

Rural school variable speed limit trial

INFORMATION SHEET April 2013



WHAT IS THE RURAL SCHOOL VARIABLE SPEED LIMIT TRIAL?

Safer Journeys - New Zealand's road safety strategy to 2020 (Ministry of Transport 2010) - envisions a safe road system increasingly free of death and serious injury and introduces the Safe System approach to New Zealand. The Safe System cornerstones include Safe Roads and Roadsides, Safe Speeds and Safe Road Use. The speed of traffic past rural schools is a high concern to many rural communities due to the conflict of the school drop-off and pick-up activities mixed with the high speed of through traffic.



The aim of this trial is to use a Safe System approach for improving road safety outside rural schools where the greatest risk of a high-severity crash is associated with traffic turning in and out of the school or the adjacent intersections. Generally rural schools have none or few pedestrians crossing the road outside the school and therefore a 40km/h variable speed limit is not required or appropriate. This trial investigates if an appropriate speed environment for the turning traffic risk can be achieved using 60 or 70km/h variable speed limits, which are activated only during school drop-off and pick-up times.

Safety benefits

Reducing the speed limit to 60 or 70km/h near rural schools before and after school will reduce the risk of high-severity crashes involving turning traffic. It will also provide a safer road environment for any pedestrians or cyclists using the road outside the school.

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

Layout of signs

The electronic signs are a similar format and have the same terms of operation as the current 40km/h variable speed limit signs, but will display either 60 or 70 km/h speed limits, depending on the location of the school.

The electronic 60 km/h speed limit sign is being trialled at schools situated on roads with a permanent 80km/h speed limit, and the electronic 70 km/h speed limit sign is being trialled at schools situated on roads with permanent 100km/h speed limits.

60km/h variable speed limit school trial sign



PREVIOUS SCHOOL SAFETY INITIATIVES

Standard school warning signs

For many years, standard reflective diamond-shaped school warning signs have been installed on roads where there is an entrance to a school. One disadvantage of any permanently displayed sign is that drivers sometimes fail to see it, or tend to ignore it if they pass the same sign regularly without requiring any action in response to it.



40km/h variable speed limit

40km/h variable speed limits* in school zones were first installed on a trial basis in Christchurch in January 2000 and they have been operating successfully in New Zealand since then. They were originally intended for installation in urban or semi-urban areas where the permanent speed limit is 70 km/h or less. This is because in areas where the permanent speed limit is over 80 km/h, it is unlikely that motorists will slow to 40 km/h within the short length of the variable speed limit. The 40km/h speed limit is also based around getting speeds to a level where pedestrians and cyclists have a greater chance of survival.



* See NZTA traffic note 37 at www.nzta.govt.nz.

Active school warning signs

For schools where the 40km/h variable speed limit is not applicable, a trial of active school warning signs* was undertaken in the Timaru District and Invercargill City in 2004. In 2006 the trial was extended to Dunedin City. The results of the trial demonstrated a strong community support for the signs, with reduced traffic speeds at higher speed sites, and an increase in motorists' awareness of the school. The signs were then approved for use in 2008. However in some situations, these signs do not result in appropriate traffic speeds, particularly where the school is on a road that has high traffic volumes together with high speeds.

* See NZTA traffic note 56 at www.nzta.govt.nz.



MONITORING

To assess the effectiveness of the trial, the following monitoring is being undertaken:

- speed recording tube counters, approximately one month before, one month after, and six months after implementation
- crash data obtained from the Police and the Crash Analysis System database
- feedback sought from the schools and community before and during the trial.

The duration of this trial is expected to be up to two years.

TRIAL SITES

As at April 2013, 13 schools have the trial variable speed limits installed: Ararimu (Auckland), Dairy Flat (Auckland), Kai Iwi (Wanganui), Kaihere (Hauraki), Loburn (Waimakariri), Myross Bush (Invercargill), Opiki (Horowhenua), Pakipaki (Hastings), Puni (Auckland), Swannanoa (Waimakariri), Te Uku (Waikato), Waikuku (Waimakariri) and Westmere (Wanganui).

Other schools are also being investigated to trial the variable speed limits in the future. If you are concerned about the safety around a particular school then you should contact the local authority if the school is on a local road or the NZ Transport Agency if the school is on a state highway.



For more information about the NZ Transport Agency, visit www.nzta.govt.nz.