

The effectiveness of school Travel Access Guides (TAGs)

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The proportion of children using active transport (walking, cycling or public transport) to travel to primary school has decreased substantially over the past few decades.¹ There are many advantages from encouraging more active transport for children.²

As part of a major cluster randomised trial encouraging primary school students to walk to school,³ 12 schools involved in the Central Sydney Walk to School Research Program developed a Travel Access Guide (TAG) as a strategy to increase active transport.⁴ A school TAG is a document with a map of the school and its surrounding vicinity, and highlights walking and cycling routes and nearby bus and train services. It can identify and address issues that may be hindering increased active travel to and from a school.

To evaluate the longer-term impact of the 12 school TAGS, school principals were telephoned three years after the development of the TAGS and asked about the use of the TAG. Of the 12 school principals involved with the program, 10 were successfully contacted and completed the telephone survey. Four of the 10 schools still used the TAGs (40%), while the other six had ceased using the TAG at some time since the completion of the program.

The schools that continued to use the TAGs unanimously agreed that they were a useful resource in encouraging children to adopt a more active means of travelling to and from school. TAGs continued to have a presence in these schools through its display around the school office and/or parent notice boards, its inclusion on the school website and in school newsletters, and also through its distribution to new parents at kindergarten orientation.

From the schools that did not continue with the TAG initiative, "changes in the school staff team" was the main reason cited. Little corporate knowledge was retained where staff who were aware and supportive of TAGs and active travel had left the school. Only one of the schools surveyed was not interested at all in continuation of the TAG idea.

Although the majority of schools did not continue with the use of the TAGs, most were interested in the idea of TAG once a brief overview was presented to them. Three principals were new in their school. This highlights the need for TAGs (and other promotional strategies) to be *continually* encouraging more active travel to and from school, year after year.

To incorporate active transport into the culture of a school, the issue of sustainability must be addressed. This could be achieved through an annual follow-up with schools to emphasise the purpose and benefits of the TAG. Regular contact with schools is necessary, although each contact may not seem productive when seen in isolation.

References

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