5 March, 2018

PROMOTING ACTIVE TRAVEL TO SCHOOL

Summary

It is now well accepted that Australia is experiencing an obesity and inactivity epidemic which unfortunately includes our children and puts them at risk.

The *Education State* has set a specific target for increasing daily activity of students – **Our Children Our Schools (OCOS) believes an efficient way to increase students' regular activity is to focus on daily trips of students to and from school.** This is effectively ten sessions of activity a week for the students which can also 'rub off' on other family members.

So it was pleasing to see the recently released *Victorian Cycling Strategy* includes a focus on active travel to school and makes a similar case to that of OCOS – pointing out many benefits including the fact that getting students cycling (or walking) can positively influence the behaviour of other family members.

OCOS will be asking the State Government to make funds available in the upcoming budget to support and enable active travel to school including providing bike shelters in schools, building walkable neighbourhoods and safe active travel routes, mapping safe routes, supporting bike education and promoting the benefits of active travel to the broader community.

Background

In their *30 Year Strategy, Infrastructure Victoria* highlighted the high number of children being driven to school as a key aspect of this public health challenge but did not address this problem directly with strategies.

> *Pg 80 Need 4 Enable physical activity and participation*
>
> *A particular challenge is the health and wellbeing of Victorian children. Some key state government indicators show that children are walking to school less and being driven more. In 2013, approximately half of all Victorian children aged 5 to 12 were always driven to school, and in 2014 only one in four children in school years 5, 8 and 11 met the recommended amount of physical activity on all days of the week, with children in rural areas more likely to meet guidelines than children in metropolitan areas.*
>
> ***Infrastructure can enable both incidental and planned physical activity through the provision of walking and cycling networks***

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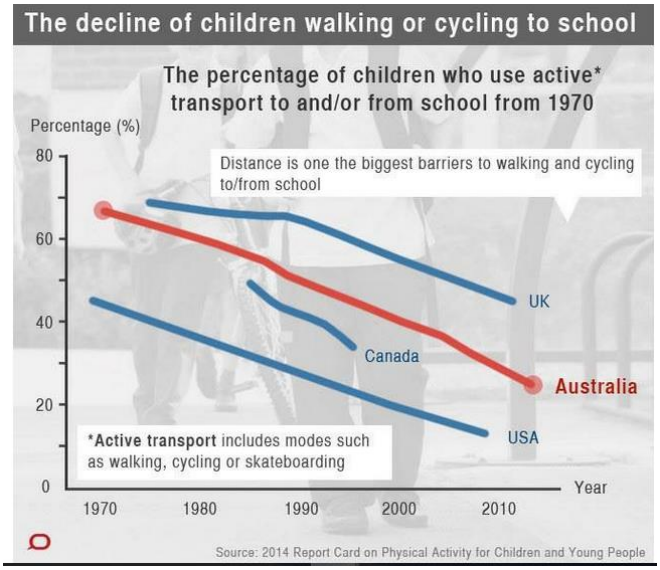
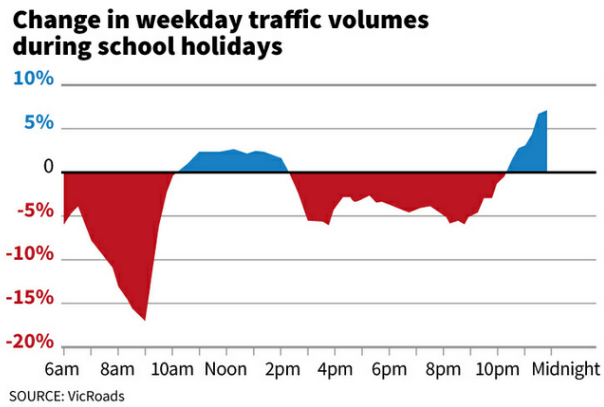
Data published by Active Healthy Kids Australia (refer graph below) shows the significant decline in the percentage of children who use active transport to and/ or from school since 1970 across a number of countries



Source: Active Healthy Kids Australia

Data released on 22nd January, 2018 by *LiveLighter* public health campaign, run by the Heart Foundation and Cancer Council Victoria shows that in Australia, 64% of children travel to school by car.

However it doesn't have to be this way. Why not school holiday roads all year round? Data published by VicRoads (refer graph below) shows significant reduction in traffic volumes during schoolholidays.



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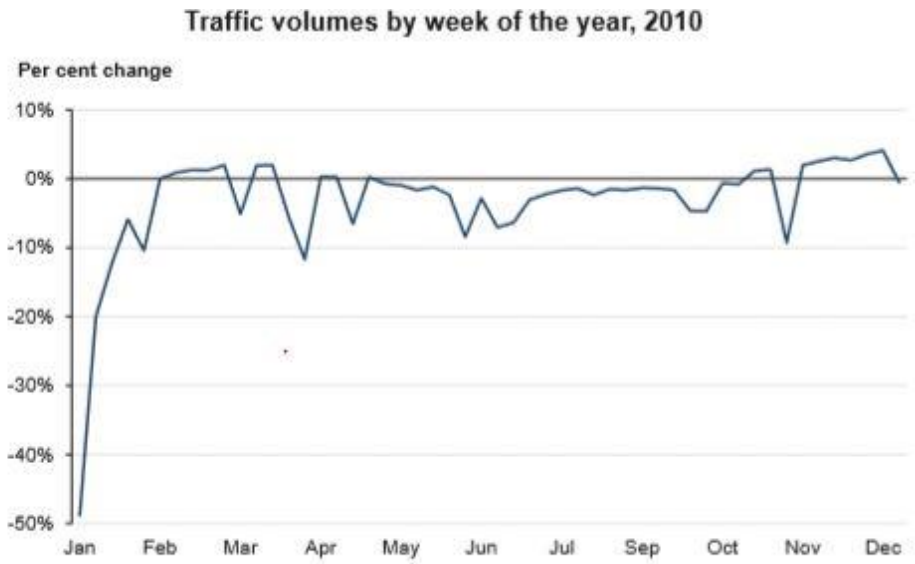
The 2013 Victorian Auditor-General's Report on Managing Traffic Congestion identifies car trips to school as a significant contributor to road congestion and suggests demand management (Pgs 23, 24 & 57):

> *"The use of cars to drive children to school has risen steeply over the past three decades, contributing to widely dispersed areas of localised congestion. It further notes there is the opportunity for travel demand management measures to encourage mode shift for school journeys.*
>
> *[The graph below] highlights the changes in traffic volumes across the 12 months of 2010, and shows the significant decline in volumes during school holiday periods. This suggests that changes in road use behaviour for school commuting have the potential to reduce current traffic volumes by around 5 to 10 per cent. This could lead to substantial improvements in road network performance and accessibility."*



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office from VISTA 2009.

A key factor in morning peak hour demand management could be travel mode shift for the trip to school. This year the Leader Newspapers' number one 'top tip' for getting ready for school was "*Practice **driving** the route to a new school*" (Moreland Leader, 22 January 2018). Why not walking, cycling or scooting?

We all need to work together to reverse this trend.

At the announcement for the new Preston High School, it was encouraging to hear Education Minister, James Merlino say that the Government would work with Vic Roads and Council to ensure safe active travel routes to the school. OCOS would like to see this approach formalised for all schools.

Safe active travel will need to be supported with a range of measures including mapped safe routes, separated path infrastructure, where possible, and bike parking provision at schools coupled with education and promotion programs in schools and the broader community.

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We believe there is an appeitite in communities for positive stories about active travel to school – as evidenced by OCOS's biggest tweet ever being on this topic and receiving 6350 impressions. Some in government may be concerned that cycling can be a contentious topic – we say no one begrudges a child on a bike and a public focus on school-aged active travellers could result in a positive shift in attitude and uptake.

OCOS welcomes the recently released *Victorian Cycling Strategy* focus on active travel to school however the stated strategic approach for the Victorian Government to *"work with local councils to improve cycling routes and facilities at schools"* is going to require clear mechanisms, governance, and of course funding.

Victorian Policy Context

Education State target

> By 2025: *The proportion of students doing physical activity for an hour a day, five times a week, will grow by 20%.*

Victorian Cycling Strategy 2018-2028

- 2.3 Support cycling to school: *The Victorian Government will work with local councils to improve cycling routes and facilities at schools, which will help increase the number of children cycling to school.*
- 1.6 Work with local councils to address gaps in strategic cycling corridors: *We will work with local councils to join up strategic cycling corridors on local streets, arterial roads, highways, rail corridors and green spaces. We will work closely with local councils to plan, identify and deliver improvements to strategic cycling corridors and to support the 20-minute neighbourhood concept, especially for cycling to schools, train stations and activity areas.*

Active Victoria Strategy

Direction 3 Additional focus on active recreation

- Key area of change: *School-based actions to improve children's physical literacy and levels of physical activity.*
- *Planning for active recreation infrastructure connected to other community uses and urban development.*

Plan Melbourne 20 Minute City

> *The concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood is simple. It's all about giving Melburnians the ability to 'live locally' - meeting most of their everyday needs within a 20-minute walk, cycle or local public transport trip of their home.*

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Those everyday needs include; schools

Recommendations

See Appendix A for an evidence base for key recommendations.

1. The Victorian Government retrofits or provides secure, covered bike parking at all public schools – possibly via the Victorian School Building Authority.

2. The Victorian Government will fund local governments to mark and/or sign safe routes to school, and undertake targeted infrastructure improvements, in combination with safe route to school maps. (Moonee Valley Council's mapping for every school in the municipality is a good example of what could be rolled out by all councils)

3. The Victorian Government, wherever possible, will fund walking and cycling paths that are separated from road traffic.

4. When funding Strategic Cycling Corridors, as per the Victorian Cycling Strategy, the Victorian Government will give priority (after black spots) to Corridors that make up routes to schools.

5. For schools being planned, Active Transport Victoria (ATV) will work with the Victorian Planning Authority, Vic Roads, local government and the Department of Education to develop a connected, direct and safe cycling (and walking) network, traffic-calmed areas and street hierarchy and network that will make active transport the preferred option for travel to and from school (consistent with a wider approach for 20 minute neighbourhoods).

6. If, as indicated in the Cycling Strategy, ATV is deemed to be the body tasked with overseeing much of this work, the Victorian Government will staff and fund ATV commensurate with the breadth and scale of the work.

7. The Victorian Government will provide the ATV, or relevant responsible body, with the means to promote active travel and tell positive cycling and walking infrastructure stories. Examples include the Sydney Cycleways social media accounts and Victorian School Building Authority story telling.

8. The Victorian Government will support schools to promote active travel within their school communities including education regarding the benefits and teaching some of the skills required.

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Appendix A

Evidence base for key recommendations

(As provided by researchers working in the field after consultation with OCOS)

- **Local public schools within walking/cycling distance of homes**

There is a need for provision of government schools of consistent high quality within residential areas so that children have good local access to quality education. This will discourage parents from shopping around for schools that are located further away from home and require their children to be driven there. There is evidence from Australia [1] and the UK [2] that freedom of choice of government schools is related to children travelling greater distances to school.

- **Separated bicycle infrastructure**

Concern about road safety is a key reason why parents do not allow their children to cycle to school [1, 3]. Children are more likely to cycle if there are separated bike paths [4]. Recent research shows that for teenagers, well separated bike paths are even more important than distance in determining a preference for cycling,

- **Reduced speed limits around schools**

If a pedestrian is truck by a vehicle travelling at 30km/h they are likely to suffer only minor injuries. However, if struck at 60km/h they are likely to be killed [5]. According to the World Health Organization [6] traffic speeds should be 30km/h or less in road environments that are shared between motorized vehicles, cyclist and pedestrians. Higher speeds show be allowed only where roads are designed to allow separation of vehicles, cyclist and pedestrians [6].

- **Provision of bike facilities at schools**

Providing bike facilities at schools, including undercover and secure parking, racks, and pumps is likely to improve active travel to schools [7].

- **Preferred routes to school**

Identification of preferred routes to school (e.g. with safer pedestrian/cyclist infrastructure, low traffic volume) are likely to encourage active transport to school [8].

- **Education for children and parents and community**

The promotion of active transport to school can include educational opportunities in the classroom for children and online or via newsletters for parents. They can learn about how active transport can help them to meet the national physical activity guidelines [9] and the related health benefits. There may also be opportunities to learn about walking and cycling as sustainable forms of transport that can help lower carbon emissions and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels.

Promotion and education also needs to occur into the broader community.

- **Training and skills**

Countries that have high rates of active transport to school have implemented school-based skills training for cycling [10]. Australian research also indicates that cyclists will make safer drivers [11].

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- **Ongoing encouragement for walking and cycling to school**

Although good for encouraging walking and cycling at the time of the event, single events such as Walk to School month and Ride to School day are not the only solution if parents return to driving their children once these events have ended [3]. There is a need for ongoing and broadly applied programs that provide sustained interest in active travel – which can include driving part way. Research also shows that children who walk and cycle to school are more focused and ready to learn.

- **Promotion of active travel to local destinations**

There is a need to encourage active transport to other neighbourhood destinations and extra-curricular activities so that children who do not reside within walking/cycling distance to school can still feel engaged and benefit from this activity [1, 12]. (Although families should be reminded that active travel can include being driven part-way.) An Australian study found that parents of primary school-aged children made 3-4 car trips per week to transport their children to places that were within walking distance of home [1].

- **Safety from crime**

If road infrastructure supports walking and cycling by reducing road safety concerns, more adults and children will engage in active transport. As a result there will be greater social interaction on neighbourhood streets as well as informal surveillance. This may help to reduce parental perception of 'stranger danger' which tends to be a further barrier to children's active transport [3, 13].

References

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