

Development Department Research Programme

Safely to School

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The issue of road safety is currently the focus of much activity by the Scottish Executive, local authorities, schools, the police and various interest groups. It is also a prime concern for parents. This report presents the findings from a seven-month study of one such initiative – the Safer Routes to School (SRTS) project – and examines the ways in which it has been integrated into the school curriculum. The research was commissioned in January 2003 by the Scottish Executive Development Department and undertaken by a team from the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) Centre and ODS. This summary draws together the main findings and implications for Safer Routes and other road safety initiatives.

Main Findings

- Previous research indicates that a range of complex inter-related factors and processes affect children's vulnerability to road accidents. These include the child's age, gender and level of social disadvantage.
- Key informants believe that road safety initiatives should be integrated within the school curriculum, delivered by appropriately trained teachers, and involve pupils in the design of projects.
- 30 Scottish local authorities are or have been involved in Safer Routes to School (SRTS) projects, and 26 have appointed or plan to appoint School Travel Co-ordinators. The main responsibility for the management and budgets of SRTS usually lies with local authority roads/transport departments.
- Schools have responded in a variety of ways to the challenge of integrating road safety into the school curriculum. However, teachers believe that the pressures of lack of time and parental support affect their success.
- Most school pupils prefer interactive approaches to learning and teaching about road safety. However secondary school pupils think that road safety education is more relevant to younger pupils.
- Parents believe that the main responsibility for their children's safety lies with them, but they expect local authorities, the police, schools and other road users to play a part.
- SRTS could be improved by: sharing examples of good practice across Scotland, developing co-operation between departments within local authorities, embedding road safety within school development plans and engaging pupils and parents in SRTS activities.

Introduction

The Safer Routes to School (SRTS) initiative is one of a number of ways in which the Scottish Executive hopes to ensure that children are provided with appropriate road safety education which will help to reduce road traffic accidents and encourage more children to walk or cycle to school safely.

The aim of this study was twofold:

- To review the effectiveness of SRTS work in the school curriculum in local authorities in Scotland; and
- To determine the extent to which Scottish Executive funding had helped local authorities develop the concept of SRTS in the school curriculum.

Research Methods

The research comprised a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Information was collected in three phases.

Phase 1 entailed a review of previous literature on road safety, and interviews with key informants.

Phase 2 was a survey of all 32 local authorities in Scotland in order to identify the engineering and curriculum activities undertaken under the auspices of SRTS.

Phase 3 explored examples of good practice in six schools (four primary and two secondary schools) in different authorities.

The wider international picture

A survey of the international literature revealed that numerous inter-related factors and processes affect children's vulnerability to road accidents. Important variables include the child's age, gender and level of social disadvantage. Previous research suggested that initiatives should:

- Be multifaceted;
- Include changes to the physical environment;
- Take account of the fact that road safety is perceived to have a low value amongst secondary school pupils and their teachers;
- Use high quality resources;
- Include attempts to change young people's behaviour as well as their awareness and knowledge; and
- Be based upon relevant content, which is related to the wider school curriculum, delivered by trained teachers, and based upon a school travel plan.

Challenges

Interviews with a small number of key informants indicated that:

- There are a growing number of road safety initiatives at local and national levels in Scotland.
- There is a shared view about what constitutes good practice.
- There is a general lack of awareness about initiatives, which leads to duplication of effort.
- There is a need to integrate SRTS within the curriculum, train teachers appropriately, involve pupils in the design of projects and ensure that projects are sustainable.

What are local authorities doing?

Practices vary across the 32 Scottish local authorities. Thirty are or have been involved in Safer Routes to School projects. They usually allocate the main responsibility for the management and budgets for SRTS to their roads/transport departments. Twenty-six have appointed or plan to appoint School Travel Co-ordinators and twenty provide literature and/or resources to schools to support SRTS. However, only six have evaluated their SRTS programmes. Significantly, local authorities spend more money on engineering/infrastructure related to road safety than they do on road safety curriculum initiatives.

How are schools responding?

A detailed study of six case study schools (four primary and two secondary) provided a picture of Safer Routes to School activities in a selection of Scottish locations. It emerged that:

- Schools have responded in a variety of ways to the challenge of integrating road safety into the school curriculum.
- Teachers report that road safety projects must compete for time in the curriculum with other priorities.
- Teachers believe that the pressures of lack of time and parental support affect the efficacy of Safer Routes within the curriculum.
- Pupils report participating in a variety of road safety activities at school. These include: puzzles, questionnaires, project work, input at assemblies, cycling proficiency training, publicity events such as 'Walk to school' days, leaflets, stickers, and police/lollipop person visits.
- Generally pupils thought that the content of road safety education was interesting.

- Secondary school pupils thought that road safety was more relevant to younger pupils because ‘they need it more than we do’.
- Most pupils prefer interactive approaches to learning and teaching about road safety, such as discussion, drama, role-play, theatre tours, experiential learning, and project-based work, and were highly critical of didactic approaches.
- Teachers believe that the key success factors are: committed individuals, accessible and active support services (eg from Road Safety Officers/Units), and clear local policies.

What can parents do?

A survey of a sample of parents in the six case study schools revealed that almost all (98%) were willing to take the major responsibility for their children’s safety. They provided information about how their children travel to school: 74% reported that their children walk to school often, but 48% thought that cars were a very safe mode of transport for children to use to travel to school. This was more than for any other way of getting to and from school.

Parents expressed a number of concerns about their children’s safety.

- 90% identified busy roads and fast traffic as the most important problems faced by children travelling to school.
- Over 50% of parents expressed concerns about wider safety issues related to assaults, bullying, street lighting and possible abductions.

It is clear that parents expect local authorities, the police, schools and other road users to play a part. In particular they want more active traffic management, and other parents to behave responsibly by reducing their driving speed and refraining from parking or dropping children off near the school.

Conclusions and implications

A number of important issues emerge from this research which have implications for the way local authorities and schools develop road safety. Our findings confirm that:

- *Practices vary:* Local authorities spend varying amounts of money on road safety and locate responsibility for it in different departments. The most successful strategies appear to be based upon co-operation between roads/transport and education departments so that local engineering/infrastructural changes are linked to curriculum developments in schools.

- *Certain schools are more interested in road safety:* It was generally reported that primary schools are more interested in road safety than secondary schools.
- *Perceptions of danger:* There was some evidence to show that perceptions of danger vary according to the location of the school and the age and gender of the child.
- *Commitment of schools:* All the case study schools reported that they were fully committed to SRTS, and this view was confirmed by local Road Safety Officers and School Board personnel.
- *Competing priorities:* Unfortunately, all informants indicated that road safety had to compete at school level with other curricular priorities and pressures. Lack of time in what was perceived to be an already crowded curriculum, and lack of support from parents, were frequently cited factors, which affected the efficacy of road safety education.
- *Support and resources:* Teachers welcome support from local authorities, well-designed resources, and expert input, eg the police, Road Safety Officers. However, a number of informants think that there is a need to provide teachers with further appropriate training so that they can integrate SRTS within the 5–14 Curriculum, or Personal, Social and Health Education in secondary schools.
- *Changing children’s behaviour is difficult:* All accepted that changing children’s behaviour is difficult and is unlikely to be achieved by programmes which merely target raising awareness and attitudes.
- *Supportive infrastructures:* Safer Routes to School projects appeared to have more impact and sustainability when there is a supporting school and local authority infrastructure (such as School Safety Teams) which involves a range of key partners, and enthusiastic and motivated individuals and groups in key positions who will champion SRTS.
- *Integrated projects:* SRTS projects that involved a curricular, classroom-based content were more likely to be accepted by teachers and maintained if their design is closely related to the 5–14 Curriculum, and provides appropriate assessment procedures, accessible resources and teacher guidance.
- *The role of parents:* All agree it is imperative to engage with parents, demonstrate to them that integrated traffic management approaches are being taken to eliminate unsafe behaviour by other parents, and allay their fears about the speed and volume of road traffic, and the wider dangers of bullying, assaults and abductions.
- *Input from pupils:* Most recognised that children and young people should be involved in the development of

SRTS initiatives and in the peer education of younger children. Young people themselves indicated that they prefer interactive approaches to road safety education.

- *Monitoring and evaluation:* SRTS should be regularly monitored and evaluated to show which initiatives are most effective and, if possible, the impact on road accident statistics.

Recommendations

We think that SRTS could more effectively be integrated into schools across Scotland if:

- Local authority transport and education departments co-operated in the planning and organisation of SRTS projects to ensure that engineering infrastructure is informed by, and also supports, curricular developments;

- Local authorities and schools shared examples of good practice in road safety;
- Schools established targets for embedding SRTS in their school development plans;
- Headteachers and School Boards made more efforts to engage parents in SRTS activities;
- Parents demonstrated appropriate behaviour, especially regarding driving and parking near to schools;
- Teachers were offered school-based training to help them integrate SRTS in their lesson plans;
- Account was taken of pupils' views, especially their preference for experiential learning; and finally
- All local authorities monitored and evaluated their SRTS activities.

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