

Motorists' Reaction to Portable School Signs

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Are school safety programs effective? Have they revealed any notable improvement since their inauguration? Who has the best pedestrian safety record, the oldsters or the youngsters? These few questions might well be answered in the affirmative in behalf of the youngsters, and particularly those of grade-school age and up to twenty-five years of age.

School children have, for the most part, received a well-balanced safety training course, and general pedestrian accident trends indicate that school-child traffic safety lessons are paying increased dividends year by year. Yet there has been considerable laxity in uniform regulations for motorists driving through school-zone areas during the assembly and dismissal periods of the school day.

Some communities permit non-standard signs to be used at school crosswalks. Others are of the opinion that portable facsimiles of school boys or girls and police officers do the job of protecting school children at these locations. Another group will prefer to warn motorists by installing at the side of the roadway a permanent type of collapsible school sign requiring the motorist to stop at such locations and opening the sign during school assembly and dismissal periods.

Could it be that those who frown upon uniformity would take the preceding citations of non-uniform practices as an answer defending local option on traffic control? A program so conceived would, in a period of time, fall apart of its own weight. The flexibility of the automobile has brought about a need for uniform traffic control and regulation. Alibis are becoming weaker and weaker year by year for those who ignore the availability of traffic regulations and controls that have been tried and proved to such a degree as to become a part of recommended national practice of traffic control.

Let's not lose sight of the fact that we do have peculiar non-standard traffic-control measures that are taken as gospel by many persons accustomed to them. Perhaps the most outstanding example of such local

traffic-control practice is in a large eastern city where oversized signals have been installed a considerable distance apart. Intermediate intersections have no signal installations, and motorists may be stopped on the main street waiting for a green indication to be signaled from several blocks away while side street traffic is momentarily permitted to enter or cross the main-street thoroughfare. In certain sections of Mexico the motorists with the loudest horns and the most intestinal fortitude will gain the right-of-way through an intersection. Perhaps practices like these are workable in their own localities, but surely they have not proved themselves acceptable on a national basis. How long they may stand on their own merits is questionable.

Recently we have become alarmed about our traffic problems. Before the close of the last World War, we found many persons in positions of authority who were complacent over the fact that traffic was becoming a problem and took little or no action to relieve the increasing tendency toward more accidents and more congestion.

Reliable figures indicate that postwar traffic has surmounted prewar counts. Many localities will find that studies have been completed recommending the types of streets and highways required to meet traffic conditions within the next two decades. National and state highway conferences of the past three years have not been unmindful of the need of public support. If our drafting-table plans are to succeed, then it is important that the misinformed and uninformed public should be properly advised of the implications of the traffic problems which lie ahead.

EVOLUTION OF PORTABLE SIGNS

While I was Traffic Engineer for Fort Wayne, Indiana, it was possible for the traffic engineering department to conduct a study of the evolution of the portable school-patrol standards leading to the present recommended practices prescribed in the recently released *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices*.

School-boy patrol signs proved to be very impracticable, and were frequently damaged by motorists. They were colored to a reasonable resemblance to a child standing in the roadway as a warning to motorists that his fellow students were somewhere about and likely to be crossing the street. It was often found, however, that the colors had a tendency to blend into certain backgrounds offering a likely camouflage.

These signs were supplemented with auxiliary messages to advise the motorist that he was within the area of a school zone or school crossing and that he was to stop or, in some few instances, to reduce his speed. It is well to point out, however, that these signs in total did not conform

to any standard practices and commanded a small percentage of obedience on the part of the motorists.

It became necessary, then, to dispose of the school-patrol signs and inaugurate the use of portable signs that would more closely conform to accepted standard shapes and colors.

At this time the portable signs were mounted like the standard 18-inch school-crossing and stop signs. They proved to be more effective than the former school-patrol signs, but there still remained a problem in getting the motorists and school children to obey them.

A well-recognized form of traffic regulation has been found to be one that is popular with the motorist. Positive stops were not popular. This can better be appreciated when we recognize that the motorist was required to make unnecessary stops at periods of the day when school children were not in the process of going to or from school. The use of the signs was in many cases very poorly supervised. Frequently they were rolled into the street for extensive periods before the opening and closing of schools and during the entire noon-hour period.

In addition to having the weaknesses cited above, the revamped method of school-crossing regulation was losing ground. Out-of-town motorists were being apprehended, paying their fines, and complaining about the lack of uniform regulations. The school children were beginning to build up a defiant confidence in the school stop signs. In many cases it was common to observe the school children walking into the street unmindful of possible disobedience to the school sign on the part of the motorists.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

During the war period, a revised edition of the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* was in process. The new manual has been improved in many phases of traffic control and now specifies that warning or caution signs be diamond-shaped and suggests messages to be placed on them. Only the word "SCHOOL" has been suggested at school-crossing areas. The manual more specifically states the use of school signs thus: "In some locations where the hazard is particularly great it may be desirable to use a portable sign set up in, or immediately adjacent to, the roadway. *Such a sign shall be displayed only during the hazardous hours and shall be removed at all times when the presence of pupils does not require its use.*"

Realizing the benefits to be derived from accepted standard traffic-control practices, our traffic engineering department recommended early use of school traffic signs as set forth above inasmuch as former school-

crossing stop signs had become so fragile that immediate replacement seemed advisable. The recommendation was approved, and the new "SCHOOL" signs were placed in operation at the more critical school locations throughout the city.

Past records of several years indicate that the city had *not* been charged with any school child-auto accidents at schools protected by the guidance of a school-patrol boy or girl. The probability of a school-child accident at a school crossing has not been increased by present regulations, and the summary of the "Speed Observance" study given here indicates that motorist observance at school signs is remarkably good.

Before exploring the summary of the study mentioned, it is well to take cognizance of some important factors involved in making a new regulation of this character work. Keep in mind that "SCHOOL" signs are but a part of the over-all program and that the children, their parents, and the school and police authorities must do the balance of the job.

It is essential that the children comply with the safety lessons taught them. They should cross the street at a walking pace, brisk and free of horseplay while in the street. Patrol boys and girls should be thoroughly disciplined as to the importance of their assignment. And it should not be necessary to remind the parents that most children reflect the parental guidance received at home.

School authorities should follow through and see that students and patrol members are following the safety lessons and regulations taught them, and they should report cases needing enforcement attention to those officers of the police department responsible for school-patrol direction and instruction. The police can very effectively stress the importance of complying with traffic regulations from the standpoint of the students, school patrols, parents, school officials, and motorists by regularly visiting locations where school signs have been installed.

STUDY SUMMARIZED

1. Seeing that pedestrian safety practices are followed is a continuous process.
2. Continued parental guidance and support of traffic measures is essential.
3. Regular police-enforcement observations of school traffic-safety lessons is always necessary.
4. School patrols must be kept interested in their duties and must be kept aware of the importance of the task they have been assigned.

5. Present portable "SCHOOL" signs have been found to be more effective than those installed upon a permanent basis. At a recent national assembly of traffic engineers and other traffic safety officials a preference was indicated for the portable "SCHOOL" sign rather than school signs of a positive stop character. However misuse of the portable type of sign must be guarded against.
6. The portable signs are a step in the direction toward a uniform method of school-crossing regulation.
7. Speeds observed were within car control limits; two-thirds of all cars come to a stop or to speeds of less than 5 mph. Ninety-two percent of the total number of motorists were observed to be driving at less than 15 mph. Less than one percent were observed to be driving in excess of 25 mph.
8. More frequent gaps in traffic are available than where all traffic is required to stop.
9. Since this study was conducted, orders were recently issued to the sign-shop personnel to install a speed regulation of 10 mph on all portable school signs. Unfortunately, two school children were injured at school crosswalk locations after the speed limit was put into effect.

VEHICLE SPEED OBSERVANCE AT PORTABLE "SCHOOL" SIGNS

(Percentage Basis)

12 School Crossings

	<i>Stopped</i>	<i>Almost Stopped</i>	<i>0-5 mph</i>	<i>5-15 mph</i>	<i>15-25 mph</i>
Morning	14.0	21.2	31.1	27.0	6.7
Afternoon	21.3	17.4	24.1	26.5	10.7
Both	17.7	19.2	27.5	26.7	8.9