

In the US, a driver of a vehicle approaching or overtaking, from either direction (from behind or head-on) a stopped school bus flashing alternating red lights must stop and wait until the bus moves again or the red lights are turned off.



BELOW: Qhubeka (which means to 'to move forward' or 'to progress') is a national organization that distributes bicycles to rural school learners. Children earn their bikes by participating in community-based solutions to environmental issues and climate change, by growing trees or removing litter or alien invasive species. Here, mechanics prepare the bicycles for handover. Visit www.qhubeka.org for more information.



Bicycle transport is an important scholar transport intervention, cutting down walking time by two thirds. The policy therefore plans to promote walking and cycling in safe and secure circumstances over reasonable distances.

The policy also proposes to promote scholar transport within the main modes of public transport – an issue over which trade union COSATU has taken government to task recently. 'It is unsafe for learners to use rail,' says Western Cape provincial secretary Tony Ehrenreich, 'particularly because of the overcrowding. It's a problem that at the moment businesses and schools start at the same time – if this was staggered better, and peak hours were spread, it would be better.'

One of the guiding principles of the policy is that scholar transport should be affordable to all. And here again, Cosatu has been vocal: 'We should have free services,' says Ehrenreich, 'for school learners of course [as well as the unemployed].'

The policy includes matters such as safety and security, quality regulation, safety and service standards, governance, law enforcement and funding.

Once the national policy has been approved, a framework for the implementation of the scholar transport system will be provided. Those elements of the policy that require only administrative action will be implemented immediately, while the elements that require major changes from existing practice will be phased in.

National scholar transport policy makes progress

In South Africa education is compulsory, yet to date there has been little in the way of provision of transport that supports safe and affordable access to this education.

In South Africa, the vast majority of scholars (76%, or about 11,4 million) walk to school (although this percentage drops significantly in metropolitan areas). And while this percentage is enviable to policy-makers in the developed world (who's concern, largely, is with obesity and sedentariness among children, and traffic congestion in the urban areas around school time), at least 7% of these scholars (that's 1.1 million children) have to work for more than an hour to get to their place of education. Not least among the dangers that face children who walk is death, in a country where 40% of our not-insignificant road fatalities are pedestrians.

In 2009 the National Department of Transport tabled the final draft of a Draft National Scholar Transport Policy, which aims to meet the mobility needs of scholars through the provision of a safe, secure, reliable and affordable scholar transport service to support social development and enhance future economic growth.

The development of this Scholar Transport Policy is one of the department's interventions toward reversing challenges of accessibility and mobility, some of which include walking long distances to schools, the high cost of transport, lack of business opportunities for Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises, late payment of service providers, high accident rates, and the safety of scholars.

Essentially, the policy proposes the development of a uniform national scholar transport policy framework, and to ensure that transport acts as a catalyst for education through access to schools.

Currently, learner transport policy in South Africa consists of a series of fragmented guidelines and no co-ordinated and effective strategy to ensure a safe, efficient and affordable journey. Some provinces have formal learner transport policies, while others do not. In some provinces, learner transport is dealt with by departments of transport, and in others by departments of education. In addition, there has been little intergovernmental co-ordination to date.

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5 Lonsdale Building

Lonsdale Way

Pinelands

7450

Tel: +27 21 531 2718
Fax: +27 21 531 2606

email: info@sabita.co.za
website: www.sabita.co.za



Slowing the 'school run' to a walk

The Centre for Transport Studies, University of Cape Town, has released preliminary findings of a research project on 'school travel planning', a survey conducted in 2009 to assess the feasibility of measures aimed at encouraging walking and cycling to and from school, and at the same time reducing the number of private vehicles involved in 'the school run' – known in academic circles as 'school trip-making'.

The study was initiated with the assistance and support of the Rondebosch Community Improvement District and the local councillor, Owen Kinahan, following contact with schools and parents in the area, as well as with representatives of the City of Cape Town.

The main criteria for assessing the feasibility of greater walking and cycling included whether sufficient learners live within walking and cycling distance of schools, and whether sufficient parents would consider supervising learner walking groups, allow their children to walk under the supervision of other parents, and allow their children to cycle to school if safety and security improvements to the existing bicycle network were made.

The study found that 33% of learners live within walking distance (defined as a radius of 1km from the school buildings), with significant variation across individual schools and grades. This suggests

that the number of learners currently walking to and from school could potentially quadruple. The study also found that 50% of responding parents (living within 1km of the school) were, in principle, willing to supervise learner walking groups to school, and 40% from school, with greater potential for establishing so-called 'walking buses' evident among the junior grades. Seventy percent of parents (living within 1km walking distance of the school) indicated they would allow their children to walk under the supervision of another parent.

Despite very low bicycle use, a surprisingly large number of parents (living within a 5km distance from junior schools and 7km from senior schools) (42%) indicated they would allow their child to cycle if he or she wanted to. Learner bicycle ownership was found to be high, at 75%. Of the parents who do not currently permit their children to cycle to school, a significant portion (35%) indicated they would consider doing so if safety and

security improvements were made to the existing Rondebosch bicycle network. The remainder (22%) indicated they would not permit cycling even if improvements were made.

The results of this feasibility study showed enough willingness among learners and parents in at least some of the selected schools in the Rondebosch area to consider non-motorised (walking and cycling) travel alternatives, to warrant a more detailed investigation of school travel behaviour and preferences in the area, and the subsequent initiation of a 'walking bus' demonstration project amongst interested schools.

A 'walking bus' is an organised walking group of usually junior school children supervised by adults. Children wait at a series of 'bus stops' along identified routes to be picked up by parent volunteers and dropped off at school (and vice versa). The 'bus' has a 'conductor' who supervises the children and a 'driver' who often wheels a trolley carrying school bags. Children typically wear reflective sashes or vests to improve visibility. This demonstration project will be initiated later in 2010.

The study was conducted among 1 494 learners among nine participating schools in Rondebosch, which serve predominantly middle- and high-income communities.

Among the findings was that trips to school by foot or bicycle have declined to 8% (7% on foot and 1% by bicycle), trips by public transport have declined to 3%, and trips by car have increased to 87%.

In 1976, a survey conducted as part of the Cape Metropolitan Transportation Study found that amongst 1 020 middle- and high-income households living in Cape Town, 49% of trips to school were on foot or by bicycle, 13% were by train or bus, and 38% were by car.

Schools in the Rondebosch area benefit from a 22km bicycle path network, implemented 25 years ago as a Bicycle Demonstration project (initiated by Louis de Waal – see page 000). In 1987, during the early years of the demonstration project, de Waal regularly 225 scholars riding to school; this increased to 300 before the decline set in. 'Today there are only a handful,' he says, and suggests that crime and the huge increase in motorised traffic are largely to blame for the decline.

A later survey of 100 households by Market and Opinion Surveys in 1992 suggested that, amongst the same group, school trips by foot or bicycle had dropped to 38%, trips by public transport had dropped to 9%, and trips by car had risen to 52%.

While different study area boundaries and household categorisation systems make direct comparisons problematic, this data suggests that in the past 33 years, walking and cycling to school in the Rondebosch area has declined by around 41%. This is a staggering change, which must have had significant impacts on traffic congestion patterns, independent child mobility and associated spatial cognition development, and levels of child exercise and health.

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CILLA TAYLOR CONFERENCES : confplan@iafrica.com, tel: +27 (0)12/667-3681, fax: +27 (0)12 667/3680. Website: www.sarf.org.za

South African Road Federation

Head Office: 3rd Floor, Forum 2, 33 Hoofd Street, Braam Park, Braamfontein • P O Box 31577, Braamfontein, 2017 • Tel: +27 11 403 5603/4 • Fax: +27 11 403 7736 • Email: Info@sarf.org.za • www.sarf.org.za