

Building a Community: A Walking School Bus Story



As part of the team here at Green Action Centre in the Active and Safe Routes to School Program, I am often asked if I have any experience with my own three children in getting them to walk to school every day. My answer is that yes, I walk my own kids to school on a daily basis, and since 2007 my wife and I have run a Walking School Bus for many of the children in our neighbourhood. I am here to share my story of connections made through a community built walking school bus.

Back when our first child was finally able to attend our local elementary school, we were excited that we would no longer have to drive every other day. Prior to this, our son had attended a Montessori school three days a week in another part of the city that we drove him to. Even though this drive was not particularly far, it was along a rather congested route, resulting in frustratingly long and stressful commutes. We had lived in our neighbourhood for seven years prior to our son attending the local elementary school, but we knew very few folks outside of the other kids and parents on our local street. Within days of walking to school with our son, we had many familiar faces that we began to recognize, and eventually look forward to seeing. Over time, these acquaintances evolved into “play date parents”, and eventually from these times spent visiting, friends.

As time progressed and our other children began to attend the same school as our oldest son, other parents began to notice that we were consistent every day walkers with our kids. Soon we were asked if we could pick up other children along the way, as not all parents had the schedule that could accommodate a morning drop off or afternoon pick up at school. Our little family walking school bus of five soon grew to seven. This eventually evolved into other parents asking if they could drop off their

children at our home in the morning to have us walk their child to school, as they wished for their children be active and walk with their friends to school every day. After this, we received requests for after school pick up and walk home, and after school childcare shortly thereafter. Before we knew it, we had 11 kids on our walking school bus every day!

If you are thinking of starting a walking school bus, here are some of the great benefits our family experienced, that you will hopefully experience as well:

Exercise-It allows our children to get at least 30 minutes of exercise every day as we walk to and from school . Often the walk provides inspiration to go and check out the park on the corner, or to go and play at a friend's house along the way; moments that would not otherwise happen if they were driven.

We know our neighbourhood- Ask me what street has the nicest flowers, what is happening at the community club, what band is playing at the local club, what house is getting renovated, where the nice old lady who is always in her yard is, and what the latest construction zone is, and I am able to tell you right away, as we see this on the daily walk with our kids.

We know our neighbours-Who are now our friends. Walking with our school bus has allowed us to spend time getting to know other parents and kids who walk to school regularly, and live nearby. Some of the best friends that we have today we met by simply walking our kids to school, and meeting many of the awesome and interesting people who live in our neighbourhood.

We get to spend quiet time walking with our kids every day-It is part of our family routine and custom that we walk and talk on our way to and from school. We get to talk about what the day ahead holds, and at the end of the day hear how the day went while it is fresh in their minds.

We know our children's friends- We meet and talk with other kids along the way, many of whom often merge into our group and chat freely as we walk. At school, we can put faces to names as we walk our children to their classrooms and meet their school friends.

We know our children's teachers- Every morning we are able to have a quick check in with our children's teachers, and sort out any issues as they arise. Plus we actually like our kid's teachers, and enjoy these connections themselves. But be warned, this has can lead to volunteering many hours at the school.....!

We save money- As a frugal Winnipegger, I am glad that our vehicles sit for days as we walk our kids to school and bike to work. Kids are expensive as is, so not having to spend money on gas to shuttle them back and forth, as well as reducing the wear and tear on our vehicles means more money saved.

We make the streets safer- Not only are we able to keep the kids on our bus safe from risks such as traffic and bullies, we are able to keep an eye on other kids in the neighbourhood, but also for any suspicious activity, as we are on the streets every day. More eyes on the streets makes for safer streets for everyone.

We make the school safer- By not driving our children to school and walking others, we take several vehicles off of the road that would otherwise be driving amongst walking kids, and then creating congestion around the school itself. I am often given the rather ironic defence by parents that they feel the need to drive their kids to school, as traffic around the school is so crazy. As the line goes, you are not stuck in traffic-you are traffic!

We make the air we breathe cleaner- By not driving, we don't pollute the air that we and others breathe. With heavier traffic around schools, all of these cars in a small area result in reduced air quality. In many communities, the most polluted air in the area is found in the immediate area around the local school.

Life Lessons- As we walk our kids to school, we are modelling behaviour that the car is not the only mode of transportation. This teaches our kids that the default way to get around is not by hopping in our fossil fuel burning cars and rolling up to the front door of the school. This results in the NEXT generation becoming active commuters when they grow up, which means safer, cleaner communities for them as well . My kids prefer to use their bikes when we are going places, and we have had many awesome family adventures on our bikes riding as a family.

Good friends return favours- Although we have never asked to be paid to walk our friend's children to school, we have had our generosity returned many times over through reciprocal child care, gift cards, and even help with renovations. It pays in so many ways.

So this fall as you plan out how to get your kids to school, consider starting a walking school bus for you and your kids. You won't regret it!

If you want assistance with starting your own walking school bus at your child's school, please call the Active and Safe Routes to School Program at Green Action Centre (204.925.3773) anytime, and they would be pleased to provide the support, advice, and resources needed to make this program happen at your school.