



"BIKES IN SCHOOLS"

By Marya Hopman

ABOVE: ST MARY'S STUDENTS HAVING FUN ON THE NEW SCHOOL BIKES PROVIDED BY BIKE ON.

The Start of Bike On NZ

One of the first things recently returned Kiwi banker Paul McArdle noticed about New Zealand was how few children and woman biked.

From living in Amsterdam for 12 years and having read up on the latest research, Paul was well aware of the wide range of positive economic and social outcomes that result from having a high percentage of a country's population biking regularly. Combining this knowledge with requests from local parents for somewhere safe for their children to bike regularly, Paul and his wife Meg Frater formed Bike On NZ, a not-for-profit organization aimed at helping more New Zealanders to experience the "joy of biking".

One of their first initiatives, Bikes in Schools, aims to provide primary schools with a no-cost "turn-key" solution that gives all junior pupils regular and equal access to a bike and accompanying bike tracks within the school environment.

The Launch of Bikes in Schools at St Mary's Hastings

But for the idea to become a reality, Paul had to first find a pilot school (St Mary's School Hastings) and then spent the summer holidays organising the construction of;

- 1 X 550m Limestone Bike Track
- 1 X 'Kennet Brothers' Bike Skills Track
- 2 X Bike Pump Tracks
- 1 X Bike Storage Shed

Bike On NZ then funded 62 special BYK kids bikes, 225 helmets and a full time coach (NZ Rep rider Kerry-Anne Tockler) to spend six months at the school helping the children and teachers develop their bike skills.

The venture attracted substantial support from a wide range of organisations including The Kennett Brothers, BAND Design, Radius Medical, Bike Hawke's Bay, Sports HB, Tumu Timber, Neil Daykin and Team Coach. Paul and Meg are grateful for all their help.

The Bikes In Schools pilot program started at St Mary's on 2 February and within just three weeks the positive results were clear according to the school principal Liz Crowley.

"We've incorporated the biking into our physical education programme and the kids just can't wait to get out there. The teachers are also enjoying biking with the children," she says.

"We're seeing an increase in confidence, improved social interaction, more physical activity, and also more attention to safety and an increase in their awareness of what's around them when they're biking," said Liz.

Bikes in Schools was officially launched by the Prime Minister John Key on 19 February. The PM, against the advice of his advisors, decided he too would get on a bike and ride the 550m track with the students. The PM was clearly impressed with the whole initiative.

"We think it is a great idea. It's a great way of introducing kids to bikes and making sure every young New Zealander gets an opportunity to learn to ride a bike so it's a program we would like to see extended to other schools and it's certainly going to make sure we've got a fitter healthier, more engaged young people," said Mr

Key at the launch.

"It gives the kids a sense of purpose and obviously gives them a huge amount of skills and of course biking is great for their health".

Local Tuketuki MP Craig Foss echoed Mr Key's words; "Bikes in Schools is a fantastic and positive initiative to help get young people more active on a regular basis, which in turn will lead to a whole range of positive outcomes such as improved health and increased confidence."

Also attending the launch was double World BMX Champion Sarah Walker. Sarah, who was a big hit with the both the students and the public, rode all four tracks and also talked about the positive impact biking had on her as a child.

"When I started riding at school it ended up crossing over towards my school work. Because I was getting better at BMX, I started getting better at school because it just gave me a lot of confidence so I was happier and got better at everything really".

Endorsement from Sarah Ulmer and also BikeNZ

Paul and Meg were overjoyed to also receive the endorsement of Sarah Ulmer. "To have Sarah Ulmer's endorsement is just incredible," said Meg. "She is such an inspirational and positive role model for all New Zealanders, not just those who bike".

"Bikes in Schools is a fantastic concept! Providing wee ones a safe and fun introduction to cycling is a great way for them to learn how much fun they can have on a bike from a young age. Also learning skills at a young age (especially if they may not have the opportunity



SARAH WALKER RIDING THE NEW BIKE SKILLS TRACK



PRIME MINISTER JOHN KEY OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED BIKES IN SCHOOLS, AND EVEN HAD A RIDE AROUND THE NEW PURPOSE BUILT TRACKS



BMX WORLD CHAMPION SARAH WALKER RIDES AT THE OPENING OF THE FIRST BIKE ON SCHOOL - ST MARY'S IN HASTINGS

otherwise) is the perfect time - having the skills and familiarity with bikes as a youngster develops confidence that stays with them as they grow older. Bikes in Schools can only be a good thing for kids' enthusiasm for not only cycling but for exercise in general - which has to be a great thing!"

Bikes in Schools has formally partnered with BikeNZ who see the programme as a natural fit with their RideStrong Programme, which is dedicated to promoting a safe and enjoyable environment for all cyclists.

"One of RideStrong's core goals is to provide the opportunity for every Kiwi school kid to ride a bike safely and with confidence," says Kieran Turner, CEO of BikeNZ.

"Bikes in Schools helps to achieve this goal. Not only are children having fun and getting exercise, but through the Bike On NZ - RideStrong partnership they will also learn important safety skills that will make New Zealand's roads safer places for them to be."

Positive Impact Aready

By the end of the first term it is clear that Bikes in Schools is having a positive impact on the school. Teachers and Parents are reporting that the children are not just fitter but also more confident and this is spinning off into both the playground (eg better biking and swimming) and the classroom (eg increased confidence and concentration).

One of the most satisfying outcomes is that the children see biking as a truly fun activity that they want to do as often as possible. Every week, every child in every class takes part in Bikes in Schools.

The local District Health Board is very interested in the outcomes and has provided research funding to formally measure and monitor the results of the program at St Mary's and also Peterhead School which is to be the next local school to get "Bikes in Schools".

Rolling out Bikes in Schools Across NZ

The successful launch and subsequent media coverage has led to a large number of requests from across the country for Bike On to help extend the initiative into other schools. Paul is currently working with the first five of these schools in Auckland, Palmerston North, Flaxmere, Wellington and Christchurch.

One of these schools is in central Auckland, where local MP and keen cyclist Nikki Kaye is supporting Bikes in Schools, not just locally but also at a national level.

Paul believes that with Nikki's help and with the backing and endorsements from the likes of John Key, Sarah Ulmer, Sarah Walker, Craig Foss, Liz Crowley and Kieran Turner, Bikes in Schools will soon become a reality for a much larger number of NZ school children so that they too will be able to experience the many positive benefits that the students at St Mary's School are already receiving.

Paul is further encouraged by the PM's response to national media when questioned about possible funding for Bikes in Schools.

"Last year we announced we were putting about \$82m more in sport and into schools and this (Bikes in Schools) is the kind of thing that is applicable in that area," said John Key.

Additionally the program has received a lot of attention from health professionals who believe it should become part of the Government efforts to address New Zealand's worsening child obesity crisis as it fits perfectly with their stated policy of getting every child active everyday.

For more information:

For more information see: www.bikeon.co.nz or <http://bikesinschools.wordpress.com/>