



ACTIVE SCHOOL TRAVEL

How Ottawa's Walking School Bus Pilot Project Could Inspire More Active Winnipeg Schools

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ABSTRACT

A Walking School Bus works similar to a regular school bus, however rather than children being driven to school they walk in a group with one or more adults. Walking School Buses can range from two families taking turns walking their children to school or it can be organized by the school or a community group with a designated route, meeting points and a timetable.¹ In communities across Canada and the rest of the world, parents have concerns about their children walking to school alone and would allow their child to walk if they were not walking alone.² Walking School Buses have been an effective tool in addressing this concern in many communities. Ottawa's Walking School Bus program began in 2014 and currently has 13 Walking School Buses at 13 schools.³ This case-in-point will look at how Ottawa's Walking School Bus program began, how the program has been able to grow to encourage more children in the community to walk to school and the lessons that can be learned for Winnipeg.

1.0 / INTRODUCTION

Walking School Buses have many benefits not only for children, but also for parents, volunteers, schools and the rest of the community.⁴ Safety is a primary concern for parents and a reason why they are reluctant to allow their children to walk to school.¹ Providing the opportunity for children to walk to school with adult supervision may reduce these worries for parents.¹ Parents may



FIGURE 1 | A Walking School Bus leader walks children to school.⁵

be more comfortable allowing their children to walk to school when they know they will be safe and supervised. Safety is just one benefit of a Walking School Bus for children. The program also allows children to participate in physical activity, foster healthy habits, learn more about their neighbourhood, socialize with friends and meet children of other ages, gain independence and arrive at school on time.⁴ Parents are able to meet other families through the program, have a greater peace of mind that their child will be safe on their route to school, and they save gas and time from not needing to drive to and from the school.⁴ The leaders that walk with the children enjoy physical activity, are able to meet families and get to know the children as



FIGURE 2 | A Walking School Bus arrives in time for the start of school.⁵



FIGURE 3 | Walking School Buses utilize cross walks and sidewalks to safely arrive at school.⁶

well as the benefit of providing a service to the school.⁴ Other benefits include lower greenhouse emissions, less traffic congestion around schools, and the program could contribute to active transportation advocacy in communities.

As children spend more time sitting and less time being physically active it is becoming more important to encourage physical activity. In Canada, 31% of children and youth aged 5-17 are overweight or obese, this is partially due to not getting enough exercise.⁷ It is recommended that youth get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity per day, however only 7% of Canadian youth are meeting this recommendation every day.⁸ If children and parents engage in an active lifestyle by walking or biking as a form of transportation children are more likely to reach the recommended amount of physical activity each day. The Walking School Bus allows children to safely get to school while being active.

2.0 / BACKGROUND

Green Communities Canada is a national association of community organizations that help people go green, at home, on the road, at work and in the community.⁹ In 2010, Green Communities Canada was contracted to launch and coordinate the Ottawa School Travel Planning Project. Working on behalf of and in collaboration with the City of Ottawa, local school boards, the Ottawa

Student Transportation Authority and other stake-holders, the project introduced School Travel Planning into 24 elementary schools across Ottawa. Interest was high at many of these schools, however only one school successfully launched a daily Walking School Bus. Viscount Alexander Public School partnered with Sandy Hill Community Health Centre which coordinates the daily Walking School Bus for the school. Sandy Hill Community Health Centre recruits, insures, trains and supervises volunteer drivers. The volunteers are people from the neighbourhood, mostly retirees and students from the University of Ottawa. From 2010-2013 the school had a 38% increase in its rate of active travel to school, the largest increase of any school in the Ottawa School Travel Planning Project. At other schools Walking School Buses led by parents were started but did not operate on a daily basis, were only weekly and/or seasonal and tended to only attract families who were already walking to school.²

The Ottawa Walking School Bus Pilot Project was started after seeing the success of the Sandy Hill program from the School Travel Planning Project. Through the Ottawa Walking School Bus Pilot Project, Green Communities Canada had multiple goals that they hoped to achieve during the course of the pilot project. The project was to provide a select number of schools with the necessary guidance and support to introduce and sustain a daily Walking School Bus during the 2014-2015 school year and to measure the participation rates and attitudes towards the Walking School Bus. The pilot project would run for a 12 week period between September and December and be available to children who lived too close to the school to be able to take the school bus.⁵ They also wanted to increase rates of active travel at participating schools, to demonstrate how a well-supported daily Walking School Bus could increase the number of children walking to school and to identify the operational and financial considerations necessary to start a sustainable and successful Walking School Bus program more widely across Ottawa.²

The pilot project was started to allow more schools to benefit from Walking School Buses by reducing the barriers when starting and sustaining them. These barriers were:

- Over reliance on parent volunteers. Many parents cannot commit to leading a Walking School Bus while ensuring a reliable and daily operation during the school year. Some schools cannot offer a Walking School Bus on a weekly or occasional basis as there are not enough parent volunteers.²



FIGURE 4 | Connaught Walking School Bus transformed into Santa's sleigh for the walk to school in December 2016.¹⁰

- Coordination and support. Schools do not always have the capacity to create and manage a daily Walking School Bus program as there are other priorities and activities competing for limited time and resources at the school.²
- Managing risk. School administration hesitant to promote or permit a Walking School Bus due to concerns over potential risks and lack of direction from the school board.²

3.0 / DISCUSSION

To plan and deliver the Ottawa Walking School Bus Pilot Project a steering committee was formed which met regularly. On the committee there was representation from:

- Green Communities Canada;
- Ottawa Student Transportation Authority;
- Ottawa Safety Council; and
- Ottawa Public Health.²

The responsibilities for Green Communities Canada were project coordination, financial management, school recruitment and liaison, promotion and information materials, case study and a webinar. Ottawa Student Transportation Authority was responsible for funding, route planning and mapping, registration and a Walking School Bus procedure policy. Ottawa Safety Council did driver recruitment and police checks, liability coverage, training and supervision, remuneration and the daily operations of the Walking School Buses. Ottawa Public Health was responsible for funding, route planning, school recruitment and liaison, a media event and evaluation.²

The budget for the pilot project was \$45,000 and was funded from three sources: Ottawa Public Health (\$25,000), Ottawa Student Transportation Authority

(\$15,000) and the City of Ottawa (\$5,000).²

Schools were selected from those that were current or past participants of the Ottawa School Travel Plan Project and schools that were identified by Ottawa Public Health as having less intensive active transportation interventions. Twelve schools were contacted and eleven responded that they were interested in being involved in the project. Eight schools were selected with the additional criteria including ensuring a mix of urban and suburban locations as well as representation of both English language school boards in the City.²

Walking School Bus routes and schedules were made using a mapping software and registration data provided by parent school boards. The intention of each route was to serve as many students as possible living within the school's walking zone, require under 30 minutes of travel time, and to arrive no later than 5 minutes before school started. Before finalizing the routes they were walked by the project partners to identify safety concerns such as overgrown vegetation affecting sightlines and missing/faded pavement markings. These concerns were reported to the City of Ottawa. As a result mostly minor changes were required to some of the routes after they had been walked.²

To promote the project, flyers were created so the schools could promote the Walking School Bus to parents/guardians through mail sent home, email and on the school website. Parents were directed to a website where they could view the route map and schedule for their school and the registration materials. A media launch was organized for the pilot's second week of operations which was International Walk to School Week.² The media launch resulted in a positive story, video and photos on The Ottawa Citizen website.⁵ Promoting the project in both schools and the rest of the community would have raised interest in the Walking School Bus because people that had never heard of it before would have heard more about it, possibly resulting in additional children being registered. Children participants were given 'I love the WSB' snap bands to also promote the project and to get them excited about being part of the Walking School Bus.²

Walking School Bus leaders were recruited, screened, insured, trained, managed and paid by the Ottawa Safety Council. There was 19 leaders hired who had to attend training on Occupational Health and Safety



FIGURE 5 | Walking School Bus Leaders wear bright, reflective clothing to easily be seen.⁵

Awareness, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Customer Service Training, Violence and Harassment in the Workplace, Level C First Aid/CPR, a two hour in class orientation session and a walk of the route. Ontario Safety Council developed an employee handbook which included policies and procedures regarding pedestrian safety, dress and footwear, student discipline, behaviour management, and emergency and incident reporting. Each route had one leader if there was 1-10 registered students and 2 leaders if there was 11-20 registered students. When registration reached 11 or more a waiting list was used until a second leader could be assigned to the route.²

A protocol was in place for weather related cancellations. The Walking School Buses were cancelled in the event of freezing rain making sidewalks unwalkable, when there was 10 cm or more of snow and sidewalks had not been plowed, and during severe winds, severe storms or tornado warnings.²

Before the end of the pilot, two of the eight routes were permanently cancelled due to low registration, however



FIGURE 6 | First day of the Walking School Bus at Robert Bateman Public School.

one route did grow during the pilot and required a second leader.²

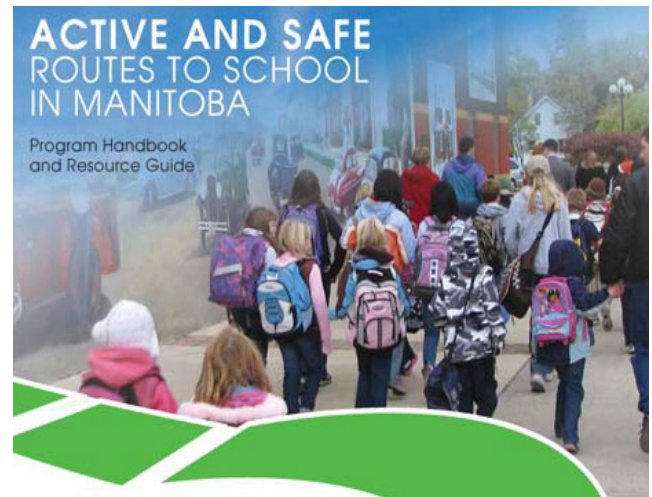
At the end of the pilot project, Ottawa Student Transportation Agency committed to funding the remaining Walking School Bus routes until the end of the school year. In March it was decided that the pilot project would transition into a program led by Ontario Student Transportation Agency and would be funded for another school year.² There is currently 13 Walking School Bus routes that are run by Ottawa Student Transportation Agency which operate daily in the morning.³

4.0 / WINNIPEG CONTEXT

Green Action Centre operates the Active and Safe Routes to School (ASRTS) program which has been in Manitoba for over a decade, working to increase children's mobility. ASRTS is a leader in School Travel Planning in Manitoba and offers help and resources to school communities that want to school travel plan.¹² The ASRTS has a Handbook & Resource Guide that features a section on Walking School Buses. In the guide there is an overview of what a Walking School Bus is, how to organize one, rules for children to follow when on the bus, a sample letter to promote the program, a registration form, and an example of how a school in Winnipeg runs the program.¹³ This is a great resource that a school or parent can use when beginning a Walking School Bus because it will answer some of their questions and assist in planning the program.



FIGURE 7 | Walking School Bus is a program of the Safe Routes to School movement.



Designed to help school communities encourage active and safe travel to and from school



FIGURE 8 | The ASRTS Program Handbook and Resource Guide is a great resource for Manitoba schools.¹³

5.0 / LESSONS LEARNED

Walking School Bus programs could spread into more Winnipeg schools if there was more advertisement and promotion in schools and school newsletters. If parents are not aware of Walking School Buses, they do not have the option of starting a Walking School Bus in their neighbourhood and if the school does not have the staff available to run the bus then children are not able to participate. Posters at the school and information on the school website or on social media would inform parents/guardians of the Walking School Bus. Showing how other schools, organizations and families are using active transportation to get to and from school in a safe and convenient way could inspire more people to try a new method of transportation to school. Using multiple methods of relaying the information would increase the number of people that see it because you could provide the information in multiple ways to reach the entire school community, no matter if they look at the bulletin board in the school or use the school website to learn about school events.

Partnership of Green Action Centre, City of Winnipeg, school divisions and other relevant organizations could increase knowledge of the Walking School Bus program. Involving more organizations would allow more people to be involved rather than currently when most

school travel planning is mostly done by Green Action Centre and individual schools or school divisions.

Ottawa's Walking School Bus Pilot Project was partially successful because there was funding available to pay leaders and for promotion. If multiple organizations pooled resources in Winnipeg there may be funding to start up new programs and either pay leaders or have a promotional campaign to get the city talking about active transportation to school.

A lesson learned from Ottawa's School Travel Plan Project is that in order for a program to work there needs to be supervisors that are willing to run the program on a regular basis. If the Walking School Bus does not run on a regular basis then parents/children will find it more confusing trying to figure out when the bus runs and when it does not. Ottawa addressed liability by training and paying leaders so that parents were not responsible for children that were not their own. If funding was not available in Winnipeg to hire leaders specifically for the Walking School Bus, adults that are already working in schools could be leaders on a route. Staff that work on salary could be given nonmonetary incentives such as additional personal days for leading a Walking School Bus.

If the Walking School Bus schedule is irregular it may be harder to encourage families to participate because they are also using other methods to get to school which they may eventually feel is easier rather than trying to figure out how to plan for the bus.

6.0 / CONCLUSION

Ottawa's Walking School Bus Pilot Project was a success which introduced Walking School Bus routes to multiple schools in both urban and suburban Ottawa. After the pilot project was complete the Walking School Buses continued to run for the remainder of the year and the following year. The Walking School Bus program is still active in Ottawa after two years with leaders paid by Ontario Student Transportation Agency. Winnipeg could learn from Ottawa's experience to implement a similar program in Winnipeg to encourage more children to walk to school. Through collaboration of multiple organizations, promotion and the desire for a healthier Winnipeg, Walking School Buses could be implemented at every elementary school in the city to

allow all children the opportunity to be more active on their route to school.

RESOURCES

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