

Rural schools safety programme Questions and answers

January 2013

1. What is the rural schools road safety programme?

The rural schools road safety programme is a series of initiatives to improve safety outside rural schools, especially addressing the risks of high-speed traffic. (Note: Rural schools are defined as those close to roads with speed limits of 70km/h or greater so they can also be in peri-urban areas.)

The speed of traffic past rural schools is a concern in many rural communities due to the conflict between the drop-off and pick-up activities associated with school commuting and high-speed through traffic.

Reducing travel speeds around rural schools at drop-off and pick-up times can reduce the risk of serious crashes occurring and provide a safer environment around the schools for pedestrians and cyclists.

2. What does the rural school safety programme involve?

There are three parts to the programme. These are:

- Introducing variable speed limit signs to reduce the speed of through traffic past a number of schools where there is an identified 'turning traffic' or pedestrian safety risk.
- Assessing the degree of road safety risk and prioritising all other rural schools and identifying actions needed to improve safety at the highest risk schools.
- The publication of a High Risk Rural Schools Guide which can be used by schools and road controlling authorities to assess (and if necessary improve) road safety at rural schools.

Safer Journeys – New Zealand's road safety strategy to 2020 – envisions a safe road system increasingly free of death and serious injury and introduces the Safe System approach to New Zealand. The Safe System pillars are Safe Roads and Roadsides, Safe Vehicles, Safe Speeds and Safe Road Use. Improvements need to be made in all four parts to create a Safe System.

3. Will the guide include urban schools?

The plan is to produce a two-part High Risk Schools Guide, one for rural schools and one for urban schools. The initial focus on the rural schools guide is due to the fact that higher speed traffic outside these schools could result in a greater risk than in urban areas where there is lower speed traffic.

The NZTA has begun discussions with Auckland Transport, who have been working on guidelines for high risk urban and rural schools in the Auckland area.

4. Why is a variable speed limit trial being conducted at some rural schools?

Earlier this year the NZ Transport Agency (NZTA) began to trial variable speed limits to evaluate their effectiveness in creating safe speeds.

Variable speed limits are just one possible way to improve road safety around schools. Under a Safe System all possible options must be considered, including education (of school children, parents, teachers, school boards and road users), enforcement by the Police, and possible changes to the road layout around schools, such as drop-off points for school buses and for parents who drive their children to the school.

Variable speed limits are a relatively new technique, which is why they are being trialled. They have been used extensively around urban schools, but a trial was needed to test their effectiveness at rural schools.

5. What is a variable speed limit sign?

It is an electronic sign which allows the speed limit to be changed locally at agreed times and to agreed speed limits.



6. What schools are taking part in the trial?

Seven trial schools have signs installed to date. These schools are:

- Kai Iwi School, Wanganui
- Kaihere School, Hauraki District
- Myross Bush School, Invercargill
- Opiki School, Horowhenua
- Paki Paki School, Hastings District
- Te Uku School, Waikato
- Whenuakite School, Thames Coromandel

These schools were chosen based on road safety concerns expressed by the local communities. Initial workshops were carried out to identify particular issues relating to road safety at each school during drop-off and pick-up periods.

Other criteria included:

- the school's location (required to be on a road with either a 80km/h or 100km/h permanent speed limit), and
- a turning traffic risk to be present outside the school. The turning risk is assessed from traffic speeds and volumes, number of turning vehicles, sight distances, and how students travel to and from school.

7. What does the trial involve?

Following focus groups with each school community, permanent and variable speed limit configurations were developed for each school.

A variable speed limit of 70km/h is being trialled at schools on roads with a 100km/h permanent speed limit. A variable speed limit of 60km/h is being trialled for schools on roads with an 80km/h permanent speed limit.

The process to change the speed limit involved the school, the Police, local authorities and the NZTA, culminating in a proposed by-law. Other road user groups, such as the Automobile Association, were consulted on the proposed changes.

8. Have they been effective?

Initial evaluations of the trial schools show that the variable speed limits have been effective in reducing vehicle speeds during school drop-off and pick-up times and in improving driver behaviour around schools.

9. Will the lower speed limits affect traffic flow?

The variable speed limit signs only operate for short periods before and after school times. While variable speed limits may have minor impact on traffic, it is essential we achieve both efficiency and safety outcomes across the road network.

10. Can I suggest a school for the trial?

The locations for the trial have been finalised. However, if you have a concern about safety around your school you should talk to the local authority if the school is on a local road or the NZTA if it's on a state highway. The High Risk Rural Schools Guide will be out in 2013 which will help schools, communities and local authorities address road safety risks around their schools.

11. What happens next?

This trial was the first step in a three-part Rural Schools Safety Programme which covers identified at-risk schools on state highways and locally controlled roads. In general, this means environments where the permanent speed limit is at least 70 km/h.

The three elements of the programme are listed below:

Significantly expanding the number of variable speed limit sites

The NZTA and its road safety partners plan to expand the number of variable speed limit trial sites from the current seven to 23 sites by the end of 2013.

The additional schools are:

- Amisfield School, Waikato
- Ararimu School, Papakura
- Dairy Flat School, Dairy Flat
- Elstow-Waihou Combined School, Matamata Piako
- Kaimai School, Western Bay of Plenty
- Loburn School, Waimakariri
- Newstead School, Waikato
- Opoutere School, Thames Coromandel
- Pahoia School, Western Bay of Plenty
- Puni School, Waiuku
- Pyes Pa Road School, Western Bay of Plenty
- Swannanoa School, Waimakariri

- Te Wharekura o Te Rau Aroha School, Matamata Piako
- Tirohia School, Hauraki
- Waikuka School, Waimakariri
- Westmere School, Wanganui

The success at the current trial sites suggests that it is worth expanding the trial at different locations, including local roads. Further discussions are underway with these local communities before the NZTA can confirm they will be included in the trial.

Assessing the degree of road safety risk and prioritising all other rural schools and identifying actions needed to improve safety at the highest risk schools

The NZTA recently completed an initial desktop analysis of all rural school sites across New Zealand. Further analysis will establish the highest-risk schools and on-site assessments will confirm the nature and status of those risks. A comprehensive assessment methodology is being developed.

Working in partnership with the Ministry of Education, schools, local councils and the Police, the NZTA plans to identify and prioritise remedial interventions for the highest-risk schools.

The selection of the most effective interventions will be guided by the High Risk Rural Schools Guide (outlined below) and may involve changes to permanent speed limits, the introduction of variable speed limits, engineering improvements and changes to school procedures.

The analysis, site assessments and planning and programming of any remedial action will be completed by the end of 2013.

The publication of a High Risk Rural Schools Guide which can be used by schools and road controlling authorities to assess and if necessary improve road safety at rural schools

The NZTA, its road safety partners and the Ministry of Education plan to develop New Zealand's first best-practice guide to managing road safety risks associated with schools in high-speed environments.

The practical and 'how to' guide will cover matters such as:

- assessing road safety risks at rural schools
- addressing any road safety risks using a Safe System approach including specific suggestions for the road environment and for school site design and management procedures
- designing and managing school bus and other vehicle drop-off and pick-up areas.

The first version of the guide will be available to schools, communities, road safety engineers and other parties from mid-2013.

12. Will other road safety work continue around schools?

Changing speed limits outside high-risk rural schools won't be done in isolation. To succeed in saving lives and preventing serious injuries we need to take action across all four pillars of the Safe System – safer roads and roadsides, safer vehicles, safe road use and safe speeds.

The NZTA, its road safety partners and local school communities will continue to work together to create a Safe System for school children.

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