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The Daily School Run in Malaysia: A Tangle of Traffic, Time, and Tired Parents

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Every weekday morning in Malaysia, like clockwork, the streets transform into a slow-moving river of cars, vans, and motorbikes, heading toward one mission: getting the kids to school on time. The “school run” may sound like a quick errand, but it’s a daily exercise in patience, logistics, and sometimes... survival for many families. Being one of them, every morning is also a battle for me.

It’s early in the morning in all cities, towns, and villages, and you can almost hear the collective sigh of parents stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic outside school gates. Roads become chokepoints as cars jostle for space in narrow drop-off lanes. The problem isn’t limited to city centres, but there is also a crunch nationwide. When thousands of schools open within a 30-minute window, the ripple effect hits not just parents but buses, lorries, and even emergency vehicles.

For working parents, the school run is a logistical puzzle. They’re trying to get the kids to school, dodge traffic jams, and still make it to the office before the boss starts the morning meeting. This often means skipping breakfast, sending work emails from the driver’s seat, or negotiating “just five more minutes” with a sleepy child. It’s exhausting, repetitive, and rarely stress-free.

Road Safety: Dodging Danger Before First Period

For many Malaysian students, the school day begins long before the bell rings — it starts with a calculated dance through traffic. In the early morning rush, the rules of the road seem to loosen. Cars double-park in narrow lanes, blocking visibility. Children leap out of vehicles while they’re still inching forward. Motorcyclists, eager to cut through the congestion, slip between cars with mere centimetres to spare.

For those who walk, the journey can feel like navigating an obstacle course designed with danger in mind. Pedestrian crossings are either non-existent or so faded they blend into the tarmac. Where they exist, sidewalks are often broken, blocked, or too narrow for safe passage. Drivers, laser-focused on beating the clock, rarely slow down even in designated school zones. Dedicated bus lanes, security staff, and sheltered waiting areas are standard in private schools. In many public schools, especially in rural areas, students may walk long distances on unlit roads or ride on motorbikes without helmets. Some parents have no choice but to send their children on overcrowded vans—safety is a luxury, not a guarantee.

It’s not just an inconvenience; it’s a public safety issue with real consequences. According to national accident statistics, many road incidents involving schoolchildren occur outside school gates. The absence of basic safety measures such as marked crossings, speed bumps, and trained traffic wardens leaves too much to luck, and luck is not a safety strategy.

The situation also has a psychological toll. Parents worry daily, even if they’re not there in person to drop off their child. Teachers sometimes start the day dealing not with homework queries, but with

reports of near misses at the school entrance. Students themselves can begin the day stressed, distracted, and on edge — hardly the mental state needed for learning.

Carpooling sounds good on paper but coordinating schedules with other families can feel like planning a wedding. Walking to school is theoretically safer than in practice, but it is too hot, too far, and too risky on busy Malaysian roads. Cycling? Rare, unless you live in a gated community or kampung with minimal traffic. And while school buses are available, not all parents trust their punctuality or maintenance standards.

If mornings are the most dangerous part of a student’s day, then something is deeply wrong with how we design and manage school surroundings. Road safety is not optional; it is as essential to education as textbooks and classrooms. Until crossings are visible, speeds are actively controlled, and traffic is appropriately managed, “dodging danger” will remain an unwanted subject on every student’s timetable.

A Path Forward?



If the school run is a national headache, better planning and community cooperation can cure it. The statement rightly frames the school run as more than a parental inconvenience — it is a national mobility challenge with economic, environmental, and safety dimensions. Indeed, better planning and community cooperation are central to any solution, but the path to achieving these changes is far from straightforward.

- **Staggered School Start Times: A Simple Fix or a Complex Disruption?**
On paper, staggering school start times would smooth peak traffic and reduce bottlenecks around school gates. However, its implementation is fraught with complications. Families with children in different schools might face logistical chaos, workplaces must adapt to new arrival times, and after-school activities could be disrupted. While the approach could work in urban areas with dense school networks, it might offer little benefit in rural regions where traffic is not the primary concern. This suggests that localised rather than blanket policies may be more effective.
- **Safer Pedestrian Walkways and Road Markings: Necessary but Underfunded**
There is no disputing the life-saving potential of well-designed pedestrian walkways and visible road markings. Yet maintenance is often neglected, for example, crossings fade within months, sidewalks crumble, and encroachments by street vendors or parked vehicles reduce their usability. Infrastructure improvements require initial investment, ongoing enforcement, and upkeep, which local councils may struggle to prioritise without sustained political will and community pressure.
- **Incentives for School Bus Use: The Trust and Quality Gap**
Encouraging school bus use could cut congestion and emissions, but the barriers are social as much as logistical—many parents distrust school buses' safety, punctuality, and maintenance standards. Without strict regulation, transparent safety checks, and competitive pricing, incentives alone may not sway parental preference for private car use. Moreover, demand might be too low in smaller towns to make bus services financially viable without subsidies.

- **The Mindset Shift: The Hardest but Most Crucial Change**
 Perhaps the most critical and challenging element is the call for a change in mindset. The school run’s problems are partly rooted in cultural attitudes toward convenience and safety, where parents often feel driving is the only “safe” and “reliable” option, even when alternatives exist. Changing this requires long-term social campaigns, community role models, and visible proof that other options are safe, affordable, and efficient. Without this cultural shift, even the best infrastructure and policies will underperform.
- **The Bigger Picture: Beyond the School Gates**
 Significantly, the school run affects more than just parents and students — it impacts public transport schedules, delivery services, and general commuter traffic. This means solutions should be integrated into wider urban mobility planning, not treated as an isolated school-based problem. Aligning public transport upgrades, urban design, and traffic enforcement with school transport reforms could yield far greater impact.



Conclusion

The proposed solutions — staggered times, safer walkways, bus incentives, and mindset change are valid but require context-sensitive implementation, institutional commitment, and cultural transformation. Treating the school run as a shared civic responsibility rather than a private family matter is essential. Without this collective ownership, the “national headache” will persist, no matter how many speed bumps, schedules, or buses are introduced. Above all, a change in mindset is needed because the school run doesn’t just affect parents; it affects *everyone* using the road at that hour. Until then, Malaysian mornings will remain a mix of car horns, sleepy yawns, and the eternal question: “*Why is the traffic so bad today?*”—even though we already know the answer.