

Special Schools and School Travel Plans

Overview

Whilst there are some practical differences arising from the pupils' needs attending Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, the general principles of what to cover in a school travel plan is still relevant. What school travel advisers/ co-ordinators are already doing with mainstream schools can be applied just as effectively to SEN schools. The following aims to provide some suggestions and ideas, as well as some examples of objectives and targets Special Schools have identified in their travel plans. This article finishes by outlining the kind of support available from local authorities in England and Scotland.

Whilst many pupils with special educational needs do attend specific SEN schools, it should also be recognised that many others are integrated into local schools, sometimes as part of a formal SEN unit. As schools should look at the travel needs of all their pupils, the issues raised here will be helpful for schools who do have SEN pupils integrated into their school community.

Content of a SEN school travel plan

For the majority of SEN schools, reducing car use on the school run will not be possible or a main focus to a travel plan due to the influence of wide catchment areas and a high dependence on LEA buses and taxis. However, some schools, such as The Elms School in Knowsley, have decided to encourage taxi sharing as a way of reducing the number of cars arriving at the school gate. Schools and school travel advisers should therefore keep an open mind, as with mainstream schools, the focus and reasons for getting involved in travel planning will vary according to each specific school.

Different levels and types of learning difficulties present within the school community will strongly determine what will be feasible and there needs to be enough flexibility within the travel plan to account for changes in the school make-up.

SEN schools generally have a very high ratio of staff to pupils, as well as a high number of visitors to the site. Investigating staff and visitor access and travel to and from the school is therefore one aspect that could be considered in a travel plan, especially given these journeys will be affecting congestion and safety issues on and off the school site. Lindon Bennett School, Hounslow are encouraging staff to walk and cycle to school, in addition to developing a virtual road layout in the playground to teach an adapted version of pedestrian training skills to pupils.

Independent travel so that individuals can access employment, recreation, vocational training and adult living options, and preparing pupils to enter adulthood confidently as active participants in society are key educational aims for SEN schools. Developing and implementing a school travel plan can significantly assist schools in both of these areas.

SEN schools have tackled a wide range of issues in their school travel plans – the following list represents some of them and provides a few ideas.

- Site safety – layout of car parks, drop-off zones for buses & taxis, scheduling taxi drop-off/ pick-up times, prioritising where taxis can drop off pupils in relation to distance from school entrance according to pupil mobility needs
- Transport procurement – e.g. vehicle specification, sourcing vehicles locally
- Personal development of pupils – independent mobility/ travel, raising pupils' expectations. Schools can target pupils they feel could be independent travellers in some way if given appropriate skills training
- Health benefits, promoting physical activity messages where appropriate, linking into the National Healthy Schools Award/Health Promoting Schools, starting up health & fitness weeks
- Involvement in Walk to School & Bike Week campaigns
- Cycle storage for school bikes, including specially adapted bikes for skills training as well as staff and visitor bikes
- Using the development of a travel plan as a chance for further integration into school system and opportunities for enhanced inclusion of pupils
- Marshalling school transport, helping address congestion at the school gate
- Safety along route to school – e.g. dropped kerbs, railings, signage, lighting, pavement widths etc
- Parental attitude – e.g. looking at healthy lifestyles, physical activity, developing life skills for greater independence etc
- Relationship with public transport providers, and attitudes of bus companies; better accessibility on buses
- Staggered starts – e.g. working in partnership with neighbouring schools
- Better access to site – e.g. separate entrances for pedestrians, separating vehicle traffic away from pedestrians on school site etc
- Park & Walk (for those who can)
- Explore opportunities to car share, if appropriate
- Promotion of sustainable travel as a wider issue, linking in with Eco-Schools Award and Sustainable Schools, to pupils, parents, staff and visitors through notice boards and newsletters
- Cycle training, including the use of specially adapted bikes
- Extended school day – transport arrangements
- Developing playground markings for road safety skill training, linking into the curriculum
- In-school mobility training, encouraging independent travel on public transport

- Use of pedometers in the playground to measure physical activity
- Increase staff walking, cycling, travelling by bus and car sharing

Examples of appropriate objectives and targets

Example 1:

Objective

We want to make public transport more easily accessible for our pupils

SMART Target

Within 1 year of adoption of the plan we will have 5 pupils (10% of total) travelling to school using public transport

Linked actions in Action Plan:

- Liaise with Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to move bus stops
- Liaise with PTA re. timetables
- Liaise with bus operators re. driver training
- Identify pupils/ journeys that would be suitable
- Provide time table information to parents
- Organise event to inform parents
- Personal journey planning for pupils

Example 2:

Objective

To improve accessibility to the school site for pupils and vehicles

SMART Target

To reduce the number of reported incidents in accessing school from x to y by X e.g. 10 per term down to 5 by June 2007

Example 3:

To reduce the number of staff travelling in single occupancy vehicles

SMART Target

Increase the proportion of staff walking to school to 21% by 2006

As with any other school travel plan, targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed (SMART) can be easily identified and specified within a SEN school travel plan.

For example:

- To reduce the number of cars by 2% by September 2006. It is hoped to move this towards taxi sharing. (The Elms School Travel Plan, Knowsley)
- Increase the proportion of pupils travelling independently from 5.5% in 2004 to 12.9% by 2006. (Barrs Court School, Hereford)

Whilst setting significant modal shift targets (i.e. increasing walking, cycling, bus use levels and reducing car/ taxi use) may not be possible everywhere, this should still be considered as there may be some opportunity. For example, when considering whether walking and cycling is an option for some pupils, think about whether this would be with an escort, with training, are there suitable walking/ cycling routes to the school and is a walking bus

possible? Encouraging pupils onto a local bus needs to involve considering accessibility issues and perhaps driver training.

SMART targets can also be set for non-modal shift objectives

For example:

- To complete all playground planning and markings by mid autumn term 2007 (Lindon Bennet School, London Borough of Hounslow)
- To establish a cycle shelter in the school car park by end of spring term 2007 (Lindon Bennet School, London Borough of Hounslow)
- 90% of students at KS4 will complete the Road safety aspects of ASDAN Youth Award/ Towards Independence by end of summer term 2005 (Fosse Way School, Radstock)

Support for Special Schools in England

SEN schools, like mainstream schools, come under the Departments of Transport and Education & Skills, 'Travelling to School Initiative'. This initiative aims to encourage school communities to choose a more sustainable journey to school (i.e. walking, cycling, public transport), through developing a 'school travel plan'. These plans show how a school will promote and achieve the changes needed, set out responsibilities and local targets.

School travel advisers working in every local authority in England can provide expert support for schools to develop school travel plans, and there is a specific capital grant for schools who develop a travel plan that fulfils the national criteria.

SEN schools are eligible for both this support by school travel advisers, and for the capital grant (£5k plus £5 per pupil per Special School) and as such the travel plans produced by SEN schools must meet the national standard. Your School Travel Adviser can provide details of this national standard (Sustrans Schools Information Service can tell you who that person is) and you can also download the DfES/ DfT Quality Assurance Advice Note from the SRS website. There is one criteria where it is up to the discretion of the school to decide if it is an appropriate exercise to be undertaken – that is the pupil travel survey question 'how would you prefer to travel to school?' Your School Travel Adviser will have further details.

Support for Special Schools in Scotland

A number of the School Travel Co-ordinators are working with SEN schools to help them to write travel plans. In addition, where travel plans are being developed by schools with support bases for pupils with additional support needs, appropriate targets and actions are included for these pupils. You should contact your local authority School Travel Co-ordinator to find out what level of support they can offer you (again the Sustrans Scottish SRS team can tell you who that person is).

Examples of work that is going on with Special Schools in Scotland includes:

- Isobel Mair, Clarkston, East Renfrewshire. Since the school is keen to incorporate physical activity into the curriculum as many pupils do not get enough exercise, the STC has supplied the school with walking resources, Walk to School Week resources, maps of the local area, snap-wraps, stickers, reflective tabards and pedometers. Whilst the school does not take part in Walk to School Week in the same sense as other schools, it uses the resources for walking in the community projects where the pupils plot routes on maps, put on reflective clothing and walk around the local neighbourhoods with their teachers counting steps and filling in forms etc.

The school has also set up two walking buses, where the school bus drops a small number of their more able bodied pupils at a car park a few hundred metres from the school. Teachers from the school meet the pupils there and escort them to school.

- Campsie View School, Kirkintilloch, East Dunbartonshire Council. The school provides education for children with severe and complex disabilities. The Head Teacher is keen on ensuring that these children are included in all initiatives as the school is part of the community. All children are required to travel by bus or taxi, with escorts. In this context the School Travel Plan concentrated on staff travel and generally improving awareness of travel and environmental issues amongst staff and pupils. The STP will also input into the Eco-School and Health Promoting School programmes.

Hopefully the above points demonstrate how Special Schools have a lot to gain from getting involved in a school travel plan, and provides some food for thought on what could be tackled and achieved through this process. From both sides, approaching a travel plan with an open mind and an awareness of the opportunities to build on what the school is already doing (or would like to do) is probably the best starting point.

This article has been drawn from delegate and speaker contributions at the North East of England's Regional Event - Engaging Special Schools in Travel Planning, held on 24th January, UK LAST Forum, School Travel Co-ordinators in Scotland and Sustrans colleagues. Many thanks!

Please contact the SRS Information Service if you would like to make any comments, amendments or contributions to the issues discussed here. This article does not represent 'the final word' on SEN schools and travel planning, indeed is meant as an introductory guide to this area. As more Special Schools become involved with travel planning, this article will be improved and expanded upon.

Rhian Barnes
Senior Project Officer
Sustrans

Contact Sustrans Safe Routes to Schools on 0117 915 0100 or visit www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk