

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Melbourne—Thursday 24 August 2023

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

John Elliott, Head of Marketing and Program Delivery, and

Brooke O’Donnell, General Manager, Education and Information, Road Safety Education.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard and broadcasted live on the Parliament website.

All evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website. I remind Members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, just to minimise interference.

Brooke and John, if you would like to make an opening statement for a couple of minutes or talk to your submission or anything extra you would like to add today, we will start with that. Then some of the Committee members will ask you questions, just to unpick a little bit more of your submission.

I will just quickly introduce the Committee members for you as well. I am Alison, the Chair, the Member for Bellarine. We have Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan; Jess Wilson, Member for Kew; John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley; Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit; and Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale. Kim O'Keeffe is our Deputy Chair, Member for Shepparton.

Brooke or John, I will hand over to one of you or both of you to maybe just have some opening remarks.

John ELLIOTT: Sure, I might just quickly start off. My name is John Elliott. I am the Head of Marketing and Program Delivery for Road Safety Education. I am joining you today from Wangal country in Sydney. Joining me also is Brooke, who is our General Manager of Education and Information. I thought I would give a quick overview of who we are and what our organisation is. RSE, which is Road Safety Education, is a not-for-profit organisation, and we have been a provider of the RYDA program for over 20 years. We exist to save lives, and our mission of making our roads a safer place is achieved by empowering and motivating young people through world-class education. The program we provide is evidence based, it is best practice and it is a whole-of-school approach, and throughout Australia now about 20% of Australian schools participate in that, although that varies from state to state.

We will talk more about the whole-school approach shortly, but what RYDA consists of is two elements. There is the workshop, which is a full-day workshop which is engaging and interactive. Then pre and post that workshop we have a whole range of activities. There are 50 different learning tools that teachers can use, including an assessed module within our learning management system. In any given year about 45,000 students from 650 schools across Australia and New Zealand take part in RYDA. About 50% of those are from regional and remote areas, and 50% are from major cities. To date, three-quarters of a million people have done our program. I think just over 20,000 are in Victoria. That is us in a nutshell. The program is guided by an expert advisory council made up of leading academics and practitioners from around the world. Brooke, did you want to add anything to that?

Brooke O'DONNELL: No, I think you pretty much have us covered.

John ELLIOTT: Thanks, Brooke.

The CHAIR: Well done, John. Good job. We might head to some questions, just to unpick a little bit of your submission, if that is okay. I might start with Deputy Chair Kim O'Keeffe.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good morning. Welcome and thank you so much for your submission and joining us today. I am based in Shepparton, so my question is a bit around regional and rural: what are the different road safety needs of rural and regional students and how do you tailor your programs for them?

John ELLIOTT: Yes, I might kick off with this: regional and remote young drivers are far more at risk of dying on our roads, and you would probably know that as well. But despite making up less than 20% of the population in Victoria, they make up two-thirds of fatalities. A key part of that is, when you look at the sorts of roads that people die on, 60% of drivers and passengers who die on Victorian roads die on roads where the

posted speed limit is 100 kilometres an hour or more, and you get more of those and more access to those in regional areas than you do in metropolitan areas. So people are driving faster, they are driving longer and they are more susceptible to fatigue. Often the roads they are driving on are in not as good condition. There are a whole lot of factors that go into what makes regional and remote drivers more at risk. There are also elements such as the chances of being caught; if you undertake risky behaviour on the road, one of the disincentives for that is a combination of the application of the penalties. So if the risk is losing your licence or a big fine, that is one element, but so is the chance of getting caught. And the chance of getting caught doing the wrong thing in regional areas is lower than in metropolitan areas, because you are less likely to get breath-tested, there are less speed cameras, those sorts of things, and teenagers respond to those short-term tangible consequences in influencing behavioural change.

On top of that, youth in regional areas have fewer access points to plan B options—they do not have access to Uber, they do not have access to public transport, they cannot just walk home, all of those sorts of things that kids in metropolitan areas have. All of that brings up this really important element of making sure that our educational opportunities are there for regional kids. The two elements to that are—the first is being there: you have actually got to make sure that the programs that you operate are accessible and can run in regional centres and are not focused on just bringing kids into the centre of Melbourne, which only makes it accessible to students in that immediate metropolitan area. So a replicable program, like RYDA, where we do operate in regional centres, is really important. Then the other part is tailoring those messages within the program to make sure that some of the challenges that regional students face are included within those. That includes content around overtaking trucks or driving around trucks at high speeds, the influence of animals on the road, all those sorts of things that can be tailored for those local audiences. Brooke, did you want to add anything more to that?

Brooke O'DONNELL: I will, actually. Just with the tailoring of the program, what I would say is that we actually try and tailor it to every student, so we let the students lead the conversation where we can. It starts with some pre-discovery work with the schools to find out not only where they are and what their experience is and what their concerns are and what they face on a daily basis, but where they are with their education, how that is being included in the curriculum and how we dovetail into that. We also have some pre-discovery work for the students, where they can take on some assignments so that they can bring them along and lead the conversations, and our facilitators are trained to let that lead. Then so much of it is peer-on-peer within the program, that they are discussing their issues. You know, our program has even got a little personality quiz that is based on just them: what is their personality? How do they respond to things? So as much as we can, we tailor it to the individual, but it is very flexible. We also use local facilitators, so they are people who know those roads and know the issues. We train them up fully with the program and the content is set, but we use local facilitators, police and other members of the community, including youth workers.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you for that. That is great information. Anthony, I might head to you next.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing and for your submission. I have actually had the privilege of being briefed before by John about the great work of Road Safety Education, so thanks for contributing to the Inquiry. My question is around how we create a better road safety culture for young people. In that context your submission highlights just how vulnerable young people are on the roads. Despite making up only 11% of the population, young people make up 20% of all driver and passenger fatalities and 22% of serious injuries, which have increased after the COVID period. So my question is: what is your advice to government around how best to embed programs such as yours, how can they be better embedded into schools and into the curriculum and at what age should young people start learning about road safety behaviour to start being aware of that culture from an early age?

Brooke O'DONNELL: I will jump in and say that the experts tell us that they do start learning road safety from about the age of two from the back seat watching their parents drive; they are picking up everything—so as soon as we can get in and start managing some of that messaging, helping parents with modelling good behaviour in the car. But as far as what we can do through schools, I think as soon as possible that should become part of the school culture. We give them a lot of tools with RYDA, but those tools are not that useful to them—it is not that they are not that useful, but they are less useful to them—if they go back and into an environment where that culture of good road choices is not supported. So I think kind of creating a culture where it is just the done thing to have empathy on the roads, to see the roads as a shared space and to approach them in a positive way with some good decision-making is a really good start.

John ELLIOTT: Just on that, when teachers attend the programs with their students, they learn as well. Something like 84% of teachers indicate that they learn something themselves about road safety by just attending, sitting in on the classes with their students. That also then helps empower them to be more confident in building road safety messaging into other curriculum areas. There is no teacher training program in the country that has a big focus on road safety education. Even PDHPE teachers do not do a module on how to teach road safety within their teacher training program. Teachers learning with the students also helps them be more confident in teaching and building it into the classroom later on.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, John and Brooke. Jess, we might head to you.

Jess WILSON: Thanks so much, Chair. Thank you for your time today. I was interested that in the submission you make the point that one-off training or courses are not overly helpful. I know that when I was young, my parents made me go to a defensive driving course. It was great for the 3 hours that I was there, but it was not an ongoing program. How important do you think it is that this is built into, I suppose, what you call that whole-of-school approach, and how can the State Government better support these sorts of programs being rolled out right across the community?

Brooke O'DONNELL: I think it is critical. Just on defensive driving, that is a skills-based thing. Again, if you are not practising and using those skills—and defensive driving teaches you things that you will only need in an emergency—then they do atrophy, and road safety learning is similar. It is not a one-day thing; it is not a one-and-done thing, it relies on the development of skills like social resilience, deep thinking, empathy, the ability to assess your own risk profile. That is something that is not really taught, it is cultivated, and it is cultivated across time, and it needs to happen in their school environment and back in their homes and be supported. But as John said, teachers are not armed to do this on their own, so I think it needs to be a partnership. We see so many teachers come into our program and they have got their own road safety bias. Not only do they not understand necessarily the specialty teaching subject of road safety, but they come with their own bias. So I think it should be done in partnership with an expert organisation and built into the curriculum. You know, if there is a space for road safety within that curriculum, road safety can be used as supporting an authentic context to learning. So learning about physics—let us learn about physics with the backdrop of how that impacts a speeding car. So building road safety into topics throughout the curriculum and having that expectation that it will be built in throughout the school I think is a positive start to creating that cultural shift.

John ELLIOTT: And one more element is ensuring that all best practice road safety programs—and best practice being important because, you know, there are some programs that are not necessarily up-to-date with best thinking in terms of what works and what does not work in road safety—have equity of access to government funding to help offset the cost of those, because there are two correlations. One is that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be victims of road trauma, but secondly, the higher the cost to participate in programs, the less likely kids from socio-economic backgrounds are to actually participate. So we need that equity-of-access model to make sure that people who need the education the most have access to it.

Brooke O'DONNELL: I would just add that school is the last opportunity that we get to speak to them with their peers. We are not always educating them as drivers, we are also educating them as passengers who are highly influential in that car. So school in peer groups is the last and best kind of fleeting opportunity to capture them in that environment and have those discussions.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you. Thanks so much, John and Brooke. Wayne, I will head to you.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for being here today and your submission. One thing I would like to talk about today is road safety culture. We all see it on our roads every day where you see a bit of road rage and whatever. So what is the most effective way to create a culture of respectful road safety behaviour among young people?

The CHAIR: Wayne, thanks for that question. I am just going to build on that question as well a little bit about maybe what you have noticed through COVID. Have we seen a change in our young people in their behaviours as well?

John ELLIOTT: Brooke, did you want to start that or should I?

Brooke O'DONNELL: I am happy either way. Do you want to kick off?

John ELLIOTT: Look, I think one of the things we have noticed—a lot of the people we engage with are still on their learners—is that learners are the safest drivers on the road across the whole nation, probably across the whole world, because they have that second set of eyes; they have got parents there with them and they are actively learning. And often by the time they get onto their Ps and they are driving solo it is after we have engaged with those students. So we do not necessarily see those behaviours firsthand in our classroom environments within RYDA. That said, the key element in changing that culture is, as Brooke has mentioned, building up those attributes such as empathy towards and understanding towards other road users and understanding how your own moods and mind states can impact your driving decisions. So if you are already in a heightened state of anger or stress or anything, understanding how that might impact on decisions that you make on the road is really important. Brooke, did you want to just add on—

Brooke O'DONNELL: I will just add: young people are the leaders of cultural shift. They have been across history the leaders of cultural shift. We are at a time at the moment where they are making real strides at cultural shift in a number of areas: equity and acceptance and diversity and environment and everything. They are making so many changes. I think we let them lead the cultural shift, and if we can get in and get them the education and get them thinking—we have got a whole session which is built around the Road Safety Week theme of Drive SOS, Drive So Others Survive, and we talk all about experiencing the road from another road user's point of view. What does it feel like to be a heavy vehicle rider? What does it feel like to be a cyclist? Getting in and feeling it from their point of view—young people have empathy. They really are culture shifters. So I think it is really important that we let them lead us and then give them the tools to do that.

John ELLIOTT: And just one final note: it is also important while they are learning that they experience positive behaviour from other road users. We did a survey recently of learner drivers who are taking part in our program, and 86% had identified that they had experienced some form of bullying on the road—tailgating, aggressive overtaking, flashing lights and everything. Obviously that then has an impact on the way they behave on the road. They feel nervous, they feel unsafe, they feel pressured—all of those sorts of things. However, also, 90% have experienced positive behaviour from other road users—you know, people giving way, all those sorts of lovely things that we know we should do when we see an L-plate on a car. That has the exact opposite impact and has a really positive impact. Students can focus on their driving. They feel comfortable, they feel safe, they feel empowered—all those sorts of things. So I think there is a culture that we need to maintain, that is, to understand how important it is in terms of role modelling, not just of parents when they are behind the wheel with novice drivers but of all drivers—setting the standard that we expect future novice drivers to be adhering to.

Brooke O'DONNELL: And just to answer your question, Alison, if we were talking about the things that we have noticed since COVID, it has definitely created an anxiety in young people, and that is felt on the road as well. It has caused a little bit of an arrested development in the development of those social skills, which we wait for years to come for young drivers because they have gone through this from all their stages of learning to develop their social skills. Things like sharing and social resilience and those things have had a bit of an arrested development, so we definitely need to give them more boosters on that. There is a real appetite from teachers for face-to-face learning. We were going towards online, then we had to do online. Now they really want face-to-face, experiential, hands-on learning. There has been a real shift to that that we have seen.

The CHAIR: Yes. I think we could have asked a whole lot more questions, and it has been a really fascinating conversation today. I really appreciate it. You have given us a different perspective, which we have not heard in the hearings, so I really appreciate that. It is wonderful. I am sorry we have run out of time to keep going, though. But like I said, if there is extra information you would like to share with us, please do not hesitate to do that. And thank you again for your time today.

Brooke O'DONNELL: Thank you for all your time.

John ELLIOTT: Thank you for the opportunity to share such an important topic with you.

The CHAIR: Absolutely it is, John. Yes, thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.