

How to Build a WALKING SCHOOLBUS

It's common knowledge that the majority of today's kids are not walking or bicycling to school, even when they live close enough to do so. Some think that modern parents are overly protective, but no one can blame parents for worrying about letting their kids walk along roads that are much more congested today than they were a generation ago. Parents also worry that their children could be attacked or even abducted by strangers, although such events are (fortunately!) extremely rare. On the other hand, it is *very* likely that kids who are driven to school every day will gain weight and become increasingly more sedentary in their habits as they get older. The exponential rise in childhood obesity testifies to the close link between daily physical activity and healthy body weight, and long-term population studies have confirmed that it is much more difficult for overweight or obese children to lose their excess weight once they reach adulthood.

In order to offset these risks and ensure their own peace of mind about their kids' health and safety, parents in communities across the country have created successful "Walking Schoolbus" projects. A Walking Schoolbus consists of a group of schoolchildren who walk to and from school along with one or more adults or older children as chaperones. Adults and responsible older kids (12+ is a good general guideline) share the chaperoning duty by volunteering to cover one or two mornings or afternoons per week, in the same way that many parents now organize school carpools. Obviously the children benefit from this fun and safe way to exercise, and many adults are surprised to find how much they look forward to their assigned day of escorting a group of exuberant young children. Many Walking Schoolbus volunteers report that in addition to the physical exercise and social interaction with the kids and other adults, the experience provides them with a boost of happiness and positive energy that lasts all day long. It's also a great timesaver for parents who typically drive their own child to school every day.

If you think that your school and your children would benefit from a Walking Schoolbus program, just follow the steps below to get started.

1. Decide that you are willing and able to take the lead on this effort. Every successful project begins with an individual who has sufficient commitment, energy, and flexibility to get through the initial organizational challenges! If you want to start a Walking Schoolbus but you don't feel comfortable or confident about doing it all by yourself, see if a friend or one of your kid's teachers would be willing to partner with you.
2. Meet with other parents, teachers, and administrators to discuss the idea and gain buy-in and support for the activity within your school community. Ask to be put on the agenda of the next meeting of the parent-teacher organization, and have interested parents write down their addresses so you can plot them out on a map and plan out routes. Consider printing up a flyer that kids can take home from school, in order to reach out to a wider audience of parents. Present the idea to civic groups in your community, too, and invite them to help you get the program started. Write an article about the project for your local newspaper. Solicit businesses and community groups that can sponsor your effort by providing additional publicity, buying and donating reflective safety vests for participants, and urging their membership to volunteer.

3. Get together with everyone who shows interest, lay out a map of your community (you can get one from your municipal office), mark the location of your school and use a compass to draw a one-mile circle around it, and work out one or several “bus routes” within the circle. (You can travel from outside the circle if a number of children live farther away, but one mile is the typical comfort and travel time limit for most pedestrians.) Like the motorized schoolbus routes, your routes should mostly follow the main and secondary roads that connect to smaller neighborhood roads where the participating children live; however, you may want to travel a slightly longer route if it takes you along well-maintained sidewalks or off-road paths, with signals or crossing guards at the crosswalks. As the Walking Schoolbus passes by each child’s home or collection point, the “bus” will grow bigger and bigger as you approach the schoolyard. A good rule of thumb is that you should have a minimum of one chaperone for every ten kids who are walking, and you may want to have one for every five or six kids if they are very young or your roads are particularly dangerous and difficult to cross as a group. Additional chaperones can also be picked up en route to school as the group grows larger.

4. Organize your volunteer “bus drivers” to cover the routes that you have laid out. Draw up a weekly schedule with the names (and phone numbers!) assigned to each morning and afternoon on each route, and make sure that all your volunteers AND all the parents of participating children receive copies. Make sure that you have a few alternates for each day of the week as well, to account for illness and out-of-town travel. But don’t limit yourself to only using parents as chaperones! This is a great service project for civic organizations and for older kids in the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and it may be the perfect volunteer opportunity for non-parents with flexible schedules and for active retired people in your neighborhood. Some high schools now require their students to log a certain number of volunteer hours before they can receive their diplomas. If you’re still short of escorts, brainstorm with the volunteers you already have about who else you can solicit.

5. For children who live considerably more than a mile from school, propose that parents drop them off and pick them up at one of your regular Walking Schoolbus stops rather than driving or busing them all the way to school. If all or most of the children in your district fall into this category, consider modifying your Walking Schoolbus program so that all of the kids meet up at a central gathering point, and the chaperones walk them to school from there. For kids who take schoolbuses, it may be necessary to change your school’s policies and obtain specific written parental permission to permit bus drivers to pick up and drop off students at locations other than home and school. Remind parents that a key reason for creating a Walking Schoolbus is to provide children with additional daily exercise -- and they don’t get any when they are dropped off at the school door!

6. Once your routes and chaperones are in place, promote the new program heavily, both through your school and through your volunteer network in their own neighborhoods. The more participation, the more successful your program will be! Plan to kick off the Walking Schoolbus during the temperate months -- either right at the start of the new school year, or after the April vacation. Some Walking Schoolbuses stop operating entirely during the winter months, some only operate on good-weather days, and others simply dress according to the weather and keep

going all year long. The choice is entirely up to you and the other volunteers. But particularly at the outset of your project, the weather could make a crucial difference in your participation rate.

7. If you like, you can plan activities that will enrich the walking experience for the children on your route, while not distracting them so much that they can't pay attention to where they are going. For example, some Walking Schoolbus groups dress in matching reflective vests or carry reflective-tape flags, sing songs, buddy up and hold hands, carry posters of a big yellow schoolbus and STOP signs, or play observation games with their chaperones on their daily trips back and forth. On the other hand, the sheer joy of walking outside in a group with their friends is usually enough to keep kids grouped together and happily responsive to adult instructions.

If you think you would be interested in starting this type of a program at your child's school, please contact Sandi Duchesne at 942-6389 or sduchesne@emdc.org for additional assistance, references, and community resources to help you put together a successful program. Sandi will even deliver a presentation to your parent-teacher organization or civic group (if you tend to be a bit on the shy side), or assist you with putting together your own presentation.