Exploring parental perceptions of a walking school bus in northern Ontario

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BACKGROUND

- Currently, only 26% of Canadian children and youth use active modes of transportation to and from school (1).
- Increased vehicle dependency results in a loss of independence, road-based skills, social interaction and physical activity (PA) (2).
- The decline in walking to school may reflect increased parental concern about child safety and security (3).
- In order to increase active transportation to school (ATS), methods such as a walking-school bus (WSB) have been proposed as a safe, active way to travel to school (4).
- While we have an understanding of parent decision making in larger urban centres (5), little is known about what influences parent decision making in regards to child WSB participation in other contexts.

PURPOSE

- To explore parental perceptions of a WSB and to describe and explore barriers and facilitators relative to a WSB in a northern context.

METHODS

Setting

- Three elementary schools located in two communities in northeastern Ontario, Canada (populations 54,000 and 5,800).

Participants and Procedures

- Parents of elementary school students (N=16) participated in semi-structured interviews guided by a social marketing approach.

Data Analysis

- Inductive and deductive analyses were used to identify emerging themes (6).
- A second deductive analysis was conducted to further identify barriers and facilitators to a WSB.

RESULTS

Demographics

- 66% of respondents lived > 3.0 km from school, 23% between 1.6 and 3.0 km, and 11% < 1.6km.
- 44% of parents report their children take the bus, 31% were driven to school.

Benefits of a WSB

- "I love the idea, I guess. Activity for the kids, getting them moving, getting some of that energy out before they start their school day and have to sit at their desks for a long period of time." (SCF2)
- "Probably some good conversations, they can walk to school happy together." (SCF5)
- "I think that it is a good way to make sure that our kids are safe walking on their own until they are old enough to be able to do it completely by themselves." (SCF1)

Parent Concerns

- "I'm a little fearful with volunteer adults leading the group, like what if someone doesn't show up for their volunteer work that day." (SAF1)
- "I'm guessing, it depends on what time they're going by the house and weather, if it's -30 C I'm not gonna let the kids walk to school." (SCF4)
- "Like, on my side of the school, there's not much room at all for that kind of traffic. So if you have people walking, you know an adult, and maybe two kids wide behind them. It could be a little bit of a concern, a bit of an issue." (SCF1)

Logistics

- "Other than just our situation of our distance, but say we lived closer absolutely he'd be doing it." (SAF3)
- "The other thing is like, I think in the back of my mind there are no sidewalks. There are absolutely no sidewalks where we live." (SBF1)

Awareness

- "I'm not sure, I guess some kind of like get active initiatives." (SCF2)
- "I think, social media really. Like the school has a website, the school has a Facebook page, the school sends out school wide emails all the time." (SAF3)
- "Possibly creating a Facebook account. Like a Facebook site or something about the walking school bus." (SAM1)

CONCLUSIONS

- The findings suggest that parental concerns regarding a WSB are similar to those of parents in more urban settings.
- Parents had strong concerns related to a lack of sidewalks and extreme amounts of snow experienced in northern Ontario.
- In order to diminish car dependence and encourage WSB uptake, messages that allay parent perceived barriers should be favoured.
- Findings from this study have been used to develop a messaging strategy to promote the WSB at participating schools.

IMPLICATIONS

- Promoting the WSB as a safe, reliable method of transportation might most appeal to parents.
- A WSB is an easy, enjoyable way to engage in PA and an excellent opportunity to foster positive social interactions with other children living nearby.
- Promoting awareness of the WSB through both electronic and paper platforms may have the greatest reach.
- A WSB may be a way to teach children how to safely walk to school in a supervised manner until they are old enough to walk alone.

REFERENCES


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