“Didn’t see the signs”

by Morgan Barth and Adriana Ibarra

Thomas Jefferson High School

Four high schools in Council Bluffs are left without designated “School Zone” signs, and after a recent incident, students have become more aware about their safety.

According to IowaDOT.gov, “the assembly consists of a Speed Limit Sign Beacon, School plaque, Speed Limit sign and When Flashing plaque to identify the time periods that the school speed limit is in effect.”

A 15-year-old Thomas Jefferson student was hit Monday morning, November 16th, crossing West Broadway. She was walking from Walgreens to the school when she was hit by a vehicle that was turning. The student was taken to CHI Health Mercy Hospital, and was both treated and released on Monday.

"We had a student hit within the crosswalk on 25th Street by a car,” said Chuck May, the school’s School Administration Manager (SAM). “She left within an ambulance and her mother was here to talk to her before she left. [She was] able to sit up and help workers get herself into the ambulance.”

In the incident Monday, first responders beat police to the scene of the accident because of the congestion caused in the intersection.

The Iowa DOT’s website states a School Speed Limit assembly shall be used to indicate the speed limit where a reduced speed zone for a school area, or school crosswalk, during certain time periods, has been established. According to Iowa.gov, those caught speeding will be given a fine that holds $250 for each traffic violation and an additional $500 for each offense.

“If there is no ‘School Zone’ sign designated, then it would just be a regular speeding ticket,” said Wilson Middle School Student Resource Officer (SRO) Chris Hite.

Thomas Jefferson sits on Broadway, one of the busiest streets in the city. Officer Hite had stated that some may say that the red light cameras on Broadway are suppose to reduce speeding and accidents. However, the red light cameras are for catching offenders and then tickets are issued after running red lights, and not for speeding.

“For it to be an official zone, it must be marked as such,” said Officer Hite. “Unfortunately, no sign, no higher fine.”

Another incident occurred on April 1st, 2014, a student was struck by a car leaving Thomas Jefferson. The accident happened sometime between two and three p.m.

Abraham Lincoln High School’s Principal Bridgette Bellows had noticed that some of her students walk to and from school, and there are a few busy intersections that they would have to cross.

However, she was not aware that there was not any designated “School Zone” signs on the premises.

“I believe that the ‘School Zone’ designations definitely help to slow traffic around the school area which helps to keep students safe,” said Bellows. “Anything that slows traffic around the school area is a good thing.”

Two students at Thomas Jefferson had spoken out about the lack of signage.

“I don’t feel safe when I walk across the street when there are speeding drivers,” said junior Jordyn Poole. “There needs to be a sign.”

After the incident on Monday, both Juniors Nick Walters, and Jordyn Poole felt as though it isn’t safe to walk across Broadway.

“It’s scary knowing I could get hit by a car, I just don’t like the feeling I get in my stomach when I walk across Broadway,” said Walters.

“Mr. May and [Thomas Jefferson’s SRO Ron] Zika have been working with the city to get school zone signs; and not only school zone signs but crosswalks,” said Thomas Jefferson High School Principal Todd Barnett. “The fact is that there are not things out there, and we are going to work to get those things done.”

The city already has some safety measures in place like traffic cameras on top of lights, and crosswalk “sensitive touch” buttons at the intersections.

Mayor Matt Walsh, a Council Bluffs native who served two decades on the City Council, said residences and restaurants lined West Broadway in the 1970s. The street also included a crosswalk in front of T.J. that would safely let students and pedestrians walk across the street.

“I believe that the crosswalk was eliminated because students were walking across the street, at or near the crosswalk without waiting for a green ‘walk’ light,” Walsh stated.

After learning that the yellow signs around schools are “Safety Routes” for students, Walsh went to the Public Sign Director to get more information on “School Zone” designation.

Officer Hite had said that it would be a great idea to put one back up. He also said that it would help increase safety at the schools.

“T.J. is a little unusual. They’re actually on a US highway. There is a lot of traffic,” said Walsh.

“I had a chance to look at our signage at Thomas Jefferson High School,” said Iowa Department of Transportation Traffic Engineering Technician Rex Allen. “We don’t have any ‘School Zone’ signage in place.”

A possible increase in traffic congestion outside the school attributed to the slower speeds is a possible concern with a reduced speed limit associated with a school zone sign.

The lack of signs have also caused problems for students, such as not being able to walk across the street safely because traffic doesn’t slow down unless the light is yellow or already red.

Walsh agrees that it’s in the best interest to get the designated signs up. “And I think that the city would be happy to put it up. It’s always good to err on the side of caution.”

Allen added that he “had put the report in, and T.J. will be seeing signs in the next couple of months.”

Notes:

The yellow signs around the high schools are for safe route for students to walk, not an official walk sign for students.

“In what I do remember in those days, you could go off campus and eat lunch, and the students would flow out the broadway door, and hit the cross walk then just scatter, and not stay within the crosswalk.

Well, Tj is a little unusual, they’re actually on a us highway, there is a lot of traffic, one of the things we found, and I’m not a sign expert, I talk to the public sign director who is a sign expert, we’ve decided that drivers aren’t responsible to those signs, or when signs say school zone, or have a speed limit they don’t really follow those

But that two said, that it does create some awareness, I know that we’ve said that the red light camera does create some type of awareness, people tend to slow down a little bit. That you thought TJ needed signs. These could be more for telling students this is the safe way to walk and not for drivers to slow down

Well the irony of ironies, a student got hit crossing the street. I hurried up and read the story and was hoping this isn’t Morgan, she isn’t going this far for this story is she?

I don’t remember, it was my public works director, and it was his reculation of why it was taken down, it was a push button wait for the walk sign, and people would they would hit that intersection, and wouldn’t turn quick enough, students were walking when it got down to the last number, they felt it was just better controlled at the corners. So they completely took it out

I don’t know, and I am not doing it to dodge the question, I did talk to the public works director and he said that it had minimal effect, and that people still drive over 10 miles over the speed limit

I hope people wouldn’t be malicious and speed up, and that they would be respectful and slow down. So these signs do have some type of effect.

“I think the city probably puts those up, and I think that the city would be happy to put it up, it’s always good to air up to the side of caution.”

“Hi Morgan, this Rex Allen, I had a chance to look at our signing at Thomas Jefferson High School, and you’re correct we don’t have any school zone signing in place. I put the report in, TJ will be see signs in the next couple of months….”

“Yeah, Mr. May and Zieka have been working with the city to get School Zone signs and not only school zone signs but crosswalks.

The issue for me is, the student who got hit was in the crosswalk, the bigger issue for me is between here and Hy-vee. I think the even bigger thing I have noticed is after school, kids aren’t leaving our lot. And it’s not students who are speeding, it’s when parents are picking up their kids and they walk in front of cars. The fact that there are not things out there, and we are going to work to get those things done, inevitably when kids are crossing when they are not suppose to be crossing and they get hit, it’s not something we can prevent.

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<http://www.iowadot.gov/traffic/manuals/pdf/02b-03.pdf>

Other recordings and resources available