likely that a million children and young people in this state travel from home to school and back on a regular basis.
3. The problem

3.01 The problem is that traffic congestion in the vicinity of schools peaks for a period of approximately an hour before classes commence and for a similar period at the end of the school day. The cause of the congestion is a sudden influx of parents dropping off or collecting their children, school buses unloading or loading students and students arriving at or leaving the school grounds. At the same time teachers will be arriving at or leaving the school and there will be parents (sometimes with pre-school children) accompanying their children to school on foot.

3.02 The problem appears to be becoming more acute as a result of a variety of factors:

- Increasing incidence of car ownership and more children travelling to and from school by private car
- A perception that children are no longer safe travelling to and from school unaccompanied
- At the end of the school day, parents’ vehicles parked outside the school gates waiting for their children to emerge
- Most schools are not designed to provide for one way traffic flow into and out of the school or off street parking for parents’ vehicles
- Some cars double park or park illegally for short periods in the vicinity of the school thus adding to congestion and increasing risk
- Lack of separation between pedestrians, cars and buses
- More senior students own or have access to a vehicle and drive themselves to school

3.03 The problem is most evident in areas of high density population where the roads are busy and parking is at a premium. The problems are magnified when the entrance to the school is on a busy road.

3.05 The concentration of traffic for short periods at the beginning and end of the school day has a number of negative consequences for students and poses a serious risk to their safety. It is likely that the problems will get worse with increasing car ownership and growing traffic on the roads. There is a need to take additional measures to reduce the risks to students.

3.04 Particular risks arise from:

- Students looking for or moving towards a parent’s car may cross the road at a place other than a controlled crossing or may fail to keep a look out for other traffic.
- Students rushing so as not to be late for school or hurrying away from the school gates to meet a parent or to return home may be especially vulnerable.

- Cars and buses pulling out from the kerb into the general traffic flow are a danger to pedestrians and other road users.
- Inexperienced student drivers may lack the skills to deal with the difficult traffic conditions.
- Cars double parked or illegally parked and buses blocking the view of pedestrians or other vehicles
- Students travelling to school by bicycle are at risk of being injured by the opening of car doors or by cars pulling out without noticing them
- Disruption and delay to other traffic can cause frustration for through-traffic with some drivers travelling at an unsafe speed to make up lost time.

4. **Measures that could be taken to reduce the risk to students**

4.01 *Environmental improvements*

When new schools are built, provision should be made for cars to enter and exit the school to drop off and collect students. There should also be space for short term parking for parents vehicles. Where possible, existing schools should be modified to provide for a designated vehicle entrance and exit which will not interrupt the flow of student pedestrians entering and leaving the school. Where there is no land available to build such facilities above the ground, underground construction might be considered.

Where it is not possible to provide these facilities within school grounds, traffic authorities should look at the possibility of creating a special zone near the school where children can be dropped off and collected. There needs to be a separation of parents’ cars from buses with a separate bus zone allowing buses to park away from the road so as not to obstruct traffic or block the vision of students crossing the road. Bus zones can be situated so that students entering or alighting from buses are protected from other motor vehicles.

4.02 *Staggering class hours*

One way to alleviate the problem would be to stagger class hours to avoid the situation where large numbers of adults and children congregate in the roads alongside the school for two brief periods in each school day. Senior classes could start and finish later than junior classes. Another approach would be to provide school-based activities in the school or the school grounds after school so as to avoid the heavy build up immediately after the last class.

There might be some resistance to staggering class hours from parents with more than one child at the school but staggered hours would go some way to ease the problem of sudden build up of motor and pedestrian traffic at times dictated by school timetables.

4.03 *Car pooling arrangements*

Parents could be encouraged to co-operate by working out a roster system whereby one parent drops off or collects children from several families.
Schools could gather details of parents who were agreeable to take part in a car-pooling arrangement and promote this as an option. Students who drive themselves to school could also be encouraged to take part in a car-pooling arrangement.

4.04 Parent and student education

Parents and students could be educated in ways of reducing the congestion outside the school. They could be asked to collect their children at a designated meeting place a few minutes distant from the school gates. Many students today have mobile phones and they could be encouraged, if delayed at school, to phone a parent and arrange a later time to be collected.

Parents and students also need to be educated in road safety and the risks to children and young people from the intense traffic movement outside the school during the peak hours.

4.05 Driver education

Education programmes are necessary to remind drivers of the need to reduce speed in the vicinity of schools. Road safety messages on television seem not to have recently highlighted this issue. Special driver education programs should be run for students who drive a car to school.

4.06 Electronic signs

It would be possible to erect electronic signs at the entrance to roads adjoining the school advising through-traffic to take an alternative route. These signs would be illuminated only at times of peak congestion. Such signs would have an advantage over traffic calming devices (speed bumps) in that they would allow traffic to flow normally at other times. Electronic signs could also signal a lower speed limit for all traffic at before-school and after-school peaks. Again this would allow traffic to proceed normally at other times.

4.07 Bus timetables

The Commission has received complaints that bus timetables are not always coordinated to coincide with school timetables with the result that students are required to wait in the vicinity of bus stops for some time after school, adding to the melee outside the school. The possibility of designated school buses departing from the school and linking with a nearby rail or bus transport centre should be considered. Such buses would depart when full or at regular intervals and would shift students travelling by public transport away from the environs of the school at peak periods.

4.08 Pedestrian crossings

Traffic lights and pedestrian crossing need to be positioned conveniently for students so that they will be used. Pedestrian crossings outside schools should always be protected by traffic lights. The safety of children in such situations needs to be accorded a higher priority than the convenience of motorists.
The Commission has been advised that the pedestrian phase of traffic lights outside schools is often not sufficiently frequent and children become impatient and are tempted to dash across the road against the lights. Thought should be given to having variable phasing so that pedestrian traffic has priority during the before-school and after-school peaks. It is understood that technology is available to vary the timing of pedestrian crossing signals.

An alarming number of people are killed on pedestrian crossings in New South Wales. Younger children are at particular risk because they are smaller and less visible and because they will sometimes run rather than walk across a pedestrian crossing or may hesitate or turn back if they see a car approaching. The safety of children using pedestrian crossings can be greatly enhanced by providing a traffic island (pedestrian refuge) in the middle of the crossing and by extending the footpath into the road at both ends of the crossing so that children can be more easily seen and themselves have a better view of approaching traffic. Ramps for strollers, wheelchairs and for students pushing bicycles will add to safety and convenience. Where schools are situated on a busy road consideration should be given to the construction of an overbridge.

The Commission is aware that volunteers often shepherd children across pedestrian crossings and this undoubtedly increases their safety. In New Zealand schools primary school children collect a brightly coloured flag as they enter school pedestrian crossings and carry the flag high as they cross thus increasing their visibility. They deposit the flag on the far side of the crossing.

4.09 Supervision of students outside school grounds

There is uncertainty as to the relative responsibilities of various stakeholders when students are close to the school but outside school grounds. The case law suggests that schools have a legal responsibility to provide reasonable supervision of students before school and after school not only within school grounds but also in the immediate vicinity of school exits and entrances. But where parents drop off or collect children, they too have a responsibility to ensure that their child moves safely from the car to the school entrance.

In some schools teachers supervise students outside the school gates at peak times. Sometimes volunteers arranged by the school or the local Parents and Citizens Association provide supervision. Paid supervisors can be provided for eligible primary and pre-schools but the conditions of eligibility are quite strict. It would be helpful if the lines of responsibility of school staff, parents, volunteer helpers and paid supervisors were more strictly delineated.

4.10 Cycleways

Special cycle lanes for cyclists and a designated cyclists’ entrance to schools would assist in the separation between cars, cycles and pedestrians.

4.11 School Zones
Much valuable work has been done in creating School Zones with reduced speed limits from 8am to 9.30am and from 2.30pm to 4pm on school days. While School Zones alert motorists to the presence of children in the area, the information the Commission has received suggests that some motorists do not reduce their speed and speed restrictions are not well policed. Speed cameras in School Zones would be an effective means of enforcing the speed limits.

The eligibility criteria for School Zones are quite strict. Priority should be given to extending the school zone program and expanding the criteria.

5. Involving children and young people in developing road safety strategies

5.01 The Commission is aware of work done by the New South Wales government towards ensuring the safety of primary school students through its Safer Routes to School Program and the encouragement it has given to the setting up of School Safety Committees in schools (involving school staff, parents, local council representatives, the Police and the RTA). The Commission commends the government for these initiatives.

5.02 It is disappointing that the published information gives no indication that students are involved in planning these programs or in participating as members of School Safety Committees. Children and young people have local knowledge and personal experience of the day to day problems caused by traffic congestion. They are most likely to be aware of specific traffic problems in the vicinity of the school and could suggest strategies for addressing some of the road safety problems they encounter.

6. Summary of recommendations

6.01 Children and young people be involved in developing traffic plans and programs and be represented on School Safety Committees.

6.02 Separate vehicle entrances and exits be created for all schools. There should be short term parking facilities for parents and separation of pedestrian, bicycle and motor vehicle traffic.

6.03 Consideration be given to staggering class hours or providing after-school activities for students so as to avoid peak hour congestion in the vicinity of schools.

6.04 Parents and student drivers be encouraged to set up car-pooling arrangements to reduce the number of cars in the streets near the school at peak hours.

6.05 More could be done by way of education of students, parents and drivers. Road safety messages need to be promoted at the beginning of each school term and at regular intervals through the school year. Students who drive to school should be required to attend a course in traffic safety in the vicinity of the school.
6.06 Electronic signs be erected in streets adjoining schools advising drivers of the need to take special care and reducing the speed limit during peak periods before and after school.

6.07 Bus timetables be reviewed to reduce waiting times for students travelling by bus. Bus zones should be created so students can board and alight from buses with safety. Consideration might be given to special buses to ferry students to main transport terminals.

6.08 Pedestrian crossings outside schools should always be controlled by traffic lights with variable phasing so that pedestrian traffic has priority at peak periods. The idea of having brightly coloured flags for younger children to carry across uncontrolled pedestrian crossings is worthy of consideration.

6.09 There be a clear definition of responsibility for the safety of students outside the school gates.

6.10 Special cycleways be constructed for students with bicycles so as to create separation from pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic.

6.11 The School Zone program should be extended to cover more schools.

Commissioner for Children and Young People
February 2001