

Beating the school bus bullies



More than a million young people travel by bus to and from school, costing local authorities (and tax payers) about £1.5 billion a year. Although school transport has an exceptionally good safety record, there is growing concern from many bus operators about vandalism to vehicles and abuse of staff. Misbehaviour and bullying on school buses have also led directly to several children's deaths in recent years. Some routes are so blighted that authorities struggle to get bus operators willing to operate services, or at least not without a significant cost premium. Major bus operators typically report vehicle damage of more than £70,000 annually and the estimated total cost nationally runs into tens of millions.

The Welsh Assembly Government has recently funded a project in North Wales to improve behaviour and safety on school transport, led by Denbighshire County Council and branded as Zoom. Measures included CCTV, improved identification of pupils, supervision on buses and a Theatre in Education production. However, these did not focus on the small number of persistent and higher-level offenders who have already been warned about their behaviour on transport or, in some cases, been banned from transport altogether.

The answer for this group was to combine the case study and practice sentencing approaches used by Magistrates in the Community with the Howard League's Crime and Citizenship programme (which ran in secondary schools during the late 1990s); and to create an intensive one-day workshop for teenagers, designed specifically to tackle bullying, vandalism, misbehaviour and violence on school transport.

Our workshop included a range of tasks and formats to see which worked best, including:

- Group rules – introducing the concept of rules and why they are important for safety. The group had to agree their own rules for the day.

- Brainstorming school transport problems and concerns to find out what was really going on on the school journey, and who they thought was responsible for their safety.
- A multiple-choice quiz about youth crime and transport, exploring the costs of crime, criminal responsibility, the impact of criminal records and specific questions about school buses.
- Moral dilemmas – an active session where individuals had to decide whether they agreed or disagreed with statements by moving to one side of the room or the other, and whether they could be persuaded back by their peers to change their opinion and move across the line. For example: finding valuables on a bus – would they keep them or return them?
- Scenario strips – in groups of 3 they were to discuss and rank a range of crime scenarios, including racism, theft, vandalism, and smoking, by importance and severity.
- Bullying – a session to explore what they thought bullying included and reflect on their own actions and behaviour.
- Three case studies – focusing on bullying, misbehaviour resulting in an accident and criminal damage to a bus. Working in 'benches' of three they discussed who was affected by the offence then decided what sentence they would give the perpetrator and why.
- The group then revisited these cases to discuss what alternative actions they and other people could have taken to avoid the situation escalating. The aim of this was to get them to think about who could intervene; how they could affect the outcomes; and strategies to resist peer pressure and avoid situations that may become dangerous.

THE WORKSHOP IN PRACTICE

We were invited by a secondary school on Anglesey to test the workshop. The group organised by the school comprised nine boys in years 7-10 – a very mixed ability group, eight of them bi-lingual. All had previously been warned (some repeatedly) about their behaviour on school transport. The school had planned to include one or two girls in the group, but then removed these from the group so that it was an all-male group. Three of us – one a Welsh speaker – led the group. No member of staff took part.

The group struggled to agree their rules for the day and defaulted to the suggested rules provided although there was some discussion and a couple of young people came up with other suggestions including a rule about enjoying the day. However, their rules were not always adhered to and we had to work hard to ensure a balance of contributions and keep reinforcing what they'd agreed. They were considerably keener to voice opinions than listen to each other at times!

The brainstorming session worked well. The group came up with a wide range of issues and started thinking about the fact that it was a joint responsibility to deal with problems on school transport.

and vandals

The session on moral dilemmas was the most popular. Although they were all very vocal, they did consider arguments for and against and made changes based on them. However, they struggled with the 'scenario strips' which required them to agree a ranking of the importance or seriousness of different crimes.

The group tackled the quiz with enthusiasm and competitive spirit. They were clearly interested and liked discussing the very concrete numbers and facts that related to age of criminal responsibility, youth crime as well as safety and costs.

The case studies were looked at in groups of three young people, with one of us working with each small group, and resulted in some good quality work and ideas. They were clearly engaged in the concept of who would be affected by crime/accidents/bullying etc. (We were keen that they recognised that costs of vehicle damage were not simply covered by insurance and that time out of service had significant impact on operators and transport users). They also came up with practical and realistic suggestions regarding sentencing for the cases and there was lively debate about what factors should be taken in account, particularly if the accident resulted in injury or death.

Everyone in the group gave positive feedback at the end of the day, and the debrief session was extremely useful to sum up the day and reinforce main points. The impact of a recent school bus crash in Cumbria together with the opportunity to discuss a case about a fatal accident in Wales that had resulted from misbehaviour was evident from the feedback. The broader discussions about youth crime also clearly hit home with them saying they were surprised young people as young as '10 years can go to court'.

Major bus operators typically report vehicle damage of more than £70,000 annually

The most striking thing they said they were taking from the day was the impact criminal damage on vehicles and vandalism had on operators, and the knock-on effect it had on others. Comments included that they'd been surprised at the 'costs of criminal damage' and that individual minor elements of vandalism such as cut seats could incur costs of £150+ per seat. These figures were clearly tangible and easily understood by the group – sufficiently large to provoke thought but not so abstract as millions or billions to be difficult to imagine.

Overall the day generated positive comments such as 'it was excellent'; 'learning new things' and 'it was very interesting'.

Sian Thornthwaite JP describes a school workshop to tackle the problem

WHERE NEXT

This was an experimental day, which we hoped could be used by authorities/operators (or perhaps MIC) to tackle specific issues around vandalism on buses and safety on school journeys. Overall:

- The mix of ages worked as there was a range of abilities and maturity even within the year groups. The number of participants worked well.
- The all-boy group worked in that there was certainly no shortage of willingness to comment and participate. However, we'd now like to see if reaction to the tasks included in the workshop and the dynamic would be different for girls or a mixed group.
- The young people were well aware of why they were in such a workshop, and future workshops could usefully be targeted as a group for those who have had a first warning for behaviour on buses, and prior to a second warning/ban.
- In a Welsh-medium school it was essential to have a fluent Welsh speaker to pick up any aside comments in Welsh quickly and respond to those.
- The location of the room needs to be away from the main school activities but not off site. Allowing them (and us) a morning/lunch break was critical.
- The group did not understand the importance of seatbelt wearing and we would propose in future workshops to include material such as a clip of the crash test impact of unsecured passengers and have prepared some large print pictures of the case studies or damage to buses to prompt more discussion about safety.
- Bullying is an issue that needs to be addressed within the day. Following comments throughout the morning we substituted a task to discuss bullying and how to recognise it. However, the group clearly did not see their own behaviour or language as possibly being bullying. We felt this was the area we didn't really tackle strongly enough and need to develop a session within the workshop that does this more effectively.

It was an exhausting, noisy, at times chaotic, and challenging day for us leading the group. However, a focused workshop based on facts and costs that are real and tangible, combined with a range of formats clearly has potential to address some of the misbehaviour and vandalism on school transport.

Sian Thornthwaite JP runs a specialist school transport consultancy. She has been a magistrate since 1998, a member of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP YO1 Feltham and was a volunteer on the Howard League's Crime and Citizenship project in London. For more information please contact info@school-transport.com.

We are grateful to the Welsh Assembly for funding this workshop and to the school staff and students. Thanks to CPT bus and coach operators who provided actual costs and examples to use. For more information about the Zoom project: <http://zoom-wales.com/>

Co-presenters were Laura Mowbray (Denbighshire County Council) and Catryn Yousefi (The Howard League).