



**To:** Transport Planners

**From:** Adrian Davis

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**Subject:** School Travel Toolbox: No 12 Walking School Buses

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*Top line:* Walking school buses were found to be associated with increased prevalence of walking to school and general activity levels although not always significantly. Time constraints emerged as barriers to WSBs, impacting on recruitment of volunteers and children to the Walking School Buses.

Trends from North America, Europe, and Australia have shown consistent declines in the proportions of pupils walking to school and significant increases in proportions being driven. In the United States, the number of children being driven to school has been increasing since 1969 with a decline in walking. In Britain, the number of 5- to 10-year-olds being driven to school rose slightly from 38% in 1995/1997 to 42% in 2009/14 with similar findings reported in New Zealand. Research in Canada reported that only 30% of elementary school pupils in Montreal and Trois-Rivières reached school on foot or by bicycle. In Australia, it was reported that only 39% of a self-selected group of respondents of a primary school in Brisbane ever walked to school, with similar findings reported for a Sydney school. The decline in walking to Britain's schools is strongly associated with affordability of cars, which increased during a period of rapid economic growth between 1980 and 2005. The greenhouse gas footprint for English schools in 2006 was estimated at 9.4 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent and 16% of that came from school transport. Walking school buses have the potential to lower these figures.

Walking school buses (WSBs) are commonly cited as one form of active transport (AT) used on the school commute in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. WSBs can be as informal as a small number of families taking it in turns to walk a group of children to school. However, those reported in the literature are predominantly highly structured, involving specific routes, timetables, and trained volunteers. Similarly to other forms of AT, WSBs could increase physical activity in children potentially impacting health while simultaneously reducing congestion outside school gates.

A review demonstrates that WSBs show promise in helping to increase children's physical activity.<sup>1</sup> There was some evidence that regular walking through a WSB could potentially teach children road safety skills as one study found that WSB schools had a 5-fold improvement in children crossing at intersections where they can be seen by traffic versus non-intersection/mid-block locations. Safety concerns. Road safety concerns emerged as the most common barriers to WSBs. Overall, the research outcomes showed that setting up and maintaining WSBs are challenging.

The main barriers are safety concerns of parents, recruitment of people to run the WSBs, and time constraints. Time emerged as a facilitator and a barrier to WSBs as parents saved time when children were using the WSB then lost time if they were involved in the running of the WSB. Other facilitators of WSBs were found to be the sheer enjoyment of children walking and talking on the WSBs on their way to school and information and promotion of WSBs. The researchers recommended that a WSB champion or coordinator role could be formalized and paid with teaching assistant or equivalent role being paid an extra hour or two to run WSBs at the beginning and at the end of the school day.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, L. et al 2015. Walking School Buses as a Form of Active Transportation for Children—A Review of the Evidence. *Journal of School Health*, 85: (3).