

# Encouraging Active Transportation to School: Lessons learned from evaluating a pilot Walking School Bus Program in Northeastern Ontario



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## BACKGROUND

- ❖ Physical inactivity among Canadian children is a public health concern as only 9% of boys and 4% of girls meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ Active transportation to school (ATS) may be a way to increase daily PA; however, only 25% of Canadian children and youth use active modes of transportation to and from school.<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ With an increased proportion of children and youth engaging in passive transportation to school (PTS),<sup>3</sup> the current generation is described as the backseat generation.<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ Walking School Buses (WSBs) offer a way to increase ATS and have shown promise in large urban settings and warm climates;<sup>1</sup> however, few studies have considered Northern settings.

## PURPOSE

- ❖ Explore experiences of parents, students, and conductors involved with a Trotibus WSB pilot program.

## METHODS

### Trotibus Walking School Bus Program

- ❖ A 5-week pilot was implemented in two Northeastern Ontario elementary schools (JK to Grade 6) from October to November, 2016.
- ❖ School 1, a neighborhood school, offered three routes scheduled one day each week.
- ❖ School 2, a specialized school, offered two routes scheduled five days per week.

### Evaluation of the Trotibus WSB Program

- ❖ Guided by a pragmatist framework, student (S; n=15) and conductor (C; n=5) focus groups, and one-on-one parent telephone interviews (P; n=7) were conducted.
- ❖ A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participant experiences with the WSB.
- ❖ Data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- ❖ NVivo software was used to organize the data.
- ❖ Transcripts were read and codes were created to identify key themes.
- ❖ A second coder independently reviewed the transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected the codes and themes. No issues in coding were identified.



## RESULTS

- ❖ All student focus group participants (mean age: 6.93 ± 2.25; 8F, 7M) were eligible to take the bus.
- ❖ Five of the parents interviewed walked with their children in varying capacities (i.e., occasional walker, conductor).
- ❖ Parents only opted for another means of transportation to school for their children when weather was bad, and on special days (e.g. picture day and Halloween).

### Health and Social Benefits

- ❖ "Because everything I did was not that I just had to sit down...like walk and get some energy in the morning." (S2-1)
- ❖ "I guess the positive experiences would be promoting healthy lives and promoting exercise, and that not only are we promoting it to the members of the school bus but also, like there is a bit of an awareness....and presenting it as, as an option even." (P6)
- ❖ "...the second thing we really noticed was like his mental – like I don't know if mental health is the right word, but overall like um, general well-being and positivity about going to school, like he was really excited about the walking school bus program." (P3)
- ❖ "I felt more involved in the community...getting to know people who lived in the area and just, getting to know more of [the city]." (C)
- ❖ "And, I liked that um, it was kids of all ages too so he, he kind of walked with kids that he might not otherwise interact with during the school day. So like some you know, primary age kids that he might not see. So I thought that was a nice that it was a real mix of kids." (P2)



### Learning Safety Skills

- ❖ "When my kids get to grade 4 they are going to have to walk...one of the most important benefits is learning the safe route to school and learning walking street safety...." (P3)
- ❖ "They learn their road rules at an early age too. So, the little ones might not have known before we had started this, and now they're more aware of the rules of walking." (C)
- ❖ "Oh, I also learned about like safety when you're walking" (S2-1)

### Participant satisfaction

- ❖ "One of the biggest facilitators of the program going well was having the volunteers from [the] University to be the leaders, because as much as the parent community can help, ... I don't know like they're busy." (P3)
- ❖ "Yes, I did feel it was well organized. The lead volunteers that put it all together and got it organized – I thought it was excellent." (P7)
- ❖ "I think it was well organized for like the first run of it, but um, I think like actually doing it and like, being involved in it like we've noticed some things that could definitely be improved on for the next time." (C)
- ❖ "I would just say, I would hope that this program can continue to be viable and even grow." (P6)

### Implementation Challenges

- ❖ "We had kids that didn't show... and we weren't sure with the communication with the [school] office and stuff like that too." (C)
- ❖ "...we had registered in the spring and then we weren't really sure when it was starting...there's probably room for improvement in terms of timing of communication." (P2)
- ❖ "I think they had a hard time at first. I think they had a hard time carrying their backpacks. But I think it was great for them. I think my daughter preferred the walking school bus over her regular school bus." (P5)
- ❖ "The biggest issue...is the no sidewalks." (C)
- ❖ "We need more volunteers. That part I don't know how to solve that." (P7)

### Moving Forward

- ❖ "I think the future program, we just need more routes ...." (P7)
- ❖ "I cannot imagine having that offloaded to either the school or like a volunteer parent or something.....Having [him] as the public health, as the overall coordinator is huge....., I think that, that should really be prioritized and something that should remain in [his] portfolio because the potential for impact is amazing." (P3)
- ❖ "Maybe we would bring this like wagon, and we could put someone to carry it each day, and we could put all our bags in it." (S2)

## DISCUSSION

- ❖ Despite some initial challenges with communication and logistics, the pilot was described as well organized, with university students and the coordination by the community health promoter playing a big role in the success.
- ❖ Similar to research on WSBs in other settings, positive outcomes included increased physical activity, socialization and learning road safety skills<sup>5</sup>, however mental health benefits were also acknowledged by parents in the current study.
- ❖ Carrying backpacks for long distances was highlighted as a challenge, particularly for the younger walkers, but this could be alleviated by using a wagon to provide assistance.
- ❖ The challenge of volunteer recruitment highlighted in this study is consistently reported in other WSB literature.<sup>5</sup> It is suggested a sustainable WSB program requires paid employees, as opposed to volunteers, to organize and run the program.<sup>2,5</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ The results of this brief pilot provide support for a number of health and social benefits, and parents were supportive of the initiative continuing.
- ❖ Experiences of the parents, students and conductors with the WSB in this study are similar to those reported in other contexts.
- ❖ Sustained initiatives such as WSBs are needed to improve upon the determinants of ATS at the various ecological levels, and will require collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders.



## REFERENCES

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