



Walking School Bus Guide



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Walking School Bus Guide

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Acknowledgements

This Nova Scotia version of the Walking School Bus Guide draws from a similar guide produced by Go for Green, a former national nonprofit organization, for its Active & Safe Routes to School program. The Go for Green Guide called on content from the Green Communities Association's (GCA) Active and Safe Routes to School Program in Ontario and the Way to Go program in British Columbia.

How to Use This Guide

This guide was designed to help volunteers organize a Walking School Bus for the trip to and from school, but also includes tips on how to involve a larger school community. This is a guide only, and you should feel free to adapt it to suit your needs. You may want to read through the guide and highlight the items that are most relevant to you. The key to a successful Walking School Bus is flexibility, and regular communication between participants.

Urban versus Rural Focus: Most Walking School Buses across Canada are in urban areas, and this guide reflects that. However, more and more rural areas are looking to take part. For example, a Walking School Bus could be formed on the way to a bus stop.

Walking versus Cycling: This guide focuses on walking, but most of the information it provides is applicable to cycling as well as other forms of active travel.

Reaping the rewards of a Walking School Bus: it can help reduce climate change and improve air quality, create safer neighbourhoods, enhance social inclusion, and give children and youth (and others) a more solid foundation for health and well-being.

About the Ecology Action Centre

In Nova Scotia, the Ecology Action Centre encourages children, youth and their families to use active transportation – such as walking and cycling – for the environment, physical activity and traffic safety.

Through our active transportation initiatives like Walking School Bus, we aim to:

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution from cars
- Increase physical activity
- Increase traffic safety

Our Child and Youth active transportation program and events are offered province-wide in partnership with the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage.

What is a Walking School Bus?

A Walking School Bus (WSB) is a great way to get to school. A WSB offers:

- Adult supervision
- Safety in numbers
- Physical activity
- A great social atmosphere
- Fun on the way to school!
- Students arrive energized and ready for the day

Why start a Walking School Bus?

Air quality and climate change

The trip to and from school makes up a major portion of personal transportation in Canada, and often involves short trips. These are the most polluting because a car's engine has not had time to warm up enough to efficiently control the emissions that impact air quality and climate change. A WSB can help reduce the number of cars on the road and the amount of pollution produced for the trip to and from school.

Health

According to the Participaction 2018 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, approx. 65% of Canadian children and youth do not meet their age-specific benchmark for physical activity – 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity per day. Walking, cycling, or using other forms of active transportation to and from school can help bring children and youth closer to these guidelines. As an added bonus, physical activity helps build self-esteem, improves concentration, and enhances to learning.

Safety

Many children and youth are driven to and from school, contributing to chaotic and potentially dangerous congestion around the school during pick-up and drop-off times. Participating in a WSB gets students out of cars and allows adults the opportunity to model and reinforce safe habits to their children, as well as to other pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. Having more “eyes on the street” also increases neighbourhood safety. Walking in a group means there's safety in numbers and offers more visibility than a student walking alone.

Community

Our increasing over-dependence on the car means that children and youth have limited opportunities during their formative years to experience both the people and the built environment of their community. Those that participate in a WSB experience their neighbourhoods first-hand and develop a more diverse view of the environment and their community.

Register Your Walking School Bus

Help us keep track of the Walking School Buses blossoming in our province by registering your walking school bus(s) online at www.ecologyaction.ca/walking-school-bus. In return, you'll receive a WSB Starter Kit including:

- This printed guide
- Information on Making Tracks: a safety skills program that will teach students the skills and confidence to walk (or wheel) in their communities safely.

Steps to Organizing a Walking School Bus

Congratulations! You're ready to offer an improved, safe means for students to travel to and from school. The steps involved in organizing a WSB are outlined on the following pages. Remember that this is only a guide – feel free to highlight only the steps you would like to focus on.

- Step 1:** Promote the Walking School Bus idea
- Step 2:** Meet with interested families and community members
- Step 3:** Create the Walking School Bus(es)
- Step 4:** Do a test walk
- Step 5:** Implement and celebrate!
- Step 6:** Ensure ongoing support
- Step 7:** Evaluate and evolve



Step 1: Promote the Walking School Bus idea

► Send a letter home from the principal

- In the letter, introduce the Ecology Action Centre's Active Transportation program. Explain the school's rationale for implementing a WSB. See the web link to sample texts below.

► Include WSB information in the school's social media platform or newsletter

- Write about what a WSB is in the regular social media posts or newsletter or consider sending a separate brochure home. Your school may choose to create its own materials in consultation with the Ecology Action Centre. See the web link to sample texts below.
- Include info about a WSB meeting to give parents and caregivers more information.
- Be sure to mention that children with disabilities can also easily be included in a WSB.

► Place posters about the WSB in the school

- Put up posters on bulletin boards and other notice areas. Many communities allow public postings at local apartment buildings, libraries, community centres, churches, grocery stores, and other places where parents and caregivers may gather.
- You can include information about how a WSB can help the environment, climate change, health, physical activity, and traffic safety.
- Be sure to include information on who parents and caregivers can contact if they'd like to help with the WSB.

► Translate some of the material into other languages spoken at the school so that the entire school community is included.

- A parent/caregiver or member of the community may volunteer to do this.

► Invite both the principal and students to make public announcements in school

► Prepare a final list of interested families and volunteers

- Assign a parent/caregiver or other volunteer to contact people for the introductory WSB meeting.

What kind of information should I provide?

You can find tons of Walking School Bus information on our Walking School Bus website www.ecologyaction.ca/walking-school-bus. Check it out for great resources, including:

- School check list
- Sample letter to parents
- WSB information for parents
- WSB success stories

Step 2: Meet with interested families and community members

Hold an introductory meeting with interested families and community members. Decide if day or evening is best. You may have to hold more than one meeting to reach everyone who is interested.

► **Make a short presentation on the WSB**

- Include info about other supportive programs/events from Ecology Action Centre. Answer any questions from the audience.
- Invite a community police officer to address any relevant safety concerns that may be raised. Ask them to bring any data specific to the neighbourhood that may be helpful.

► **Discuss any existing informal WSBs**

- If there are any families who participate in an informal WSB, ask them to speak at the meeting about why it works for them.

► **Ask why parents/caregivers and community members are interested in the WSB**

- Some parents/caregivers may see the WSB as a babysitting service. Be sure to clarify that this is not the case.

► **Identify potential safe WSB routes for the group**

- Using a map of the school zone, have parents/caregivers mark where they live. Identify where the clusters of families live who could start a WSB. Identify adult supervisors (those who will lead the WSB). Following the meeting, make enough copies of this map to have one for each route at the "Establish the route" meeting.

► **Discuss supervisor responsibilities**

- Inform supervisors of their responsibilities when approaching the school. Discuss existing regulations and safe practices.
- All adult supervisors must comply with the volunteer requirements of the school, such as undergoing a police check.

► **Plan a follow-up "Establish the route" meeting**

- Ask parents/caregivers to take safety-related materials home with them and review them with their children before the next meeting.

Who "drives" the bus?

Parents and caregivers aren't the only ones who can lead a Walking School Bus!

- Recruit teachers and other school staff who would like to be 'drivers'.
- Ask local seniors groups if they would like to help out by leading a route.
- Engage local community groups, such as Scouts or Guides, Lions' Clubs or Rotary Club members.
- Involve older students or youth from the local junior or senior high - 'driving' a Walking School Bus is a great leadership experience.
- Set-up a 'Walking Buddies' program where pairs of groups of children arrange to walk together without a designated leader.

Step 3: Create the Walking School Bus(es)

There are three main points to cover at this meeting: a) establish the route(s), b) make the WBS visible, and c) set the rules. The meeting can be very informal. You may want to conduct one large meeting of all "routes" or have each "route" meet individually.

a) Establish the route(s)

► Highlight the route(s) on a map and give each "bus driver" a copy

- If there is more than one route, break into groups according to route.
- Make sure each route is as safe as possible. Good routes have sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, are well-lit (during all seasons), etc. Identify any issues you may need to discuss with your local council, such as snow removal, no-stopping zones.

► Give all "bus drivers" a complete contact list

- Include both home and work phone numbers where necessary, keep it updated

► Set the starting date for the WSB

- If possible, ask for police presence on the streets during the first few days.

b) Make the WBS visible

► Decide if WSB participants will wear identifiers on the street

- It is helpful if both "bus drivers" and students wear identifiers so that everyone knows for sure who is on the "bus." Ex. hats, reflective vests and armbands, and backpacks. Reflective and bright-coloured materials will also provide extra visibility for traffic.

► Determine if there is a budget for these items. Donations or fundraisers may help.

► Have students select names and/or colours for their "bus"

- This helps as an identifier, and also adds a bit of fun to the process.

► For each route, designate a permanent meeting place

- Consider the impact of weather/season when choosing a spot.

► Consider clearly marking the routes. Some suggestions include:

- Paint feet on the sidewalk along the route, with different colours for different routes.
- Post signs along the route. Make sure they don't obstruct drivers' views at intersections, corners or driveways.

Note: Remember to get authorization from your municipality for all markings and/or changes in signage around your school. Invite your local councillor to walk the routes with you and get their help with this request.



There are two ways (at least) of organizing a Walking School bus: one where the bus starts at a far away point and picks up students along the way, and another one where students meet at a gathering point and then walk without stopping the rest of the way to school.

c) Set the rules

When creating and reinforcing the rules, remember that some students may have some difficulty adjusting to a new system. The WSB is a wonderful way to teach new values and habits to participants. It's advisable for each WSB group to discuss issues of liability together and write up something that everyone can agree to. Set the ratio of parents/caregivers to students according to local standards. See www.ecologyaction.ca/walking-school-bus for a document called "Walking School Bus Liability Concerns."

Adapt these suggested rules to your own WSB

Rule 1: Always follow the same route.

Rule 2: The "bus" may wait a few minutes for latecomers before proceeding. If a student misses the "bus" on the way home from school, they must go to the school office and have their parent/caregiver contacted to pick them up.

Rule 3: Children do not go into other people's houses. They wait either on the street outside their own house or at a designated meeting area. Decide where to collect students who live in apartment buildings.

Rule 4: "Bus drivers" escort students right onto the school ground. If different groups of students have different entrances to the school, drop off students at each entrance. Do not leave children unattended.

Rule 5: Parents/caregivers must be home when their children arrive on the "bus". Determine a back-up plan in case of emergencies and have everyone agree to it in writing.

Rule 6: Parents/caregivers must notify the "bus driver" if a child will not be on the bus (i.e. due to illness or an appointment).

Rule 7: The "bus" stops on the sidewalk before crossing the street.

Rule 8: Participants do not run ahead or lag too far behind.

Rule 9: Children must obey all "bus drivers".

Rule 10: Participants do not take shortcuts that could be hazardous, like crossing the street diagonally.

Step 4: Do a test walk

You may want to do this as a group before formally establishing the route OR as a separate activity OR on the first day of the WSB. Bring a “walkability” checklist with you (a sample checklist can be found on our website www.ecologyaction.ca/walking-school-bus - Resources).

► Do a trial run

- Include as many participants as possible in this trial run.

► Set the pick-up and drop-off times for each family

- **Morning:** Establish the time that the “bus” leaves the first house on the route and work out when successive participants will be picked up. Allow a few extra minutes for latecomers.



- **Afternoon:** Decide on the pick-up time and place at the school. Allow time for packing up, saying goodbye to friends, dressing for the weather, etc.

- Make sure teachers know which students are on the WSB.

► Check for potential dangers along the route

- Choose what seems to be the best route and be sure to highlight potential dangers to students. If there is another possible route, try it as well and compare safety issues.
- If there are no sidewalks, walk facing traffic.
- Be aware of driveways that cross the sidewalk.
- Discuss issues for strollers and wheelchairs if applicable.
- If speeding is a concern, consider launching the Pace Car program aimed at reducing speeds in neighbourhoods (visit www.ecologyaction.ca/pace-car for more information).

► Examine the crosswalks

- Are the visible to the participants and drivers? If there is a light, does it allow enough time for young children in a group to cross? Discuss improvements with local council, planners and traffic engineers if necessary.

Step 5: Implement and celebrate!

► Make the “bus” fun

- Hold theme days such as colour days (everyone wears red one day, blue the next, etc.) or wear your clothes backwards day. Make up songs you can sing on the way.
- Play fun walking music. Go to www.ecologyaction.ca/walking-school-bus (click on Resources) for links to some great walking & wheeling tunes.

► Build in other celebrations throughout the year

- Create your own events to celebrate! Hold an idle-free event or a fitness challenge.
- Consider launching your WSB during International Walk to School Month in October (www.ecologyaction.ca/iwalk).
- Celebrate Winter Walk Day. Choose any day in February, register and receive some prize giveaways. Learn more at www.ecologyaction.ca/winter-walk-day

► Invite the media

- Ask media to participate in the WSB for a day. Invite local partners (police, municipal leaders, school officials, etc.) to join in. This is a great photo opportunity for politicians!
- Learn the policy of your school regarding media. Be sure to get written permission as necessary.
- Recognize volunteer efforts – regularly!
- Consider thank you events for “bus drivers” such as monthly coffee and cookie socials

► Develop awards for volunteers and students and post them in the school

- Consider starting WOW – We Often Walk (or Wheel). It motivates children and youth to walk and wheel more often. Do it in two easy steps once you start your WSB: 1) participants track of number of times they walk or wheel on their WOW cards and 2) once cards are filled, participants receive rewards or recognition. Register at www.ecologyaction.ca/wow to receive your WOW Kit.

► Involve the students

- Encourage students to draw or write about what they see on the WSB.
- Conduct walking classes to learn about the neighbourhood. Relate findings to curriculum.
- Implement the Making Tracks Walking Safety education program at your school that teaches the skills and confidence students need to safely walk in their communities. Learn more at www.ecologyaction.ca/making-tracks

Step 6: Ensure ongoing support

► **Talk to students regularly about why they are participating in the WSB**

- Help them understand how their participation relates to the environment, health, physical activity, safety, etc.

► **Continue to promote the WSB on a regular basis**

- Publish regular newsletter and/or website updates.
- Have a WSB corner in the school newsletter and have students write about their experiences with and feelings about participating in the WSB.
- Print information on other related issues such as air quality, climate change, physical activity, street safety, etc.

Step 7: Evaluate and evolve

► **At the end of the first year of the WSB, survey students and parents/caregivers about their experiences.**

► **Interview WSB participants or hold a focus group and gather anecdotal information.**

► **Report the survey results to the school community and to any project partners, including Ecology Action Centre.**

► **Analyze the results and use them to plan your WSB strategy for the following year.**

► **Plan for the WBS to become part of school policy (i.e. include it in primary enrollment information, school manuals, etc.)**

► **Consider including students on bikes/scooters on the WSB or starting a Bicycle Train!**

For more information on other walking School Bus projects or similar programs, please visit us at www.ecologyaction.ca/issue-area/transportation-projects



Happy & Safe Walking everyone!

Walking School Bus Evaluation

School Name: _____

Town: _____

Contact Person: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Number of Walking School Buses: _____

Provide the following information for each WSB (on separate sheet if necessary):

Route 1:

Specific WSB route name or #: _____

Total number of children enrolled on this route: _____

Typical number of children walking on this route: _____

Number of stops: _____

Route length (KM): _____

Number of morning trips per week (0-5): _____

Number of afternoon trips per week (0-5): _____

Number of months per year (1-9): * _____

Route 2:

Specific WSB route name or #: _____

Total number of children enrolled on this route: _____

Typical number of children walking on this route: _____

Number of stops: _____

Route length (KM): _____

Number of morning trips per week (0-5): _____

Number of afternoon trips per week (0-5): _____

Number of months per year (1-9): * _____

Route 3:

Specific WSB route name or #: _____

Total number of children enrolled on this route: _____

Typical number of children walking on this route: _____

Number of stops: _____

Route length (KM): _____

Number of morning trips per week (0-5): _____

Number of afternoon trips per week (0-5): _____

Number of months per year (1-9): * _____

Scan & email these results to EAC-Transportation at stp-cb@ecologyaction.ca