

Improving the safety of kiss and drop zones at schools: The Stay Safe Rangers at Balgowlah Heights Public School

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Introduction

Background

Stay Safe Rangers is a school-based initiative developed by Kathryn Henderson, a parent at Balgowlah Heights Public School. This is a government-operated primary school in northern Sydney.

The Stay Safe Rangers concept was developed by Ms Henderson in 2005. Planning for the project was undertaken during 2006, including a review by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and development of a risk assessment plan. A trial scheme commenced at Balgowlah Heights Public School in the first term of 2007.

The objectives of the initiative are:

- To improve “kiss and drop” zone safety for children in Primary Schools, particularly at home time
- To modify and improve driver behaviour in the vicinity of the school
- To streamline traffic flow and improve local amenity
- Integrated with the current Primary School Leadership Curriculum, to allow senior Primary School Students to observe and make recommendations on their findings, relating to road safety for themselves and their younger peers
- To provide a forum at which these School Leaders can discuss issues and broadcast their findings and recommendations in the School Newsletter and through other appropriate channels.
- To prepare years 5 and 6 students for further road safety education such as the young drivers programs offered in High School

This article is based on a review, conducted in May 2007, after some nine weeks of operation of the trial scheme. The review was commissioned and funded by NRMA Motoring & Services.

Methodology

Pre-trial and in-trial observations of the Kiss and Drop zone in operation were
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conducted by Mr Paine. Ms Henderson facilitated the initial training of Stay Safe Rangers. Mr Paine discussed the operation of the scheme with participants and other observers, such as local council rangers, police and Department of Education and Training managers.

International research was reviewed to establish best practice. The operation of other Kiss and Drop schemes in New South Wales was also reviewed.

Kiss and Drop Zones

"Kiss and Drop" zones are parking areas near the school gates that have a maximum two minute parking. The intention is that drivers do not wait in these zones and that they stay in the vehicle so that throughput is streamlined and traffic queues are minimised. In reality it only takes a few inconsiderate drivers to overstay in these zones and the system breaks down leading to frustration and traffic delays.

There are a variety of alternative names for Kiss and Drop zones including "Kiss and Ride" zones and "Drop-off and Pick-up" areas. Also, the term "parent" is used for simplicity and includes carers.

A Kiss and Drop zone is considered to be a passive intervention, where individuals are not required to undertake any action to be protected. Passive intervention strategies have been shown to be more effective than active measures, which require continued effort from individuals (McClure, Stevenson & McEvoy, 2004). Passive interventions such as a Kiss and Drop zone are particularly suitable in situations involving children.

Wigmore and Baas (2004) noted that Kiss and Drop zones are found to be effective where there has been a comprehensive treatment of the school frontage, including access to internal car parks, indented bus bays and passenger drop-off zones. This finding supports the conclusion drawn in STAYSAFE 53 (2002) that the traffic management of the areas outside schools should be holistically addressed as 'precincts' (or where there are adjacent schools, as 'cluster precincts').

More recently, researchers at the Center for Transportation Research and Education, University of Iowa (Hallmark & Isebrands, 2006; Isebrands & Hallmark, 2007) have reviewed safety on school grounds and public streets adjacent to elementary and middle schools in Iowa, and have produced a comprehensive guide to assessing the road safety issues and a toolbox for potential measures to reduce risk and improve safety during school travel. Again, this work complements STAYSAFE 53 (2002) approach.

The traffic environment around schools is one of the most complex road transport environments normally encountered by the majority of motorists, and is easily the most complex traffic environment normally encountered by children. For periods of 30 minutes or more during the morning traffic peak, and for a very intense 10-15 minutes in the mid-afternoon, the immediate frontages of schools experience traffic volumes and a diversity of road use that is only seen in busy commercial and shopping centres or associated with mass movements of people to sports and other large community events.

It is perhaps the complexity and ephemeral nature of the traffic environment

around schools that has tended to hide the significant risks posed by this environment to all road users, but particularly to school children seeking to travel from home to school and return.

There has been, as found by STAYSAFE 53 (2002), a systemic inability to deal effectively with the risk of harm associated with school travel, as opposed to the actual occurrence of road injury. Simply put, countermeasures that are based on death or serious injury to a child as a criterion for ranking of priority are not an acceptable benchmark for achieving better road safety around schools. A broader and more forward reaching approach to ensuring a safer environment around schools and communities must also include an assessment of risk without the necessary occurrence of road crashes. This reflects an increased risk-management approach within the school environment where, for example, schools are required to develop risk management plans for excursions. In the case of Balgowlah Heights Public School, such plans have been applied to the Stay Safe Rangers initiative.

New South Wales practices

The current approach to very short stay “drop off” and “pick up” zones outside schools is to designate such zones as 2-minute parking areas, or passenger set down or pick up areas. Kiss and Drop zones have been well supported by local councils and schools and, in concept, by parents. However, as drivers, parents have tended to be less co-operative, particularly in the afternoon.

Kiss and Drop zones evidently work very well in the mornings. The arrival time of vehicles is staggered, children usually exit the vehicle quickly and move into the school grounds and the driver is then able to move off. There are rarely traffic queues and children do not usually wait at the footpath.

In the afternoon the situation at most schools is quite different. Nearly all children arrive at the Kiss and Drop zone at the same time, as do vehicles and the streets are blocked with traffic. The footpath area is a mix of children waiting for vehicles to arrive, parents who are waiting to pick up children and walk to home or car and children hanging around in social groups. There is general confusion and many distractions for the children - who should instead be looking for the arrival of their vehicle. Drivers, too, are distracted looking for children amongst the throng and may be impatient due to traffic delays.

In the afternoon the proximity of distracted, excited children to moving vehicles is a particularly serious safety concern.

To address these home-time problems a series of countermeasures needs to be considered that incorporates the following elements:

- Organised grouping of children waiting to be picked up
- Targeted release of children whose vehicle has arrived
- Improvements to the road environment - avoiding vehicle/pedestrian conflicts, improved signage, traffic flow measures.
- Changing driver attitudes - more patience, awareness of safety issues and consideration of others

In effect, the simplest way to do this would be to create similar conditions at
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home-time to those that exist during the morning arrival - staggered vehicle arrival and prompt, efficient movement of children from the school grounds to the vehicle.

The focus of the Stay Safe Ranger initiative has therefore been to improve safety at home-time.

Stay Safe Rangers Concept

There are two main components of the Stay Safe Rangers initiative:

- The creation of a group of students, known as Stay Safe Rangers, who will observe the operation of the Kiss and Drop Zone in the afternoon, identify potential road safety situations and discuss possible solutions in Stay Safe Ranger Forums
- Revising the operation of the Kiss and Drop zone to improve safety and streamline traffic flow

The School Principal and a teacher, together with Ms Henderson, organised the Stay Safe Rangers.

A review of the Kiss and Drop Zone operation was undertaken by a small team that included school staff, Manly Council, and Department of Education and Training representatives.

Risk analysis

The School Principal and staff from the Department of Education and Training developed a comprehensive risk management plan. Key measures identified during this process included:

- Seeking parent permission for Stay Safe Ranger activities
- Specific training for Stay Safe Rangers and adult volunteers
- Stay Safe Rangers and adult volunteers to *remain on school grounds* (behind the fence) at all times
- Children waiting to be picked up are to wait in an orderly fashion behind the fence (on school grounds). When they see their vehicle they should raise their hand and the adult volunteer will tell them to move to their vehicle when it is safely parked.
- Stay Safe Rangers to wear highly visible clothing to indicate that observations are taking place
- Stay Safe Rangers are not to give instructions or directions to any person and are not to engage in conversations with drivers
- Adult volunteers will manage the release of students and support Stay Safe Ranger observations. Adult volunteers should not engage in conversation with drivers and *should not assist children getting into vehicles*
- No number plate or other identifying information is to be recorded by Stay Safe Rangers
- Widespread publicity for the new arrangements

Implementation of pilot scheme

The pilot scheme at Balgowlah Heights Public School commenced on 2 April 2007.

The initiative was strongly supported by the School Principal, who took part in early planning work and then oversaw the implementation of the scheme. He had the responsibility of ensuring that the underlying objectives of the scheme fitted comfortably with existing school policies. It was paramount that the initial emphasis on student empowerment was not forgotten.



Gate and sign used for Stay Safe Ranger operations.

The scheme was presented to teaching staff as part of the existing Student Welfare and Leadership Program and this was supported. An Assistant Principal at the school took on the role of Support Teacher, responsible, in conjunction with Ms Henderson, for many of the project tasks.

Student participation

A total of 55 Stay Safe Rangers were appointed and it was evident that the scheme was popular with Year 5 students.

Rosters were drawn up with the aim of having at least three Stay Safe Rangers on duty each afternoon. A Stay Safe Ranger Committee was elected by the Rangers. The Student Committee ran the Stay Safe Ranger Forum and ensured that Rangers turned up for duties as rostered.

Adult participation

Adult volunteers are crucial to the success of the scheme. The home-time collection of students can proceed without Stay Safe Ranger present, as they are there to make observations only. The adult needs to arrive just before the home-time bell and control the students being picked for a maximum of 30 minutes.

As with most school activities, recruitment of adult volunteers did prove to be difficult and only a few adults were available at the start of the trial. This improved as other adults saw the duties involved.

Uniforms

NRMA Motoring and Services provided bright yellow t-shirts for the Stay Safe Rangers to wear on duty. These were popular with the children. A prominent banner was also provided with the words "Stay Safe Ranger Patrol Area"



Stay Safe Ranger T-shirts and banner

Pre-pilot observations

Pre-trial observations revealed that the street often grid-locked at home-time. Several inconsiderate motorists arrived early at the Kiss and Drop zone and waited, usually well in excess of two minutes until their child arrived. Meanwhile other motorists waiting to pick-up children queued up and blocked the northbound traffic flow. The school bus was often stuck in this traffic and it was not unusual to see the queue extending around the corner, some 200m away. This meant that drivers became impatient and U-turns were frequent.

Children waiting to be picked up gathered on the footpath or, worse still, on the grass between the footpath and road. They mixed with students who were not necessarily waiting to be picked up. The proximity of distracted children to moving vehicles was highly undesirable. The students were often not looking for their lift and the parents often did not see the student amongst the crowd so there was general confusion.

Publicity

Once the procedures had been worked out a description of the scheme and a set of tips for parents and students was published in the school newsletter. Students were also told of the arrangements during assembly.

The local paper was interested in the initiative and ran several articles about the scheme. This helped to alert non-parent motorists and local residents of the new arrangements.

Commencement of pilot

On the first day there was an after-school activity that meant there was a reduced number of students waiting to be picked up and reduced traffic. This was not intended but proved useful for refining the procedures.

On the second day about 50 students were picked within about 15 minutes of the home-time bell. Traffic was noticeably smoother than pre-trial and the queue built up to no more than about 5 vehicles.

A minor difficulty that was not anticipated is that young children do not always recognise their parent's vehicle. They are also easily distracted and do not notice the vehicle arrive. Since most children are regular participants the adult volunteers got to know them and this difficulty was soon overcome. It was evident that the practice at some schools of placing a surname card on the vehicle was unnecessary.



After 10 minutes only about ten children are remaining to be picked up

Drivers picking up children appeared to be less stressed and less frustrated. Many delayed their arrival at the school by several minutes in the knowledge that their child would be waiting on the school grounds and traffic would have cleared.

Traffic queues were rare. Neighbours have expressed their appreciation of the major improvement in traffic flow at home-time. Council rangers and Police have also expressed support for the scheme.

Stay Safe Ranger Forum and student solutions

Stay Safe Ranger Forums are run by the students along the same lines as Student Representative Council meeting. Individual Stay Safe Rangers are given the opportunity to describe their observations and recommend solutions to safety problems. These are prioritised, and all Stay Safe Rangers present then vote on action to be taken. Individual Stay Safe Rangers are assigned responsibilities of these actions.

School newsletter articles describe the outcomes of the meetings.

The students' view of Stay Safe Rangers

It is important to consider the views of the children who participate in the Stay Safe Ranger program. The following statements are from Harriet Lungsten and Dylan Poole, senior primary school students and Stay Safe Rangers at Balgowlah Heights Public School.

Harriet Lungsten said: "I was excited to become a Stay Safe Ranger because I knew I could do a good job helping other kids. In our Ranger training we learned a lot about the dangers of the road and how easily an accident can happen at the Kiss and Drop zone. We listened to Ranger Kath, a council ranger, Mr Paine, a road safety expert, and a police sergeant. We knew we had an important role. We were all formally presented our uniforms and certificates by important people like the Mayor, Mr Stewart from NRMA, and a police officer. I felt very proud. Our first job was to observe the Kiss and Drop zone before we started our duty. We saw traffic jams, cars double parked, parents staying too long in the zone, and all sorts of dangers. From the very first day when we went on duty, we put up the sign and put out the witches hats and everything changed. No more traffic jams and everything went so smoothly, and in half the time! It is a bit like a taxi rank.

I would like to conclude, on behalf of all the Stay Safe Rangers at our school, that being part of the program is fun as well as making a real difference. We hope that other schools can have the opportunity to be part of this program. We know it works."

Dylan Poole said: "I really enjoy being a Stay Safe Ranger. I have learned a lot. One of the best things is that we are teaching other kids the right thing to do, and then they remind their parents. We put reminders in the weekly school newsletter about what we observe the week before. This works well to remind the parents of what they should do to keep our Kiss and Drop zone safe. Since I became a Stay Safe Ranger, I have more confidence. I have been part of making a big difference to safety for other kids. We hold a Forum every three weeks where the Stay Safe Rangers meet and discuss our observations. It is a formal meeting where we take turns making recommendations. We vote on issues and then we action them. As a Stay Safe Ranger representative, I recently wrote to our local Mayor of Manly, Dr MacDonald. We had voted requesting new 40 km/h signs around our school. These are the sort of things we would never have had an opportunity to do before the Stay Safe Ranger program. I think being a Stay Safe Ranger is excellent."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Stay Safe Ranger initiative at Balgowlah Heights Public School has met its major objectives and has successfully improved student safety and traffic conditions—both driving and parking—without being an undue burden on school resources or the community. It has also made the participating senior students more aware of road safety issues. Through their well-publicised observations they have also subtly but noticeably changed the behaviour of adult drivers. For the students who are Stay Safe Rangers there are also separate benefits in learning citizenship skills associated with governance and community involvement, as well as service learning.

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Acknowledgements

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