

CROSSING GUARD BASICS

Crossing guards play an important role in providing safe routes to schools in Virginia. They help students cross the street safely by directing drivers to slow or stop and communicate safety messages to students, parents, and neighbors. They do all this despite conditions that are frequently challenging, which is why we consider them local heroes.

Are you interested in implementing a crossing guard program in your community? Do you already have crossing guards but want to know more about them? If so, this *Learn it. Do it. Live it!* is for you. It covers what crossing guards can and can't do and provides basic guidance regarding crossing guard equipment, placement, recruitment, training, retention, funding, and liability.



Primary Sources

The information in this *Learn it. Do it. Live it!* is drawn from two primary sources. The first and most important is the [Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices \(MUTCD\)](#), a federal regulatory document that establishes requirements for signs, signals, pavement markings, and also crossing guards. The second is the [Adult School Crossing Guard Guidelines](#) published by the National Center for Safe Routes to School. This document elaborates on the federal standards and provides examples of how states and communities have implemented crossing guard programs.

A very special thank you to our panel of experts for providing more information:

- Lt. Marie Snyder, Prince William County Police Department
- Lt. Dan Murphy, Arlington County Police Department
- Tara FitzPatrick, Richmond SRTS Coordinator

Crossing Guards in the Field

Crossing guards are highly visible members of the community, in part because they wear reflective gear, but more so because they are stationed at critical intersections that many people travel through each day. This section covers the most visible elements of a crossing guard program – the role of crossing guards, their equipment, and guidance on their placement.



Role

- Adult crossing guards provide gaps in traffic at key school crossings. Crossing guards also help students assess and safely use gaps in traffic to cross the street.
- From the [Virginia Municipal Code § 46.2-834](#): Uniformed school crossing guards may control traffic at any marked school crossing, whether such crossing is at an intersection or another location.
 - In Prince William County, if there is an optimum location for a school crossing that by VDOT regulation cannot be marked, the Prince William County Attorney ruled that as long as the location is controlled by a crossing guard, it can be a school crossing.
- From Section 7D.05 of the MUTCD: Adult crossing guards shall not direct traffic in the usual law enforcement regulatory sense. In the control of traffic, they shall pick opportune times to create a sufficient gap in the traffic flow. At these times, they shall stand in the roadway to indicate that pedestrians are about to use or are using the crosswalk, and that all vehicular traffic must stop.
- VDOT strongly advises against allowing crossing guards to direct traffic in the same manner that a police officer would.
- Crossing guards should not be used to control vehicular traffic or let school buses in or out in cases where they are not, at the same time, managing a marked school crossing.
- Outstanding crossing guards:
 - Help students cross safely by directing drivers to slow or stop.
 - Use good crosswalk management skills.
 - Use a stop paddle, hand signals, and verbal signals to keep pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists informed of traffic patterns.
 - Discourage unsafe behaviors.
 - Clearly communicate and reinforce safe behaviors to students, parents, teachers, and community members.
 - Are consistent with reporting to their position on time and in all conditions; and notifying their superior of the need for a substitute.
 - Always promote safety awareness.
 - Identify safety issues at the school.
 - Report any incidents to the proper channels.
- Guards must be able to speak English and communicate clearly with others, especially in emergency situations.



Equipment

- From [Virginia Municipal Code § 46.2-834](#): Uniformed school crossing guards who are supplied with hand-held stop signs shall use such signs whenever controlling traffic.
- The MUTCD requires the use of STOP paddles that have the word message STOP on both sides. VDOT strongly recommends 24" paddles, which matches department's requirements for construction flaggers.
- Paddles should be retroreflective or illuminated in dark conditions. Schools may wish to consider purchasing enhanced paddles that have embedded LED lights.
- Any time any guard steps into the street, they should be wearing a vest regardless of the volume of traffic or degree of light present. VDOT strongly recommends Class 3 vests. Used in high-traffic situations, Class 3 vests have the highest level of visibility. These vests must have a minimum of 310 square inches of reflective tape that is 12.92 feet long and 2 inches wide.
- Class 3 vests are particularly recommended if guards will be out during periods of darkness, as is usually the case during the morning in the winter. This recommendation matches VDOT's requirements for construction flaggers.
- Crossing guards may also wear reflective tape on their pant legs to create a full silhouette of the body when illuminated by headlights.



Placement

- There are several factors to be considered when considering where to place crossing guards. See Table 1 for details.
- To guide more students to locations where crossing guards are posted, schools should consider suggesting specific walking routes. When determining such routes, schools



should consider factors noted on Table 1 such as presence of traffic controls, presence of sidewalks, number of students walking, age of students, and total walking distance.

- In Prince William County, there are no crossing guards at roundabouts or on streets with posted speed limits above 35 mph. On divided roadways, it is county policy to have two crossing guards that work in tandem to cross students safely.

Table 1: Factors that Contribute to the Need for a Crossing Guard

FACTOR	DISCUSSION
AGE OF STUDENTS	The need for crossing guards is greater where there are younger students
STREET WIDTH, NUMBER OF LANES	The need for crossing guards is greater on wider streets and streets with more lanes to cross
SAFE GAPS IN TRAFFIC	The need for crossing guards is greater where there are fewer gaps in traffic that allow for safe crossings, such as at locations without traffic controls
PRESENCE OF TRAFFIC CONTROL DEVICES	The need for crossing guards is greater where traffic control devices, signs and pavement markings are absent or far apart, or where there are frequent conflicts between pedestrians and turning vehicles
VEHICLE SPEEDS AT THE CROSSING	The need for crossing guards is greater where vehicle speeds are higher. In Prince William County, crossing guards are not placed on roads above 35 mph.
VOLUMES OF MOTOR VEHICLES	The need for crossing guards is greater where there are high volumes of motor vehicles
VOLUMES OF PEDESTRIANS	The need for crossing guards is greater where there are more pedestrians
ATTENDANCE BOUNDARY	The need for crossing guards is greater within attendance boundaries that include more walkable areas
DISTANCE FROM SCHOOL AND ADJACENT LAND USE	The need for crossing guards is greater the closer the crossing is to the school and in areas where schools are near the residential areas where students live
CRASH HISTORY	The need for crossing guards is greater in locations with a history of regular crashes

Crossing Guards Behind the Scenes

We all know what a crossing guard looks like, but do you know who they work for or how they were trained? This section covers the less visible elements of a crossing guard program, including program structure and funding, recruitment and retention, training and liability.





Program Structure and Funding

Local law enforcement, school districts, or individual schools are responsible for hiring, training, and funding crossing guards. To ensure retention, funding should come from a stable source. Crossing guard programs pay salaries in a variety of ways, often combining funding sources as needed.

- Taxes, local school boards, law enforcement, public works, and traffic engineering departments may contribute to funding crossing guards.
- Parent-Teacher Associations or Organizations may contribute funding to pay for crossing guards.
- Surcharges on parking fines can also be applied to crossing guard funding.

Funding for division-wide crossing guard programs in Virginia varies. For example:

- Police departments hire, train, and pay crossing guards in Arlington County, Chesapeake, and Prince William County.
- In the City of Richmond, the school system hires, trains, and pays crossing guards.

Recruitment and Retention

Crossing guard programs often suffer high turnover rates due to untraditional work hours, low pay, and potentially hazardous work conditions. Crossing guards must also operate in all types of weather. Proper support and training of crossing guards can maintain staffing needs and ensure that the valuable role is performed well.

- Crossing guards may be volunteers, but those who are paid employees can be evaluated, trained, and disciplined by the employer.
- If a school is having trouble finding a permanent crossing guard, law enforcement officers may be used in the interim. Volunteer members of the community or school staff may also be used as crossing guards with the proper training.
 - For example, Richmond Public Schools uses teachers, custodians, nutrition workers, or other school staff. These individuals are already on site, and students are familiar with the adults. RPS reported that using school staff in this capacity creates a sense of community by increasing interactions between staff, students, and parents. See text box to the right.

Richmond Public Schools recently implemented a crossing guard pilot that transferred responsibility for crossing guards from the Richmond Police Department to the Richmond Public Schools (RPS). With the same level of funding, RPS was able to expand the crossing guard program from seven crossing guards at seven schools to 36 crossing guards at 12 schools.

Recruiting from within schools proved to be easier than from the general public. Principals knew of interested staff – many who were already helping with arrival and dismissal.



- Encourage friendly relationships with students, parents, and other school staff to incorporate the crossing guard into the community.
- Celebrate crossing guards on Crossing Guard Appreciation Day – and the rest of the year.

Training

- Quality training shows that schools and school divisions are invested in their crossing guards. While the job can be challenging, comprehensive training can help guards feel confident in a variety of situations. Well-trained crossing guards perform their job better and are more likely to enjoy their role. Guards who feel supported are more likely to continue in the position.
- Training should be provided to substitute guards as well as long-term guards.
- Training refreshers can remind crossing guards of what they're supposed to do and notify them of any new policies.
- Training should include both classroom instruction and field exercises.
- According to the [National Center's Crossing Guard Guidelines](#), training should address:
 - The basic traffic laws of the community.
 - School zone signage and pavement markings.
 - Proper use and purpose of traffic signs and signals.
 - Methods of signaling drivers and taking advantage of traffic gaps.
 - Crossing procedures and ways to teach them to children.
 - Site-specific traffic factors and potential traffic hazards.
 - Professional work responsibilities, including following agency rules and regulations, supervisor hierarchy, the proper chain of command, and legal ramifications of the job.
 - Proper attire and behavior to remain safe and to project a positive public image.
 - Proper use of safety equipment.
 - The safety issues and limitations of children as pedestrians.
 - Procedures for crashes involving adult school crossing guards and children on their way to or from school.
 - Emergency procedures.



- Protection of the health and welfare of the guard while working, including topics such as proper attire to increase visibility, the need for hydration, sun protection, bee sting treatment, and how to respond to threats from loose dogs.
- Liability in the case of negligence or omission.
- Crossing guards must be aware of how to control traffic. Other than controlling traffic by voice, [Virginia Municipal Code § 46.2-1309](#) outlines controlling traffic by signals. These motions are easy to understand and obey.
 - **To stop traffic by hand:** Stand with shoulders parallel to moving traffic. Raise arms forty-five degrees above shoulder with hand extended, palm towards moving traffic to be stopped.
 - **To move traffic by hand:** Stand with shoulders parallel to traffic to be moved. Extend right arm and hand full length at height of shoulders towards such traffic, fingers extended and joined, palm down. Bring arm down sharply in the direction of traffic to be moved. Repeat movement with left arm to start traffic from opposite direction.
 - **To stop and start traffic by whistle:** One blast, moving traffic to stop; two blasts, traffic in opposite direction to move.
 - **Emergency stop of traffic by whistle:** Three or more short blasts, all traffic shall immediately clear the intersection and stop.

Liability

- **Legal responsibility varies based on the crossing guard's employer and the school district. Speak with the school district's legal counsel or risk management officer to clarify liability.**
- Crossing guards, crossing guard supervisors, school administrators, and other decision makers should be aware of liability in the case of negligence. This includes failure to properly perform the duties of a crossing guard.
- Crossing guards should be informed of their liability during their training.
- A crossing guard should be prepared to respond to difficult or challenging situations, whether by handling it themselves or deferring to police.
- Develop a plan to identify potential safety concerns and improvements.
- Efforts to address safety problems must be documented.
- All crossing guard programs need to abide by MUTCD requirements, as per state and federal code. See Chapter 7D of the 2009 edition of the MUTCD [here](#).

