

# **Developing a School Travel Planning Guide**

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## **1 Introduction**

Not long ago most children walked to and from school. Today, due to factors such as personal safety concerns increased car ownership, changing economic and social patterns, and the increase in school catchment areas, most children are now inactively transported to school in the family vehicle.

Physical inactivity is a huge contributing factor for disease and disability. It is an important factor in coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, colon cancer, breast cancer, stroke, depression and obesity. Weight bearing exercise, ie. physical activity, is required to build healthy bones, muscles and joints, improve movement and coordination skills. (AIHW 2004)

Being physically active not only brings health benefits, for children and young people, but also environmental and social benefits. Motorised travel contributes to environmental problems such as enhanced levels of greenhouse gases, smog, noise pollution, congestion and road trauma

Active travel provides freedom and independence to children and young people and contributes to building self-esteem, social skills, discipline and leadership while reducing the symptoms of depression and stress. Community cohesion is strengthened and anti-social behaviour is deterred, (WA Physical Activity Taskforce).

To capture the plethora of benefits derived from active travel, and to reduce the growing problem of congestion around school zones at drop off and pick up times, the Victorian Department of Infrastructure determined that School communities should be supported to implement School Travel Plans. Through the use of School Travel Plans, school communities are encouraged to promote active travel of students by accessing and working collaboratively with their local government and other key stakeholders in road safety. A School Travel Planning Guide has been developed to provide a process for developing, implementing and evaluating a whole school approach to active travel. This paper outlines why School Travel Plans are important and unpacks the process and content of the Victorian School Travel Planning Guide.

## **2 Background**

Many parents perceive that their child's travel is inherently dangerous and so, they increasingly drive their children to school and other destinations in private vehicles. Unfortunately there are many occasions when parents drive their children to school over extremely short distances when it is practical to walk. Indeed, in Victoria there is evidence that about 80% of primary aged children live within 3 kilometres of the school, an easily walked or cycled distance, and yet the majority are driven to and from school. This motorised school travel results in congestion, pollution, and an increased risk of road accidents.

Keeping children healthy, safe and mobile requires a delicate balance between encouraging and allowing them to move about freely and safeguarding them in the road environment. Trips by car now account for at least half of all distances travelled by 10 – 14 year olds. The significant shift to car travel is believed to account for that fact that more children are killed today as car passengers than in any other transport context (OECD 2004).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the leading cause of death among young Australians aged between 15 and 24 years is injury, and transport accidents account for more injury-related deaths than any other cause. In the 0-14 year age group 37% of children who die do so in transport accidents and 14 % of injuries are from collisions. (ABS 2003).

Every choice involves trade-offs, and transport is no exception. Restricting children's movement may reflect parent's well-intentioned efforts to keep them safe, but may unintentionally have detrimental effects on their health. Researchers have recently linked decreases in the level of children physical activity, walking and bicycling, to increases in lack of stamina, childhood diabetes and obesity. (OECD 2004, p. 19)

Around Australia, children seem to have paid for the decreasing accident rates by decreasing mobility. So what is the problem of decreased mobility?

- 25% of children are overweight or obese, and between 1985 and 1995 children's body mass index increased by 0.08% per year. At this rate by 2020, 50% of children will be overweight or obese.
  - Obese children have a 25 to 50% chance of becoming obese adults.
  - Cardiovascular disease remains the major public health problem for Australia and can be prevented. A modifiable risk fact for cardiovascular disease is being overweight.
- (Magarey et al 2001)

There are demonstrated health benefits from as little as 30 minutes per day of moderate levels of physical activity. This activity can be accumulated in 10-minute bouts – just a walk to or from school. Increases in active transport are likely to have significant direct health benefits which also can accrue from reduced environmental pollution and community cohesion through increasing physical activity and the use of public transport.

According to Hoban (2005) many forces are working against children being physically active – especially walking and riding to and from school. Hoban cites Dr Michael Booth from the University of Sydney's Centre for Research into Adolescent's Health who says that children are prevented from walking and are kept off streets because of 'stranger danger' and cars. But there is no evidence that shows our streets are any less safe, in terms of 'stranger danger' that they were 40 years ago.

Booth says that Australia has a very high rate of car ownership and very few children walk or cycle to school. When children are driven it becomes a catch-22 situation. Because parents are afraid of letting their children walk anywhere because of the fear of traffic and other safety issues, so they drive them, which causes an increase of cars on the road, which makes it less safe to walk or ride. If we create a friendlier environment, more people will walk or cycle.

The protection of children from the dangers of traffic and of adults in the street plus adults' dependence and use of private cars can mean that children are denied the right to independent mobility and the ability to explore and know their own community (Hillman 1993; Hillman et al., 1991; Tranter 1996). Surveys by Hillman and colleagues (1993) showed the extent that children's independent mobility has been curtailed as parents aim to protect their children from perceived traffic safety risks. This results in greater car use and thus greater

levels of traffic that need to be avoided. The consequences of the adult based decision making leading to high car use leads to further consequences for children and young people. For example, the increased risk of traffic accidents leads to further restriction on cycling and walking. It also reduces the level of communication between neighbours and general social life on the street which is one of the main locations for social life of young people (Mathews and Limb, 2000).

Children need to be able to travel safely on their journeys to and from schools, as well as to enjoy freedom of movement to play and explore their surroundings. Safe travel is a key issue for many families and school communities, but such concerns can be partially ameliorated through the development and implementation of a School Travel Plan.

### **3 What is a School Travel Plan?**

#### **3.1 Overview**

A School Travel Plan is an action plan that is designed to support families to change to more sustainable travel for the journey to and from school – such as walking, cycling, and using public transport, including school buses.

The experiences of schools indicate that over time school travel planning can:

- Significantly increase numbers of students walking and/or cycling to school, leading to improved health and fitness.
- Remove the traffic chaos seen outside the school at the beginning and end of the school day, by promoting realistic travel alternatives to the car – walking, cycling and using school buses and public transport.
- Improve road safety for students and make streets quieter for local residents as the volume of traffic around the school is reduced.
- Allow families to connect more with their local community and encourage parents/carers to be more interested and involved in the school, as they walk or cycle with their children.
- Lead to children gaining greater independence and improved social interaction by walking and/or cycling with other students.
- Improve the air quality around the school and make a significant contribution towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, leading to a more environmentally sustainable future.
- Increase awareness within the school community of environmental issues and the positive and practical actions they can take.

The school travel planning process encourages schools to identify barriers to students using more sustainable ways of travelling to and from school. These barriers can range from concerns held by parents and students about safety (both personal safety and road safety), to practical issues such as the weight of school bags.

A plan includes proposals for ways to make safety improvements to the physical environment, education and training of all school community members and promotional activities to support more active travel.

### **3.2 What is usually included in a School Travel Plan?**

All schools are different, and the issues around school travel varies from one school to another, as do the solutions.

As a guide School Travel Plans usually contain:

1. Evidence about the current situation
  2. A plan for action
  3. A plan for implementation
  4. A plan for monitoring, reviewing and reporting progress.
1. A look at the current situation usually includes:
    - a brief description of the location, size and type of school
    - information about how children currently travel to/from school and the reasons why they travel this way
    - how they would like to travel to/from school.
    - a brief description of the barriers to making a change to more sustainable travel alternatives faced by the school/cluster of schools. (This could include, for example, journeys to attend pre-and after-school events and journeys made during the school day to attend activities at other locations)
  2. A plan for action usually includes:
    - the results of a survey (s) to identify the current travel patterns and the issues to be addressed
    - clearly defined targets and objectives to provide focus and directions
    - details of proposed measures on how to address and meet the objectives and targets set
    - costings and sourcing of any funding required
  3. A detailed plan for implementation usually includes:
    - a timetable for implementation
    - clearly defined roles and responsibilities
    - how the plan and its actions will be communicated to the school community
  4. Proposals for monitoring, reviewing and reporting progress.

### **3.3 What are the benefits for key stakeholders in having a School Travel Plan**

Everyone is a winner when a School Travel Plan is in place, and the benefits are far reaching.

For the School

- Improved health and safety for all members of the school community
- Reduced congestion around the school gate at drop off and pick up times
- Establish walking and cycling routes are safer
- Contributing to a better understanding of the health and environmental impacts of motorised travel.

For the Children

- Improved health and fitness as a result of walking and cycling
- Improved traffic awareness and road user skills
- Improve awareness of the surroundings and greater social connectedness

#### For the Parents

- Increased travel choices for their family
- Reduced stress and time spent in traffic congestion between home and school
- Increase parent-child contact when walking or riding together
- Better links with the school established
- Greater social connectedness with the school and the local community.

#### For the Local Community

- Improved local environment by reducing air and noise pollution when car travel is reduced
- Reduced congestion problems near schools and on local streets
- Improved walking and riding routes as the demand for such facilities increases
- Improved road safety outcomes as children become more traffic savvy.

The key to success is that the whole school community needs to be actively involved in the development of the School Travel Plan from the outset. Through this a real sense of ownership and shared responsibility for implementing the plan can be created.

### **3.4 Who is involved in the development of a School Travel Plan?**

The development of a School Travel Plan is a co-operative venture and it brings together the ideas and contributions of different groups of people who are key stakeholders in children's health and safety. Key stakeholders include students, parents, teachers, school boards, local councils, and public transport operators. Representatives of each of these stakeholder groups actively collaborate to work out the details of the School Travel Plan, to ensure they not only meet their own demands but also contribute to the greater good of the local school community.

Parents need to be involved in the development of the plan because they are the ones who make important decisions about travel and traffic safety for their child, particularly relating to their level of exposure to risk, levels of accompaniment and independent travel, and the use of safety equipment such as bicycle helmets. Childhood experiences build foundations for adult behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, and parents serve as important role models and their behaviour and actions can influence their children. Having parents walk or ride safely alongside their child is an important agent of learning.

Students must be involved so they can understand the need to, and the benefits of, actively travelling to school. Having them involved in the development of the School Travel Plan gives them considerable ownership of the initiative, thus increasing the Plan's sustainability.

Local government also need to be engaged in the process of developing a plan, because they are responsible for the local streets leading to and around schools and have expert knowledge of local traffic flows, danger spots etc. They usually have responsibility for monitoring traffic flows around schools, and have the capacity to infringe those drivers who are doing illegal or unsafe manoeuvres. Two-way flows of information (eg. between local engineers and local school communities) on mobility and risks (actual and perceived) are essential if many 'hard' road safety measures are to work.

Community organisations, such as local environment groups, local Police, local bus operators or RoadSafe groups, can also take part in the development of the plan. They may have an interest in school travel or an established relationship with the school.

The School can serve as a mediating organization by offering, formally and informally information to children and parents about safety between home and school or through communication with the municipality about the safety of the school route. Agreements can be made with parents on driving and parking near schools.

Schools, parents and local government are already working effectively together on different programs, so it is anticipated that a collaborative and co-operative approach to establishing and implanting a school travel plan will be managed with a pile of good will result in excellent outcomes. An example of an existing collaborative approach to school travel is the Walking School Bus initiative.

## **4 Development the Victorian School Travel Planning Guide**

### **4.1 Background to the development**

In 2003, thirty four schools were recruited to participate in a project aimed at “reducing the barriers to walking and cycling to school”. This project adopted a school travel planning methodology and received funding from the Victorian Greenhouse Strategy (VGS). It was named the ‘Safe Walking and Cycling Routes to Schools Program’ and adopted as Action 7.4 of the VGS (now known as School Travel Planning Development Project).

Analysis of the Victorian Activity & Travel Survey estimates that in metropolitan Melbourne over 17% of the morning peak hour car traffic is school travel. Surprisingly 40% of school travel involves travel only from home to the school and then directly returning home.

Of the 34 schools surveyed for School Travel Planning Development Project prior to initiating School Travel Planning, 59% of Primary and 51% of Secondary students were found to be driven 5 days per week despite 80% Primary and 60% Secondary students living within 3 kilometres of school.

The School Travel Planning model was adopted by the School Travel Planning Development Project after analysis of survey and focus group results indicating a variety of barriers to reducing car trips. As a model able to integrate a wide range of solutions (e.g. from social marketing to infrastructure), it was considered the best methodology to apply. One advantage of the School Travel Planning model is its flexibility. A School Travel Plan can incorporate a large number of approaches, including a curriculum based approach.

33 schools have developed School Travel Plans that are expected to yield significant reductions in car trips, increases in walking and cycling to school, and associated health and community benefits.

Despite positive outcomes for schools involved in the School Travel Planning Development Project, many were daunted by the School Travel Planning process, found information about programs hard to find and understand, found various processes difficult, and needed a variety of readily accessible information that is not easily obtainable in order to develop their School Travel Plan.

In a separate initiative, early in 2003 the Department of Infrastructure brought together a range of organizations currently offering Travel related programs to schools. It was found that the programs (over 35) represented at the forum compete against each other, and against a plethora of other competing claims for the attention of school Principals.

Although the STP process provides a strategic structure to assess the best strategies to achieve reduction in car trips, without coordinated information, schools have to search for information and assessment of the scores of available programs. A need for a practical school travel planning guide was identified and resulted in the project to develop Victorian School Travel Planning Guide.

#### **4.2 Why a CD-ROM based guide?**

Background research undertaken prior to the development of the Victorian School Travel Planning Guide indicated that the majority of similar guides available, both internationally and within Australia, were either publications that were printed and/or available as document online for download.

The key limitations with this approach, based on the experiences with the Victorian Greenhouse Strategy School Travel Planning funded project in 2003-04, seemed to be that:

- Users are required to sift through a significant amount of content to be able to find specific information they require.
- Because schools come to the school travel planning process with varied experience with dealing with travel issues, traditional approaches to guides lack flexibility and do not necessarily allow for easy navigation through the content. For instance those who had already been involved in a school travel related program, such as VicHealth's Walking School Bus, may already have collected data on travel, addressed local road safety concerns as part of this and have a high degree of awareness of key issues. These schools contrast significantly with those that have no experience with travel related programs and issues.
- Some schools are more skilled at strategic planning than others, and so require less guidance on the planning process. Once again providing an easily navigated guide where a user can select required information is desirable.
- Significant time and effort is lost by schools reinventing the wheel rather than be able to gain from the experiences of others. This is because it is difficult to present lots of information in an accessible format in a traditional guide, without creating a very long tome. Also even where example material, such as sample newsletter items, were presented, these were generally not made available in electronic format.

Hence it was decided that the approach for the Victorian School Travel Planning Guide should be that the guide be an application either available online or in CD-ROM format. Both formats provided the ability with good design to be interactive, easy to navigate and provide features such as access to sample documents and searchable resources. Ultimately the decision to produce a multimedia CD-ROM based guide was due to:

- the limitations of developing a guide to sit on a government website with set corporate guidelines that control design and features
- the limited speed and reliability of access to the Internet that many schools still experience and so putting real restrictions on use of features such as video

- concerns that the level of Internet use by teachers and their computer skills in general is still limited and that a CD-ROM application could be made much more user friendly than quite a complex website.

### **4.3 Structure and features of the guide**

The guide is structured with 2 key areas (see Figure 1) that provide:

1. a step-by-step process for schools undertaking school travel planning
2. suggestions for councils on how to support schools through the planning process.

Both these areas are structured around 5 key steps for developing and implementing a school travel plan. These are:

1. Getting started – considers who needs to be involved, who should lead the process, and stresses the importance of introducing the concept to the school community.
2. The current situation – suggests ways to collect data on how students currently travel to and from school and identify the barriers to using more sustainable and healthier travel options.
3. Planning for action – provides guidance on making sense of the data collected and developing a realistic plan.
4. Implementing the plan – advice on putting the plan into action.
5. Monitoring progress – suggestions for making sure the plan is on track and measuring its success.



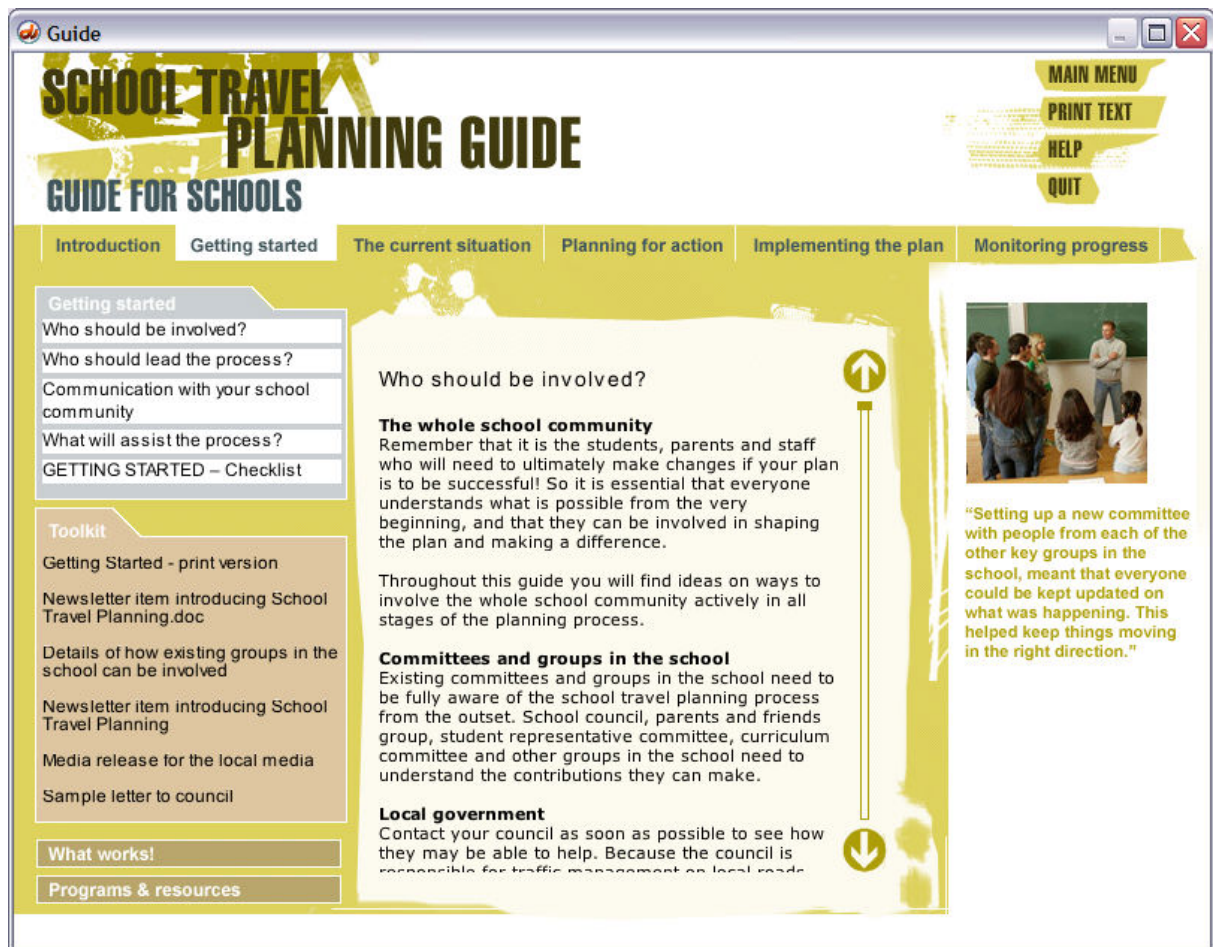


*Figure 1: The welcome screen for the Victorian School Travel Planning Guide.*

Figure 2 shows one of the screens in the area designed for schools and shows:

- the menu structure for this section with easy access to all sub-areas of content
- the Toolkit menu which presents only documents related to the section currently viewed
- buttons for accessing the What works! and Programs and Resources sections
- the video window that is accessible in each section of the guide.

Each main section contains a checklist of key activities that should be undertaken during this stage in the development of the school travel plan.



*Figure 2: One of the screens in the Guide for Schools area of the Victorian School Travel Planning Guide.*

Throughout the guide users have access to a wide range of useful documents, tips and ideas and details of related programs and resources they may be able to use. These are organised in the following sections:

**Toolkit** – this is a collection of useful documents including:

- more detailed instructions and guidance for users on specific tasks or issues
- sample and template documents that can be used to save time and effort, such as surveys, slideshow presentations and media releases
- print versions of guide sections
- spreadsheets to streamline survey collation and analysis.

**Programs & resources** – this area is a searchable database of travel related programs and resources that are available for schools to use (see Figure 3 and 4). Programs and resources selected for inclusion in this area had to meet specific criteria:

- Relevance – Does it have a direct relationship to school related travel? Does it contribute to meeting the aims of the School Travel Planning?
- Quality – Is the program/resource underpinned by good evidence based practice?
- Legitimacy – Is the program/resource legitimate in terms of the organisation behind it?

- Support – Is the program/resource ongoing/maintained? If it only operates for a limited timeframe is this realistic for schools engaged in School Travel Planning? Is there any support offered to schools to use the program/resource?
- Currency – Is the program/resource material current and relevant to schools in 2005? Is it consistent with curriculum frameworks and teaching pedagogy?
- Availability – Are there restrictions to schools using the program/resource? Is the program better suited to particular types of schools or those in specific locations?
- Commitment required – Is the level of resourcing schools need to commit to use the program/resource reasonable?

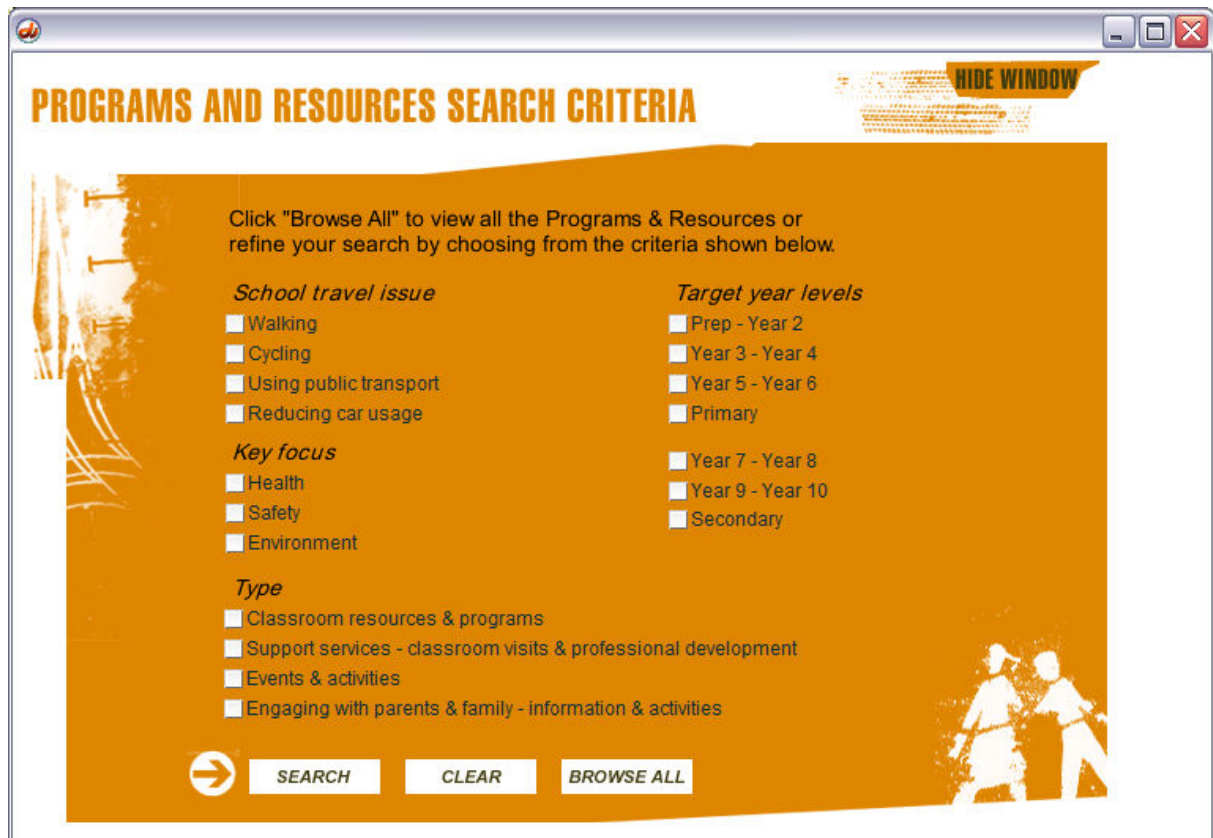


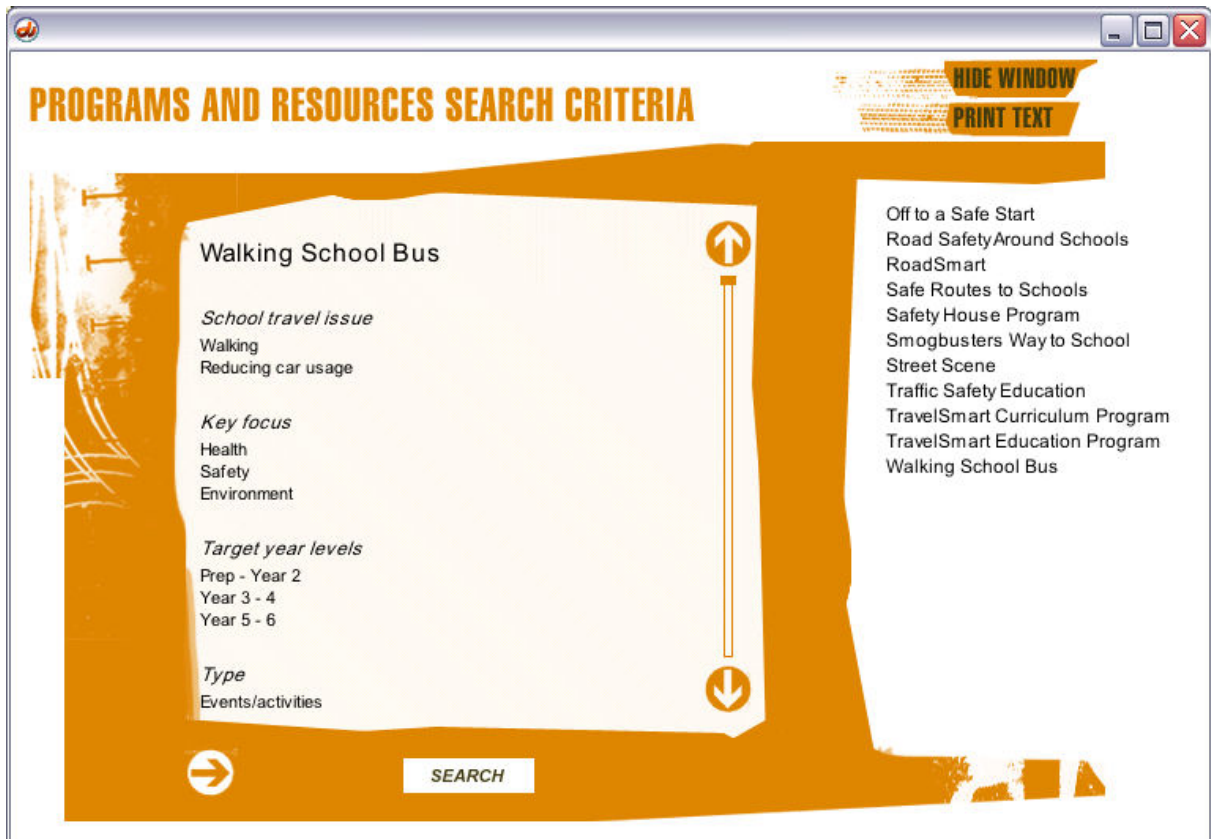
Figure 3: The search function of the Programs & Resources database area.

**What works!** – this is a searchable database of ideas for actions that have come from schools that have been through the school travel planning process. This area is seen as critical in that it shares and promotes good practice and helps schools through the vital step in the planning process of deciding what they will actually do to achieve their objectives. The ideas for actions are organised according to the:

- School travel issue – that is walking, cycling, using public transport or reducing car usage
- Type of action – such as support for the planning process, classroom activities, school policy/rule, support for teachers, school events/activities, promotion/publicity and infrastructure/facilities.
- Target – that is primary or secondary schools.

Throughout the guide there are also excerpts from video interviews with people from schools who have been through the school travel planning process. These are designed to provide

practical insights into ways that schools have worked through the planning process and what has been achieved.



*Figure 4: The results area in Programs & Resources showing program/resource details.*

## 5 Conclusion

At the present time, a roll-out of the guide to schools across the state is planned, so sound evaluation data is as yet unavailable. However, consultations held as part of the development process for the guide have indicated that it will be a useful and effective tool for schools and local government for promoting and maintaining active travel to and from school. In the schools that have been through a school travel planning process as part of the School Travel Planning Development Project, it appears more families are actively travelling to and from school, and these numbers are being maintained over more than one school term. Further, there is a perceived reduction in the traffic chaos around the school gate at pick up and drop off times.

The School Travel Planning Guide is available to schools and councils involved in funded projects and also upon request. There is a registration process that will collect details of schools, councils or individuals and enable them to:

- receive regular bulletins about school travel planning issues
- receive updates as these become available
- be contacted for evaluation purposes to see how the guide is being used.

Details of obtaining the School Travel Planning Guide are available on the Victorian TravelSmart website: [www.travelsmart.vic.gov.au](http://www.travelsmart.vic.gov.au)

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