

Title - *School Zones in South Australia - Getting it right!*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the history of School Zones in South Australia. Changes in School zones generated much controversy and debate amongst the community and it is unlikely that there is one road user who is not aware of this relatively simple traffic control device.

The paper traces the changes that were implemented, the processes undertaken, the reactions from different sectors of the community, the changes in driver behaviour as a result of the changes to the zones and importantly the lessons learnt. The paper highlights the difficult balance in satisfying all road user groups. It emphasises the need to pay attention to engineering, education and enforcement in implementing any form of change. It discusses the importance of relationships between all stakeholders in implementing change including police, schools and road user advocacy groups.

The paper concludes with a report on the Government programs that have been initiated to ensure the safety of children near schools.

SCHOOL ZONES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA- GETTING IT RIGHT!

BACKGROUND

This paper traces the status of school zones in South Australia. What was considered a relatively simple and straight-forward initiative to upgrade child safety near schools became a most controversial issue with many front page news headlines. The positive result from the pain is that there are few motorists who are now not aware of School Zones.

By definition, School Zones are sections of road on which a driver must pay special attention to children by travelling at a lower speed than that on adjacent road sections. The driver is not required to stop for children who may wish to cross the road in that zone (ie the child does not have priority in a School Zone) but it is most important that a driver drive with due care and consideration, and particularly when children are present.

This differs significantly for Children's Crossings where the child has priority and the driver must stop and the child crosses at a specific location.

1. SCHOOL ZONES - THEIR PAST

Before the commencement of the 1997 school year, School Zones were signposted with "SCHOOL" and "END SCHOOL LIMIT" signs and a maximum speed of 25km/h applied when there were children on the road (including footpath) within the zone proceeding to/from school. The legislation was unique to South Australia and compliance with the law was generally considered poor. A mean speed of 42km/h and an 85th percentile speed of 53km/h was measured at six sites surveyed in 1978. It was possible that drivers from interstate would be unfamiliar with South Australian road rules were not aware of the need to slow to 25km/h.

The signs were the diamond shaped black on yellow signs that had been in place for many years. Generally enforcement levels were very low, and perhaps only restricted to the first day of school at a handful of schools in the state. In 1995, it was recommended to the Minister for Transport, that a modified school zone system be implemented.

2. SCHOOL ZONES - THE SITUATION 1997 –mid 1998

The recommended system provided a 25km/h limit between certain times on School Days. The signs used were regulatory 25km/h speed limit signs supplemented with "SCHOOL ZONE" and the times of operation, for example "8-9am 3-4pm SCHOOL DAYS". These provisions were consistent with the Australian Standard and follows the principles adopted in other states.

It is understood that other states use 40km/h at school zones however there was no plan to increase the limit in South Australia. The 25km/h limit was considered appropriate.

The State Government provided funds for these new signs to be installed in all existing school zones throughout the State before the commencement of the 1997 school year. The new signs were installed in the same locations as the old "SCHOOL" signs which were removed (ie no new school zones were installed or authorised as part of this project).

Ads were placed in the paper to advise motorists of the new signs. Transport SA was aware that new school zone signs had been installed in other states about this time with minimal community concern. Over 5000 signs were installed at approximately 1500 school zones throughout the State.

An important feature of the project was that the road authority who were to install the signs, were to consult with the relevant school to determine the most appropriate time period which should appear on the new signs to provide maximum protection for the children. Hence we had lots of variety around the state and metropolitan area.

The old "SCHOOL" signs were installed adjacent to many kindergartens throughout the state and hence as part of this project, the new signs were installed to serve these kindergartens. Time periods for kindergartens, as shown on the new signs, were generally longer than a morning and evening peak and could read for example 25km/h 8am – 4pm School Days. This was also further complicated in that some kindergartens did not operate for five days per week.

Following the installation of these new school zone signs and the start of the new school year in 1997, there was considerable community concern following a relatively high level of enforcement by the South Australian Police at many zones. Because the offences were related to vehicle speed, a driver driving through a school zone at 60km/h instead of 25km/h was fined as if he/she was driving at 35km/h over the limit.

Huge amounts of community concern and comment were generated:-

Concerns have included:-

- the size of the signs,
- the visibility of the signs, often hidden by parked vehicles or trees,
- the diversity of times, and particularly around kindergartens
- the uncertainty over the determination of "School Days"
- Uncertainty about school days for private schools versus public schools
- How did a driver know what the time was? (particularly for motorcyclists)

Parent groups however were most supportive of the high levels of enforcement and wanted the time periods to be extended to result in slower speeds around schools and kindergartens at all times. Only two sites were surveyed with these new signs in place and mean speeds of 51.3 and 44.9 km/h and 85% percentile speeds were 64.8 and 57.6 km/h were recorded. It is unlikely that such results are indicative of overall driver behaviour with the new signs however it does indicate that the introduction of the time-based School Zones did not have a dramatic effect on drivers to travel at the School Zone speed limit of 25 km/h.

In response to the road user concerns,

In April 1997, ie three months after the signs had been installed, the Department of Transport (now Transport SA) provided guidelines to all Councils and to its own operational sections for the consistent and uniform use of school zones. These guidelines covered such issues as the visibility of signs and the zone location. It was felt that few zones had been critically examined before the signs were installed as requested.

On those roads which are the responsibility of TSA, larger signs were installed and often duplicated, where required, due to the width of the road or the number of lanes.

In September 1997 and following continued community concern, further recommendations were made to Government and the present system was introduced with further new signs installed by the start of Term 3 in 1998. .

3. SCHOOL ZONES – Mid 1998 to the present

Speed limit

The 25km/h speed limit at school zones remains.

New signs

New larger and brighter signs have been installed that are a new shape and have a distinctive orange panel. This contributes to the conspicuity of the school zone.

The words "***when children present***" are included on the signs.

This means that the limit applies at any time when a child is present in the school zone. The school zone applies to a length of road and does not include adjacent private property. In other words, the child needs to be on the footpath or on the road in the school zone. Under the legislation, a child means a person under the age of 18 years and includes a student of any age in a school uniform.

If in doubt about the age of a child, drivers are encouraged to slow down first and provide a safe environment for all.

Consistent time periods

The difficulty faced with the previous signs have now removed by the use of the words “when children present” This can be at any time and provides an increased level of safety around our schools and kindergartens.

Zig zag lines

All school zones have now been marked with a zig zag line generally upstream of the new signs. This is a 30m long line and generally between the wheel paths of the normal vehicle. These zigzag lines have no legal significance and only serve to alert drivers to the presence of the zone. It cannot be used as a defence that the zigzag line could not be seen.

Visibility of School Zone signs

Before the start of term 3 in 1998, road authorities were again asked to assess the visibility of all School Zone signs. They were asked to undertake the following steps in the order listed if the School Zone sign is not clearly visible to drivers from a distance of 50 metres or from 70 metres if parked vehicles or a parking lane is present:

- remove restrictions to visibility if possible (and ensure adequate visibility is present in the future).
- replace the standard size sign for the road type with the next larger size.
- duplicate the School Zone sign (if not already duplicated).
- install advance warning sign of the same size series as the School Zone sign.
- install the school pavement message as well as the zigzag lines

4. THE FUTURE

No School Zones on high speed multi-lane roads

The Government is now to replace all school zones on arterial roads throughout the state with a suitable crossing facility over the next two financial years. In some cases this will may mean PAC’s, or Children’s crossings.

As a matter of priority, road authorities were to review School Zones to ensure that none are located on any multi-lane road with a speed limit greater than 60 km/h and where necessary to provide an active crossing.

Rationalisation of School Zones on Transport SA roads

Where possible, the removal of School Zones from any Transport SA road has been negotiated with key stakeholders, eg by relocating school gates, and school bus and parent pick-up points.

Major ‘collector’ roads

Councils should consider additional treatments to enhance the School Zones on their collector roads through the provision of kerb extensions, pedestrian refuges, Children’s Crossings, or other appropriate treatments.

The Review

With the implementation of the existing system in July 1998, it was required that a review be undertaken in July 1999 and that a report be presented to Parliament within 6 months. This report focussed on community attitudes to the new signs and including whether school communities feel safer etc.

The review found that most were comfortable with the school zones, the signs and zig zag lines however there was some confusion about what does “when children present” mean!

This has been addressed in media campaigns undertaken at the start of the 2000 school year.

It is understood that levels of Police enforcement of the system have not been similar to those with the time based school zone signs. It is worth noting that at the sites surveyed with the new signs, the mean speed was 32km/h and the 85th Percentile speed was 43.3km/h. An improvement on the old systems however we still do not have enough drivers travelling at 25km/h.

SUMMARY

So in summary this whole exercise has been a major learning for us all.

The key issues I believe are about

- better understanding and selling the need for change, (ie what was actually wrong with the old yellow signs) Consultative processes were undertaken however this issue perhaps should have been given higher priority
- work with the police and the community on sensitive enforcement strategies, (TSA had great success with the implementation of the Australian Road rules due in part to a well planned and appropriate enforcement strategy)
- engage the support of all road authorities and Councils to ensure the initiative has shared ownership and commitment,
- pay attention to measuring effectiveness of change initiatives (perhaps undertake a risk assessment as part of the project development)
- don't underestimate the expenditure required on public education,
- don't assume the general community understands the system (as witnessed by the ongoing confusion about what "when children present means")
- Pay extra attention to all legal issues (this seems to be increasing ie society becoming more eager to challenge the law)
- The time based signs attempted to meet the needs of the schools with the consequence that the times of many signs varied. Drivers had to read each sign they encountered rather than all signs having a single time period. We need to consider better balancing the needs of the schools and the motoring public

We will never please all the people all the time.

However ,the new system I believe, best balances the needs of all.

It provides a level of safety not matched in Australia at schools and kindergartens.

It does however require a change in the way drivers think and act around schools but the safety of our children is paramount.