

Seat Belt Use: Maple Valley High School Case Study

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Abstract

Seat belt use is an important aspect in the safety of newly licensed teen drivers. Yet, crash statistics suggest that belt use rates are well-below the desired 100 percent rate. Belts were used by only 73 percent of teen drivers in injury crashes on rural Cass county roads during recent years. Educating teens about belt use is seen as an important means of promoting seat belt use. This research offers empirical research that peer-to-peer and expert witness education are effective as combined in a campaign for this rural high school. The campaign did have some sustained benefits a month after completion although afternoon seat belt use rates were not as affected. Focus group and survey activities conducted during the project suggest that, in addition to education, parents are a key factor in teen belt use. This study initiates a concerted effort to quantify effects of seat belt interventions in rural North Dakota to better understand effectiveness of resource allocations. Additional research will be added to this compendium as opportunities are presented. The findings will be beneficial in understanding the effectiveness of seat belt education among North Dakota's rural teens, and can be considered by safety stakeholders in other rural states.

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Introduction

Seat belts are a primary vehicle safety device. Teen use of this safety equipment is a primary concern to traffic safety professionals. North Dakota enacted a primary seat belt law for teens under 18 years of age in 2004. Crash records and seat belt observation studies suggest teen compliance is well below the desired 100 percent. In coordination with the Safe Communities Coalition of the Red River Valley (SCCRRV) a case study of seat belt education for teens was undertaken at Maple Valley High School (MVHS) in Tower City, ND. Seat belt use by teen drivers in the rural areas of Cass County, where the school is located, was 73 percent in injury crashes between 2005 and 2007 (North Dakota Department of Transportation, 2008). Because local seat belt use information is not available, the crash data is offered here as a proxy for measuring this driver behavior.

The MVHS seat belt project was initiated by local traffic safety stakeholders including SCCRRV and the Cass County Sheriff's Department with the cooperation of school officials. A series of seat belt observations were conducted to assess effectiveness of educational activities launched by SCCRRV and the school's SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) Chapter during a one-month seat belt education project. Researchers offered expertise and neutrality in conducting seat belt observations. They were carried out on eight occasions to quantify project impacts as an effectiveness measure. In addition, a focus group and survey activities supplement information collected in the observation exercises.

Case Study

The case study research method was used to conduct this cooperative research project in a rural North Dakota high school. The research time line, activities, and assessment were designed around high school seat belt education events. The education campaign was designed to educate and encourage students to use seat belts. The activities were selected and scheduled by the school and SCCRRV. The research team met with SSCRV to establish its research activities and time line. The goals of the case study analysis were to assess the effectiveness of the campaign and to gain insight into teen seat belt use decisions.

The case study began before the MVHS event was initiated with pre-event seat belt observations. Initial seat belt observations were used to collect baseline use data prior to initiating the seat belt education campaign. The campaign was low-key at its start and was intensified during its month-long duration (Figure 1). In week one of the project, the SADD organization displayed posters to encourage their peers to buckle-up. The following week the school added daily school announcements of seat belt safety facts and reminders to students to use their seat belts while driving or riding in a car. Students were also asked to complete a seat belt pledge, stating that they would ALWAYS use their seat belts. These lower-key activities were intensified in the latter two weeks with heightened education and enforcement efforts.

Week three continued the increased level of seat belt-related activity in the school with a seat belt information booth. At the booth, a local seat belt expert visited with students and encouraged them to sign the seat belt pledge. During this week, law enforcement created a high-visibility day by stationing officers in and near the school parking lot. The SADD chapter also conducted its own seat belt observation study in the school parking lot during the week.

The campaign was wrapped up with a seat belt presentation by a local safety expert. The presentation included facts and stories to reinforce the seat belt messages that students had received during the month. The safety expert asked students to complete a short survey regarding seat belt use and perceptions following his presentation. Results for the observed seat belt use during the campaign are presented in the next section. The results of a student focus group and the safety expert’s survey follow. This seat belt campaign study may be useful in planning and assessing future teen seat belt initiatives.



Figure 1. Seat Belt Campaign Event Calendar

Seat Belt Observations

Seat belt observations were conducted by researchers on eight occasions to provide baseline, intermediate, post, and post-post measures for intervention and program effectiveness. All teenage drivers and passengers were observed entering and exiting the school parking lot. Arrivals to the parking lot were observed at three checkpoints. Observers were stationed at the east, west, and south access sites to the parking lot for the morning observations; and one observer was stationed at the south exit for the afternoon observations. The post-post

observations on Oct. 29 utilized one observer for both morning arrivals and afternoon departures. In each of the vehicle observations, all occupant genders were recorded and seat belt use was captured with the exception of two drivers. Thus, observation findings are considered very reliable in representing the population with a 99.4 percent observation success rate.

Overall seat belt use during the project was 76 percent (n=301). The belt use rate among drivers was 77 percent compared to 70 percent for passengers during the project life. While just over two-thirds, or 67 percent, of the occupants were buckled in the August baseline survey, use had increased to 78 percent in September. Seat belt use peaked during the September campaign and declined slightly to 77 percent in the post-post observation. Results suggest that, while there is some decline, a majority of the positive influence from education and enforcement visibility is maintained a month after the campaign.

A significant positive influence is found for the seat belt campaign, comparing driver seat belt use by month – with weak significance, using the 90th percentile ($\chi^2=5.1886$ $p<0.074$, n=237). Change in passenger use rates is not found to be significant. A strong positive correlation, however, is found between driver and passenger seat belt use (Corr=0.7424 $\alpha=0.001$, n=64).

Males are significantly lower in their seat belt use rates, averaging 71 percent over the project life compared to 81 percent for females ($\chi^2=4.5984$ $p<0.032$, n=301). Both groups did show higher propensity to use belts in intermediate, post, and post-post observations compared to the baseline August results where male use was 63 percent and female use was 72 percent. Additional detail for gender is included in the Appendix.

An interesting element was observed in the seat belt use considering the data collected before and after school. The morning numbers were consistently above the afternoon numbers, and the morning numbers had sustained gains even in the post-post survey while the afternoon use rates dropped in the final observation (Figure 2). The overall use rates during the project do vary significantly at the 95th percentile for morning and afternoon ($\chi^2=4.7254$ $p<0.0297$, n=301). Morning use in the baseline survey on Aug. 27 was 72 percent and rose to 85 percent in the post-post survey. The afternoon use in the baseline survey on Aug. 26 was 56 percent with a post-post use rate of 65 percent. The afternoon use rate was at 76 percent on Sept. 15. The end-of-school-day departures generally have a lower total occupancy than the arrivals, and this may be due to after-school activities for some of the students. Although the small number of observations associated with the afternoon values should be noted in discussing this observation element, it does offer a point for future research.

A final comparison was made of seat belt observations by vehicle type. A significant difference was found in comparing seat belt use of truck occupants to that of other vehicles that included cars, sport utility vehicles, and vans. Truck occupants were belted in 61 percent of the 46 observations compared to 78 percent of occupants in other cars ($\chi^2=6.5425$ $p<0.011$, n=301). A significant difference was not found based on the gender of truck occupants. Males and females were reported to be belted in for 60 percent and 62 percent of truck observations, respectively. A significant gender-based difference was found in the occupants of cars, with 73 percent of males reported to be using seat belts, compared to 84 percent of females ($\chi^2=4.2219$ $p<0.04$, n=301). As previous research has suggested, truck occupants have a lower propensity to use seat belts (McCartt and Northrup 2004, National Highway Safety Administration, 2008). The

results here also suggest that treating this group as high-risk is appropriate, regardless of gender.

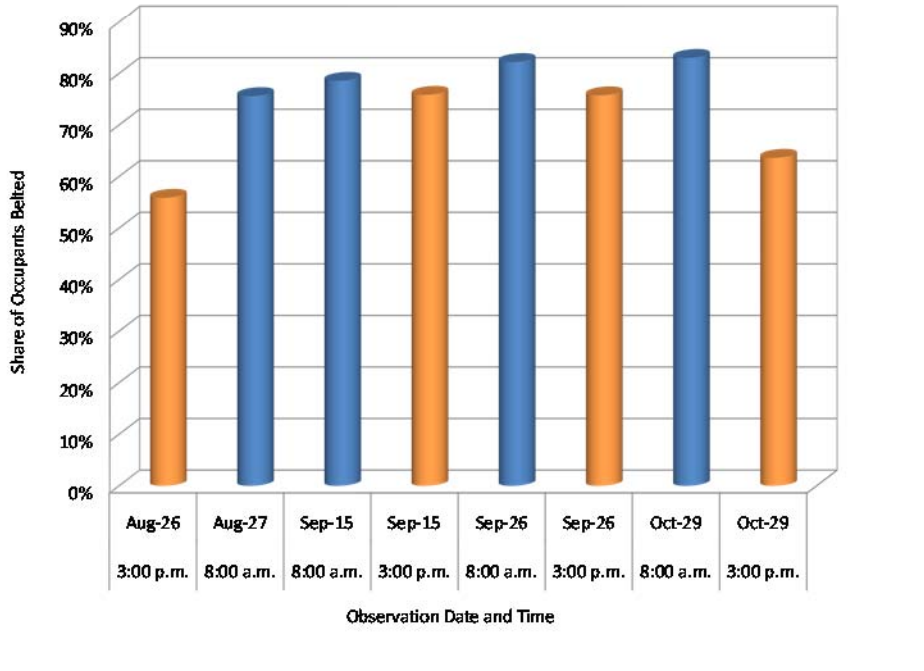


Figure 2. Seat Belt Use in Observation Surveys

Student-Collected Seat Belt Observation

The high school’s SADD members conducted their own seat belt observation Sept. 16 as a peer education activity. The students observed fellow students as they entered the parking lot for school that morning, noting gender and seat belt use. The students collected information for 58 drivers, reporting seat belt use at 91 percent. The seat belt use rate for drivers is higher than any recorded by the researchers. The researcher-conducted seat belt observation from the previous day showed a driver use rate of 79 percent. The student-collected seat belt use rate was 93 percent among 26 female drivers and 90 percent among 30 male drivers. In addition to drivers, 7 of 8 male passengers and 6 of 7 female passengers were reportedly wearing seat belts. Some concern in the students’ seat belt observation results is associated with the use rate and with the number of vehicles observed at 58. The four morning surveys conducted by researchers varied slightly, ranging from 34 to 41 vehicles, but never reached this level. It seems likely the student observer teams had multiple recordings for a single vehicle which weaken reliability as an evaluation measure. The student seat belt observation did, however, offer an excellent opportunity to engage students in the seat belt campaign. The potential does exist for bias with any self-survey, but the survey is useful in understanding the value of resources dedicated to seat belt education. Additional instruction on observation and/or enlisting teachers or other

adults as observers may provide opportunities to improve reliability if the school-originated observations are used for future seat belt education or enforcement program evaluation.

Focus Group

As a behavior measure, the observations provide an excellent indication of program success. As a supplement to understanding students' decisions to buckle-up – or not to buckle-up – a traffic safety focus group was conducted at Maple Valley High School on Sept. 19, 2008. Student participants were recruited by school officials and parental permission was obtained before the discussion. The focus group was facilitated by NDSU researchers. The group consisted of 11 students who ranged in age from 14 to 18 years. The one-hour discussion evolved primarily around seat belt use and impaired driving with an emphasis on message delivery methods. The following synopsis highlights the focus group discussion.

Seat Belts

The focus group participants indicated their use of seat belts to be either *all* or *most* of the time. When asked why they wear seat belts, the majority said because their parents require it and then it becomes habit. Contrary to the majority of students, one student noted that she does not wear a seat belt when riding/driving with her parents because her parents do not wear seat belts, however, she does wear one when riding with friends. Safety is a major motivator. Insurance costs were also mentioned. Approximately 30 percent of the students say their parents are more concerned with seat belt use if their own child is driving and 70 percent of parents are more concerned when their child rides with other friends.

When asked why they do not wear seat belts, responses varied from “seat belts are annoying” to peer pressure when their friends are not buckled up. Some students admitted not wearing a seat belt when just driving a short distance – five students live on farms and as one noted, “you drive 10 mph and there is nothing to crash into except a hay bale.” Two students in the group felt that males wear seat belts more frequently, while nine felt females wear them more frequently.

The group offered several opinions and suggestions on how to effectively motivate teens to wear seat belts:

- Rewards/gifts such as those given out during the current SADD seat belt campaign.
- Messages on traffic safety from students/peers/friends.
 - Have graphic information regarding people who have died in accidents because they did not use restraints.
 - Share personal experience - death of a friend/family member in an accident who was not wearing a seat belt would influence a teen to use restraints.
 - Invite speakers – while about 50 percent of the group did feel that humorous messages would have a greater impact, the other half felt speakers with a serious message would be more influential.
- Be an Example
 - Refuse to move the car until everyone is buckled.
 - Put a seat belt on yourself – if others see you wearing a restraint, they will tend to put one on.

The focus group's views regarding message delivery methods were:

- Radio advertising – a possible source, but not optimum because most teens will switch the station when a commercial is aired.
- Computer – emails or pop-ups are just deleted without reading. Facebook’s social networking site may work better.
- TV ads might be the best method.

Impaired Driving

Unanimously the group felt that drinking is a problem among North Dakota teens. The group estimated that about 35 percent to 40 percent of the student population – freshman through senior – were drinking and subsequently driving. The reasons given for socializing with alcohol were peer pressure and unconcerned parents. The general opinion was that involvement in extra-curricular activities did not reduce drinking. The focus group felt that students in sports were simply better at not getting caught. In addition, students said that alcohol-related sport suspensions are not uniformly enforced. For example, penalties are often not levied for the star players in situations where alcohol is present at student gatherings .

Students shared their thoughts on why they and their peers would choose not to drink and drive. The responses suggest that family support and personal values are primary influences. Reasons for choosing not to drink and drive include choosing to be non-conformists and not wanting to ruin their futures and preferring to work hard to achieve success. The students felt parents and home life have the greatest impact on their ability to make good, positive decisions about impaired driving.

The focus group offered several suggestions to deter teens from impaired driving. Most importantly, parents should know where their children are and with whom they are spending time. The students recognized that although students sometime resent the questions, parents must show active involvement in what their child is doing and be positive role models. Beyond parents, students think that more entertainment options such as school dances and games nights would be beneficial. A general need for change in teen mindset may also reduce impaired driving among teens. Right now, students feel bad when someone gets a minor in possession violation; their response is sympathy rather than condemnation in regard to the illegal behavior which precedes the impaired driving. Students also suggested the traditional means of deterring impaired driving with more enforcement – law/parent/school – and stronger penalties in terms of higher fines and longer suspensions.

The final topic in the deterrent discussion was education – including peers, parents, communities, and experts. The group supported ramping up awareness while students are young so they do not start drinking and driving. The Reality Checklist – a SADD component – was mentioned where visits were made to fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students, so the message can get out before the students reach high school. The group also recommended asking parents to join in an educational component with their children – teens as well as young students. It was also mentioned that teachers talk to parents during parent/teacher conferences. A positive message prior to events, such as concerts where there is a captive audience of parents as well as students, may also be effective. This group noted that they had an information evening for parents related to drinking and very few parents attended. However, there was a large turnout for the ‘meth’ meeting leaving the impression that parents felt impaired driving was not as important an issue.

Seat Belt Survey

In addition to the small group gathered for the focus group component, perceptions and actions of the larger school population were gathered in a one-page seat belt survey. The seat belt expert, Dan Schoonhoven – a member of the SCCRRV – asked the group to complete a short survey following his presentation. Schoonhoven is a firefighter with the city of Moorhead, MN, and Injury Prevention Instructor with MeritCare Trauma Services in Fargo, ND. He is also highly recognized for his work to build teenager seat belt awareness and to educate audiences on the importance of seat belt use among vehicle drivers and passengers. He uses real-life examples and experiences as a firefighter being called to vehicle crash scenes to explain and connect with teenagers on the topic of seat belt safety. His presentations include crash statistics and photo examples of vehicle crashes in which the drivers and/or passengers of the vehicles did not use seat belts. He also brings actual crash vehicle parts such as a damaged steering wheel to his presentations and uses it to explain how physical force from a low-speed crash can be just as dangerous as a high speed crash. He dispels many of the myths and reasons why people do not wear seatbelts with fatal crash statistics and real-life experiences as a firefighter. The presentation and survey were conducted as a final high-profile event in the seat belt project. The questionnaire included seven questions related to seat belt use and crashes, along with basic demographic information.

A total of 125 surveys were collected from the group. The responses included 117 students – 31 in the seventh and eighth grades, 19 freshman, 27 sophomores, 17 juniors, 23 seniors – and 8 teachers. Females outnumbered males with 64 and 53 responding, respectively. About half of the students have been involved in a crash as a vehicle driver or occupant, including 46 percent of the male respondents and 54 percent of female respondents.

An interesting difference is noted in crash rate among the grade levels. In the 10th grade 37 percent of students answered yes and 63 percent answered no to crash involvement. For the 12th grade however, the reverse was true; 62 percent of students report they have been involved in a crash, compared to 38 percent who have not. Although this question has limited use in extrapolating to the larger population, it provides insight for the unreported crash factor in teen driving. It suggests that in understanding risk, crash involvement is more rather than less likely for rural teens. A significant difference in seat belt use was not found in comparing male and female crash rates or their seat belt use rates during these crashes.

Table 1. Crash Involvement

Group	Yes	%	No	%	Total
7th	8	57%	6	43%	14
8th	8	47%	9	53%	17
9th	11	58%	8	42%	19
10th	10	37%	17	63%	27
11th	8	47%	9	53%	17
12th	13	62%	8	38%	21
Teachers	4	50%	4	50%	8
Overall	62	50%	61	50%	123

If the student had been involved in a crash, a series of follow-up questions were asked about seat belt use, injury, and fire/deep water factors. A majority of students involved in vehicle crashes – 88 percent of the 61 respondents – reported they were wearing a seat belt at the time of the crash. To the question regarding injuries in crashes, 9 said yes and 50 said no injuries occurred to any of the occupants. In crashes where students reported to be wearing seat belt, only 1 in 7 crashes resulted in injury compared to 1 in 3 where students reported they were not belted. Only one individual reported that the vehicle either started on fire or went into deep water. Thus, foregoing seat belt use to reduce the risk associated with fire or drowning seems rather implausible.

Students were also asked about their own seat belt habits, as well as their parents. Only 25 percent report the desired 100 percent ‘family’ use rate for seat belts. It is positive that a large majority of students reported high seat belt use rates – between 75 percent and 100 percent of the time (Table 2). Only 12 percent of the students wear seat belts 50 percent of the time, followed by 3 percent with a 25 percent usage. No students reported never wearing seat belts. Difference in seat belt use by grade level was analyzed, but the differences were not found to be statistically significant (Table 2).

Table 2. Seat Belt Use by Grade

Grade	Share of Time Seat Belts Are Used										Total
	0%		25%		50%		75%		100%		
7th	0	0%	0	0%	2	14%	4	29%	8	57%	14
8th	0	0%	0	0%	3	18%	5	29%	9	53%	17
9th	0	0%	1	5%	1	5%	8	42%	9	47%	19
10th	0	0%	0	0%	3	12%	10	38%	13	50%	26
11th	0	0%	0	0%	3	18%	3	18%	11	64%	17
12th	0	0%	2	9%	2	9%	7	32%	11	50%	22
Overall	0	0%	3	3%	14	12%	37	32%	61	53%	115

The influence of parents on their teens’ traffic safety decisions is an important one as indicated by the focus group and other studies (Simons-Morton 2008). This premise is evidenced in the positive correlation between student seat belt use and parent seat belt use. With respect to parental seat belt use, the students reported that 85 percent of mothers have a high seat belt use rate (at least 75 percent of the time). Only 62 percent of fathers are reported to have high seat belt use rates (Table 3). More than half of the mothers are reported to use their belts all the time, compared to just one in three of the fathers. Students reported that 2 percent of their mothers and 5 percent of their fathers never wear their seat belts.

The student self-reported high seat belt use rate is significantly related to high rates of seat belt use by mother ($\chi^2=31.4809$ $p<0.001$, $n=117$) and father ($\chi^2=16.6986$ $p<0.001$, $n=117$). As would be expected, a significant relationship is also found between the high-use rates of the parents ($\chi^2=24.8313$ $p<0.001$, $n=117$). Among the use rates given by students, in the 21 observations where mother’s use rate was below 75 percent only two fathers have a high-use rate. Mothers’ use rate is high in 61 percent of the cases, however, where the father’s rate is not. A high-use rate is reported for both parents in 56 percent of the cases ($\chi^2=24.8313$ $p<0.001$, $n=117$). In cases where the teen self-reported high-use, 91 percent had at least one parent with a high-use

rate and 65 percent reported both parents to be high-users. Only 2 of the 15 students who reported seat belt use below 75 percent reported that both parents were high-users. These lower-use students reported that parents were also low users of seat belts in 53 percent of the cases.

Table 3. Parent Seat Belt Use

How often do you wear your seat belt ?	Mother	Father
	n=116	n=111
100% of time (=high use rate)	53%	35%
75% of time (=high use rate)	32%	27%
50%, 25% or 0% of time	15%	38%

A portion of the survey was developed to further understand if students felt comfortable asking occupants of their vehicles to buckle up. When asked if they made others in the vehicle ‘buckle up for the ride,’ the majority of students responded yes – 80 percent. Nevertheless, this leaves 20 percent of students unwilling to make the request to ensure all occupants are restrained.

The survey further attempted to identify the reasons behind those students who do not wear seat belts 100 percent of the time (Table 4). Students could select as many reasons as applied. The most frequently reported reason – at 31 percent – is forgetting to buckle. Many teens, 18 percent, indicate they believe seat belts are unnecessary on short trips. Other reasons included seat belt discomfort, too many people in the vehicle, and just not wanting to wear the seat belt. Riding in the back seat and peer pressure are the least-reported reasons for not using restraints. ‘Other’ was chosen as a reason on 26 surveys, but no additional information was provided to explain this response.

Table 4. Reasons for NOT Wearing a Seat Belt

When you do NOT wear a seat belt, what is your reason?	Frequency	%
I forget	57	31%
It’s only a short trip	31	18%
Other	26	14%
Too many people in the car (not enough seat belts)	20	11%
It’s uncomfortable	20	11%
I just don’t want to	19	10%
I ride in the back seat	6	3%
I’m worried what my friends think	6	3%
Total Reported Reasons	185	

Students were asked their opinion of a mandatory seat belt law in North Dakota. Support exceeds non-support to a large degree as shown in Figure 3. Students in seventh and eighth grades have the greatest support ($\chi^2=5.7055$ $p<0.017$, $n=116$). The overall approval rate for these junior high students was 94 percent compared to 73 percent for the high school, including grades 9 through Support for a mandatory seat belt law in North Dakota does not vary significantly from grade to grade in the upper grades, but is less than the support found among junior high students.

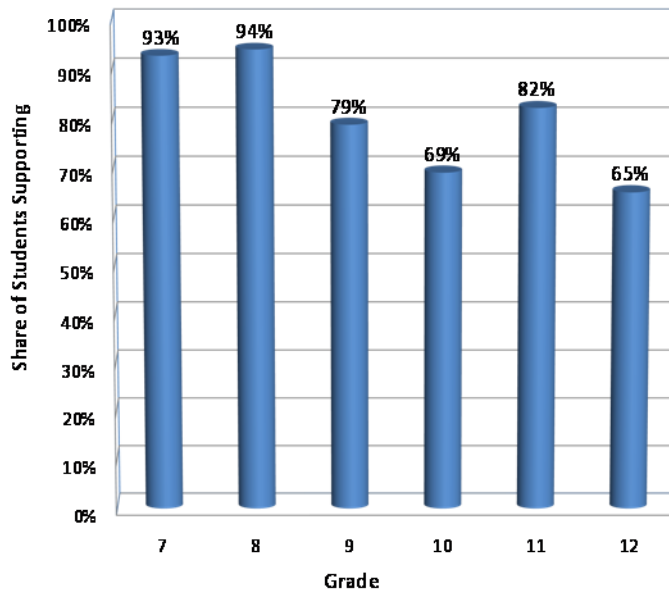


Figure 3. Support for Mandatory Seat Belt Use by Grade

A significant difference was found for a mandatory seat belt law considering gender ($\chi^2=31.4809$ $p<0.001$, $n=117$). An additional comparison between gender views on a mandatory seat belt law indicates that 91 percent of females favor the law compared to only 63 percent of males. Gender may play a role in explaining the higher level of junior high support since females outnumber males by a ratio of 1.8 compared to 1.1 in the high school. Figure 4 illustrates that gender is a factor in these differences, but does not fully explain the differences.

A final section in the seat belt survey invited student comments. Overall, the responses were positive. The presentation was viewed as informative, and several students indicated it had convinced them to use their seat belts. For example, *“It changed my mind about seat belt use;”* *“I really think this inspired me to wear my seat belt;”* *“It made me realize how bad little crashes can be, even when you're not going fast.”* One comment for enhancing impact was *“I believe that ...more pictures of the results of accidents where the person is not wearing a seat belt, it might send the message out even further.”*

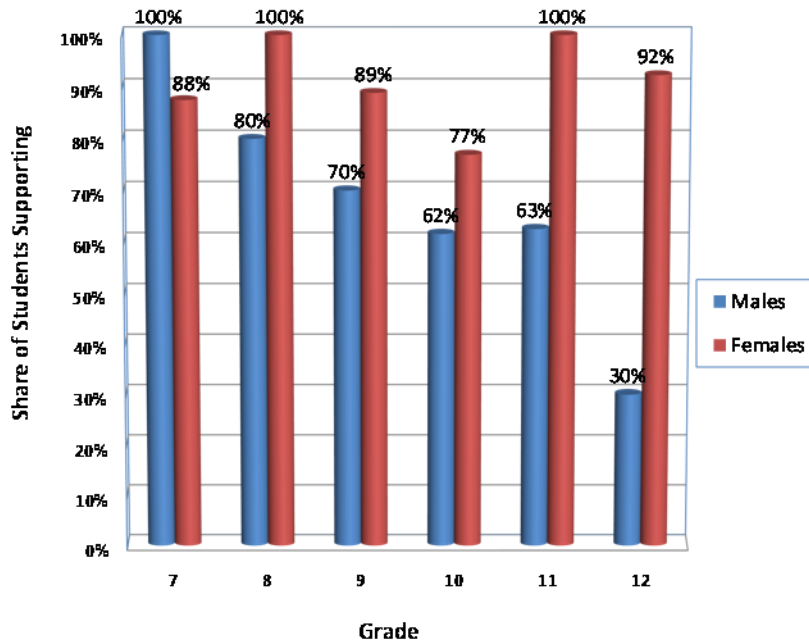


Figure 4. Support for Mandatory Seat Belt Use by Grade and Gender

Conclusion

Seat belt use is a primary factor in teen safety. The risk for rural teens is particularly of interest as this group has a lower use rate, even though they often drive further and at higher speeds. As North Dakota works to increase teen seat belt use, it is important to understand effectiveness of interventions. This paper uses case study analysis to assess effectiveness of a month-long seat belt campaign at a rural North Dakota high school. Results support combined education and enforcement visibility as a method to increase teen belt use. The overall seat belt use rate increased during the month, and has shown sustained gains in a post-post survey conducted a month after the campaign. In addition, a student focus group and survey results offer insight regarding teen seat belt decisions. While teen education is important, parental involvement, enforcement/penalty factors, and incentives are also methods suggested by students. Findings suggest benefits could be gained from future research related to parental influence and temporal factors in the seat belt use rates of rural teens.

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Appendix

Seat belt Use by Gender

Drivers and Passengers			Male	Female	Total	Percent
August 26th	3:00 p.m.	Seat belt	9	10	19	56%
		No Seat belt	11	4	15	44%
August 27th	8:00 a.m.	Seat belt	18	13	31	76%
		No Seat belt	5	5	10	24%
September 15th	8:00 a.m.	Seat belt	18	15	33	79%
		No Seat belt	4	5	9	21%
September 15th	3:00 p.m.	Seat belt	9	13	22	76%
		No Seat belt	3	4	7	24%
September 26th	8:00 a.m.	Seat belt	20	17	37	82%
		No Seat belt	6	2	8	18%
September 26th	3:00 p.m.	Seat belt	10	15	25	81%
		No Seat belt	6	0	6	19%
October 29th	8:00 a.m.	Seat belt	22	22	44	83%
		No Seat belt	5	4	9	17%
October 29th	3:00 p.m.	Seat belt	8	6	14	64%
		No Seat belt	6	2	8	36%