Safe Walking and Cycling to School

Green Party policy paper
Walking and cycling to school is good for kids and good for all road users. Walking or cycling improves children’s health, makes them happier, and helps them learn.

When kids walk or cycle, it means that parents save time and money on driving, and it means fewer cars on the roads, which eases congestion.

Our kids need to be able to get to and from school easily and safely. In the past, most kids walked or cycled to school but nowadays only a third of them do. Parents tell us that they would be happy for their kids to walk or cycle to school if it were safer.

The Green Party’s Safe Walking and Cycling to School plan will give parents that choice. We will provide $50 million a year for four years from the transport budget for communities to invest in safe walking and cycling facilities in and around schools.

We will progressively reduce the speed limit on roads outside all urban schools to 30 km/h.
We will also reduce the speed on roads outside rural schools to 80 km/h, and establish a ‘variable’ 30 km/h speed limits during the hours that kids arrive and leave school.

We will also make it easier for councils to reduce speed limits on residential urban streets.

This package is a targeted effort to reduce school traffic and to bring back two simple Kiwi traditions: walking to school and riding a bike. It will save parents time and money, it will help decongest our roads and it will help our kids be healthier, happier, and ready to learn.

The $50 million a year Safe Walking and Cycling to School fund will be part of a total investment of $100 million a year on walking and cycling that the Greens will make under the National Land Transport Programme. This money will be freed up by reprioritising money in the transport budget away from low-value roading projects. These investments will build networks for walking and cycling comparable to what exists in many towns and cities overseas.

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Since the 1980s, there has been a **dramatic** fall in the number of children who walk or cycle to school. In 1989, **half** of our kids cycled or walked to school and a third came by car. Today, those numbers have reversed.¹ Parents are more likely to drive their kids to school, mostly because they are worried that walking and cycling isn’t safe.² And who can blame them—since 1989 the amount of traffic on our streets has doubled.³

Why kids don’t walk or cycle as much as before

The New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA) has looked at the reasons why walking and cycling to school has become **less common**. It concluded safety as well as the perception of safety were the crucial issues:

“It may be that an extremely low crash rate is needed before parents feel that walking or cycling to school is deemed inherently safe and even then, it is the perception of it being unsafe that is likely to be the biggest barrier”.⁴

NZTA says that there is a “missing link” because there is no national strategy for creating optimal travel systems around schools that keeps cyclists and walkers from being exposed to danger from traffic.⁵

Why speed matters

When it comes to the safety of our kids on the streets the difference between 30 km/h and the current default speed limit of 50 km/h is significant.

According to the World Health Organisation, if a child is hit by a car travelling at 45 km/h they have only a 50 percent chance of surviving. If we reduce that speed to 30 km/h, that rises to 90 percent.⁶

The Government’s own analysis shows that the default limit of 50 km/h is not linked to function, design, safety, or use of the roads.⁷ The 50 km/h limit around our schools has simply become a dangerous norm.

Congestion on our roads

**One in three car trips in the morning rush hour is related to education.⁸** That’s around a quarter of a million car journeys every morning that involve dropping kids off. As anyone who uses the roads during school holidays knows, school traffic is a major cause of congestion, which holds up traffic for all road users.

Exercise to live and learn

**A third of New Zealand children are overweight.⁹** That means ill health, greater health costs, and poorer academic performances. Regular exercise, including walking and cycling, is mentally stimulating and is an effective way to help children to stay healthy.

Studies show improvement in academic achievement when kids participate in physical activity. A Danish study found walking or cycling to school boosts a child’s ability to concentrate throughout the morning, to the level of a child half a year older.¹⁰
The current approach

New Zealand’s existing educational school transport programmes show high returns on investment. However, funding has been very limited.

These education initiatives include cycle skills training, the Bikes and Schools programme that puts bikes and cycling training facilities in schools, and various walking school bus initiatives.

While these programmes are of high value, unless kids can safely walk or cycle on the roads between school and home, these initiatives will always have a limited impact.

Infrastructure

The National Government has increased investment in cycling infrastructure, but its focus has been almost exclusively on adult commuter cyclists. The Government’s transport strategy directs all cycling investment towards people “accessing employment”, and makes no mention of the trip to school.\(^{11}\)

Slower speed around schools

50 km/h has become the default speed for streets around our schools, even though the Government has recognised it’s not necessarily a safe or appropriate speed limit.\(^{12}\)

Currently, schools can only reduce the speed limit around schools to 40 km/h, and only during specific times of day. Schools and councils must jump through a number of hoops to lower speeds— including first proving that traffic is above 45 km/h, that kids already walk and cycle, and that there have been cycling-related accidents in the past.

Unsurprisingly, many schools don’t have time to lobby their local council and the NZTA to reduce the speed limit outside the school.

We think the onus should be reversed. The default speed outside schools should be the safest speed for our kids (30 km/h) and the responsibility should be on councils and the NZTA to make the case for raising speed limits to potentially unsafe levels.
The solution

1. Commit $50 million a year for four years to create safe, attractive walking and cycling infrastructure around schools.

2. Make 30 km/h the default speed outside urban schools.

3. Establish a ‘variable’ 30 km/h speed limit outside rural schools during the hours when kids are arriving and leaving school.

4. Set a target to get more than 50 percent of kids walking or cycling to school by 2022.

As well as reducing speeds outside the school gate, we’ll work with communities and local authorities to design safe routes for kids to get from home to school.

The Green Party will create a $50 million per annum pool that local authorities, in consultation with their schools, will be able to apply for funding from.

The NZTA will work with local authorities to allocate funding to create the best choices for their circumstances and ensure standards are consistent across the country.

Options will include:

- Cycleways

Cycleways separate kids from traffic and prevent major causes of accidents, like opening car doors. Cycleways can be simple lanes on low-speed roads, fully protected paths with light-controlled intersections on busy streets, and shared paths for people walking or biking through parks or alongside roads. These cycleways will link into community-wide networks.
Reducing speeds

Reducing speed limits on residential roads substantially reduces the risk for pedestrians and cyclists, and can be a low-cost solution to creating a safe and attractive route to walk or cycle. The current process for reducing speeds on local roads is intensely bureaucratic. We will make it less onerous for local councils who want to make their streets safe.

Road crossings

Improved cycling/pedestrian road-crossing facilities can be established around school routes. This can include more zebra crossings, kerb extensions to improve pedestrian visibility, intersection layouts designed for people on bikes, and light-controlled mid-block crossings.

Traffic-calming measures

A variety of road shaping adjustments and features help to make driving safer around kids and schools. Trees, traffic islands, and raised crossings help calm traffic near schools. Some neighbourhoods may wish to implement a reduced speed limit around schools.

Support for walking buses and cycle skills training

Funding can be allocated to support walking buses to school, and for teaching kids walking and cycling safety. Schools will also be able to use the Community Coordinators announced in our Schools at the Heart policy to support these activities.\(^\text{13}\)

These options provide schools and communities with real flexibility and will create infrastructure that is useful to everyone, not just school children.

The $200 million over four years of funding for Safe Walking and Cycling to School will be sufficient to make significant upgrades for walking and cycling facilities around most medium and large-sized urban schools.\(^\text{14}\) All schools will be able to apply for funding.

We envision the programme expanding to more schools in the future.
How it works

Safer speeds outside urban and rural schools

Councils and the NZTA will have three years to implement a 30 km/h speed limit outside urban New Zealand schools. Outside rural schools, the speed limit will be reduced to 80 km/h with the limit dropping to 30 km/h during school pick-up and drop-off times.

In line with international best practice, we will support councils to transition urban streets around schools to 30 km/h through changes to road design (e.g. speed bumps and roundabouts), and public communication so drivers know what to expect.

Councils will be able to seek funding support for transitioning to lower speeds from the $200 million allocated to walking and cycling. The NZTA will be required to develop guidelines so that councils can exempt certain school roads from the 30 km/h speed limit. This will recognise that in some cases schools will be on roads, which may be difficult or inappropriate to permanently slow.

Developing safe routes from home to school

1 Schools and their local authorities will come together to develop safer walking and cycling routes, and the infrastructure they need. Schools are often close together, so we expect local authorities to coordinate to serve multiple schools.

A plan might identify, for example:

- Several main roads in the community where protected cycleways separated from traffic would be warranted
- Residential streets where slower speeds, or low-cost painted cycle lanes may be more suitable
- Parks that could be used for walking or cycling if they had a sealed path
- Road-crossing points for kids walking or on bikes that need lights, zebra crossings, or kerb extensions
- New covered bike stands at schools
- Walking and cycling safety skills training programmes at schools

2 The plan is submitted to the NZTA, which assesses the plan against the national guidelines and allocates funding from the $200 million, four-year pool.

3 The local authority contracts the work to be carried out and assesses the effectiveness.

4 Further funding can be sought for additional improvements if needed to achieve the goal of more than 50 percent of kids walking or cycling to school.
Benefits for children

The benefits of more kids walking and cycling to school are widespread:

- **Improved safety**: School-friendly streets with improvements such as protected cycleways and improved pedestrian crossings will help separate kids from traffic, which will make these options more attractive. Increased numbers of people walking and cycling creates better driver awareness.

- **Better learning outcomes**: Exercise in the morning has been shown to lift children’s moods, boost attentiveness and help them retain information.

- **Health**: Regular, moderate exercise by cycling or walking is a great way to improve kids’ health. Studies show children have reduced waistlines and better cholesterol counts when they walk or cycle to school.

Benefits for the community

Research from the University of Auckland shows the kind of infrastructure the Greens will build for walking and cycling will produce up to $4 billion of benefits over 40 years for a $200 million investment – a 20 to 1 return.

The indicative benefits from this study include:

- 6 billion fewer kilometres driven, saving $1.2 billion on fuel

- 29 fewer road deaths, 25 fewer pollution deaths, 1,270 fewer deaths due to better overall health

- 36,000 fewer sick days lost to ill-health

- 8 million fewer tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, saving $330 million

In addition to those benefits, Safe Walking and Cycling to School will mean:

- Better walking and cycling options for all: Safe Walking and Cycling to School is centred around schools but the infrastructure will be available to everyone and integrated with councils’ investment on arterial routes, making commuting to work easier and safer

- Less congestion: Achieving the target of 50 percent of children walking and cycling to school would remove around 100,000 car trip legs per day. The infrastructure will also be used by commuters, further reducing congestion for people who drive

- Reduced road damage: Local road maintenance costs hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The wear on roads from a bicycle is negligible compared to the impact of a car. Safe Walking and Cycling to School will reduce the length and number of car journeys, helping to reduce road maintenance costs
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