

Road Safety Education

By Lauren Djakovac

Almost every South Australian uses roads every day, whether it is by car, bus, bike, or on foot. Although in the past decade there has been a downward trend in road fatalities, the last few years has seen the numbers suddenly rising with the total road toll in 2009 reaching 119.

In the first two months of 2010, 30 road fatalities have already been recorded in SA, an increase on the number of fatalities in the same two months on the previous three years.

As part of the state strategic plan, SA has aimed for less than 90 fatalities on our roads in a year – a figure which was exceeded by approximately 33% in 2009.

According to the South Australian Police (SAPOL), SA has one of the highest fatality rates in Australia and is astoundingly 15% worse than the national average - prompting calls from experts, parents, students and the media for improved and even compulsory road safety education for students.

Outlined below are the strategies currently employed or endorsed by stakeholders. What is clear is the lack of a consistent attitude to reduce the road toll and educate young drivers about road safety – with some focussing on education, while others favouring a tougher, punitive approach.

SAPOL

SAPOL's 'SA Road Safety Strategy 2006-2010' has a target of reducing fatalities by 40%, plus a reduction in serious casualty crashes to less than 1000.

SAPOL has developed a whole of community approach to road safety by focussing on Detection and Deterrence, Investigation, Community Support, Prevention, Education and Early Intervention and Capacity Building in a number of ways. Some of these are:

- working with schools, at risk groups and others
- developing and implementing a lower tolerance approach to road safety which modifies driver behaviour
- enhancing media strategies to highlight consequences of 'fatal five' behaviours
- developing road safety strategies in conjunction with other agencies
- promoting responsible service of alcohol.

RAA and the Motor Accident Commission

Both the RAA and the Motor Accident Commission (MAC) produce safety campaigns using market research and social marketing principles to educate young drivers of the risks. But with South Australia unable to reach the target of 90 or less deaths in a year, the campaigns do not seem to be working as well as they should.

Both organisations are also involved in offering road safety programs for schools across the state, which aim to shift attitudes and raise awareness. To improve this, MAC plans to commission research in 2010 into how schools worldwide tackle the issue of road safety education.

In addition, MAC recently told the media they are calling for regular reviews of speed limits flagging the possibility of lower limits in some areas.

Community Attitudes

Some families of those killed on the state's roads this year would like to see more aggressive methods employed and have pleaded for improved driver education. To curb the road toll, they want vital road safety education, including the display of 'shock tactic' photos, to be standard in SA schools.

Driving instructors have told the media they believe schools need to emphasise the road safety message, so learner drivers are more aware of the potential dangers they face when getting behind the wheel. They suggest:

- exposing students to graphic footage of crashes
- teaching current road laws
- lessons on the dangers of using a mobile phone while driving
- how to be a responsible passenger
- tailored programs for city and country schools
- access to a driving simulator
- the effects and dangers of speeding

A RAA survey conducted in 2009 of almost 2000 SA secondary students from years 10 -12 showed:

- 60% agreed with the statement "the number of deaths of young people on the road are a real concern to me"
- 57% said road safety messages now make them think twice about getting into a car as a passenger
- 48% said they would have the courage to tell their friend if they were driving unsafely
- 93% said that drink driving is the most dangerous driving behaviour to engage in
- Only 49% believe their friends drive safely.

In addition, an EducationNow survey this year found 63.6% of primary and secondary students want road and driver safety to be a compulsory part of the school curriculum. Road safety experts propose the message could be integrated into existing subjects such as English, maths, science, design and even drama. The RAA suggests in English students could write about their experiences or attitudes, in maths and science students could study reaction times, and in the arts students could portray road safety messages through graphics and performance.

State Government Action

The SA Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure has apparently decided a more punitive approach is needed. They have revealed key road safety measures that are expected to become effective in the last half of 2010. Some of these include:

- Increasing the minimum time required on a learner's permit from 6 to 12 months for drivers under the age of 25.
- Increasing the minimum supervised driving time for learner's permit holders from 50 hours (including 10 at night) to 75 hours (including 15 at night).

- Increasing the maximum speed limit a learner's permit holder may travel on a road from 80 km/h to 100 km/h, where speed signs permit.
- Provisional (P1 and P2) drivers under 25 years of age will be restricted from driving high-powered cars including vehicles with engines of 8 or more cylinders; turbocharged or supercharged engines (except diesel powered vehicles), vehicles that have been modified to increase engine performance
- and a number of nominated high performance vehicles.
- Tightening of curfew conditions for novice drivers returning from a serious disqualification, a penalty of two demerit points for failure to display L and P plates instead of license disqualification and the offer of a Safer Driver Agreement option for disqualified provisional drivers.

Despite the increasing media attention and debate this issue has received in recent months, the government and opposition have refused to commit to making driver safety lessons compulsory. However, the State Government pledged in the lead-up to last month's election to expand road safety programs, including the Road Safety Awareness and Accident program, to reach more than 90% of the state's Year 11 students.

Opposition Education Spokesman David Pisoni told the media before the election that principals and governing councils should have more autonomy in how much driver education their school receives. Adding that road safety education programs need to be tailored to particular school districts. He also believes schools need to have more budget flexibility, so they can bring in organisations to run road such courses.

Newly elected Education Minister Jay Weatherill has said that although road safety was already part of the curriculum, he will review road and driver lessons in schools and seek advice about whether the curriculum adequately addressed this particular issue.

In 2008, SA showed it was possible to keep the road toll below 100, but since then the number of road fatalities has risen. With a number of stakeholders demonstrating conflicting views, it is unclear which strategy best addresses the problem. The tactic of tightening regulations is supported by overseas data. For example, the Head of Safety Engineering at Mercedes-Benz says that, in Germany a 16 or 17-year-old must be accompanied by someone at least 30 years old for one year after receiving their license—stating this has reduced accident rates in Germany by 20%. ■

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- Young adults aged 16-24 make up only 11% of the total population but accounted for 34% of all road fatalities and 25% of serious injuries
- 66% of all fatalities and 53% of serious injuries occurred on rural roads
- 58% of serious injury crashes occurred on roads with a speed limit of 60 km/h or less
- 18% of vehicle occupants who died were not wearing a seatbelt, while 4% of those seriously injured were not wearing a seatbelt
- Speed was a major factor in at least 34% of fatal crashes
Who died in road crashes? 50% were drivers, 28% passengers, 8% pedestrians, 12% motorcyclists, 2% cyclists
- 119 people died in 2009, 93 were male and 26 were female