

The Walking School Bus Program: A Primer and First Steps

Module 1 (13 minutes): Background – Why We Need Walking School Buses, Anyway

After completing this module, participants will be able to:

- Cite data that quantify how walking to school has declined in the last 50 years;
- Present reasons for this decline and explain why this decline should be reversed;
- Describe the fundamental features of a Walking School Bus (WSB) program;
- Explain how a WSB program can support public policy action;
- Describe the “Five Es” in Safe Routes to School.

Slide 1 (20 sec): Title of training, “The Walking School Bus Program: A Primer and First Steps” title of module, “Module 1: Background – Why We Need Walking School Buses, Anyway”

Hello, and welcome to “The Walking School Bus Program: A Primer and First Steps.” My name’s Michelle Windmoeller - I am the Assistant Director and Director of Programs for the PedNet Coalition, based in Columbia, Missouri, where I oversee one of the largest Walking School Bus programs in the United States.

Slide 2 (50 sec): Table of contents, “Overview of this Module; 1. Why kids don’t walk to school anymore; 2. Why we need more kids walking to school; 3. The Walking School Bus (WSB); 4. Public policy opportunities; 5. The “Five Es”

In this first module, I will provide some background information about why so few American children walk to school these days and why we should be concerned about this decline. I will then make the case that Walking School Bus programs are a popular and effective approach to increase the number of kids walking to school, and mention some public policy opportunities that are presented when Walking School Bus programs get going. Finally, I will describe the “Five Es” that make up the Safe Routes to School action model. Although you may be familiar with some or all of this information, I hope you’ll review it with me so you too can make the case for a Walking School Bus program in your community. Full citations for all statistics quoted in this module are provided in the module transcript, which is available in the “Downloadable Resources” section.

Slide 3 (30 sec): “Decline in Walking/Bicycling to School”, graphic showing data from 1969 and 2009 (All children: Walk/bike, 48% (1969), 13% (2009); Travel by Car, 12% (1969), 44% (2009); **Animate partway through narrative:** Children Living Less Than 1 Mile from School: Walk/Bike: 89% (1969), 35% (2009))

Since 1969, the proportion of American children who walk or bicycle to school has fallen from forty-eight percent to thirteen percent, while students being driven to school has increased four-fold. [Animation] Even among kids living within one mile of school, most are arriving by car or school bus these days – whereas almost ninety percent walked or biked a generation ago. As a result, many communities struggle with traffic congestion around schools during arrival and departure times. In fact, according to research, ten to fourteen percent of morning rush hour trips are generated by private family vehicles taking children to school.

Citations:

- I. *The National Center for Safe Routes to School and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership (2010). U.S. Travel Data Show Decline In Walking And Bicycling To School Has Stabilized: Safe Routes to School Programs Encourage Active, Safe Trips to School. Chapel Hill, NC & Boulder, CO. [Press release] Available: http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/news_room/2010-04-08_2010_nhts_release.cfm. Accessed: March 23, 2011.*
- II. *Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting (2003). Washington DC: Environmental Protection Agency, Report No. 231-R-03-004 Available at <http://www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/pdf/SchoolLocationReport.pdf>. Accessed March 25, 2011.*
- III. *How children get to school: School travel patterns from 1969 to 2009. The National Center for Safe Routes to School (October 2011). Available at: www.saferoutesinfo.org/programtools/NHTS-school-travel-1969-2009. Accessed October 3, 2011.*
- IV. *McDonald N., Brown A., Marchetti L., Pedroso M. (2011). U.S. School Travel 2009: An Assessment of Trends. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 41(2), 146-151.*

Slide 4 (40 sec): Why Kids Don’t Walk to School, #1: Distance to School, photograph of suburban mega-school

Let's talk about a few of the reasons why fewer children walk or bike to school than in the past. One of the most challenging problems to address is the distances children travel to school these days. Since 1969, thousands of neighborhood schools have closed and been replaced with schools located on highways, further away from where the children live. This change has been driven by economics, as school districts have looked to consolidate resources and acquire cheaper land on the edge of towns. ... Even with excellent sidewalks and pedestrian crossings, children and families will not walk more than about a mile each way to and from school so, at first glance, this appears to be an impossible problem.

Slide 5 (40 sec): Why Kids Don't Walk to School, #2: Traffic Danger, photograph of unsafe, congested street
Even when families live close to school, many parents choose not to let their children walk. If you ask a room full of elementary school parents whether they walked to school as kids, about half of them will raise their hands. If you then ask whether they let their kids walk to school today, most will say "no," and if you ask them why, many will cite traffic danger. ... Since the 1960s, the number of motor vehicles in the U.S. has almost quadrupled to more than a quarter of a billion. Over the same period, road capacity and traffic speeds have increased dramatically, while sidewalk construction has declined. With these changes in the built environment, it's understandable that some parents have reservations.

Citations:

- I. **U.S. Department of Transportation's Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA), Available: http://www.bts.gov/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_01_11.html. Accessed: February 15, 2012.**
- II. **U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), Motor Vehicle Traffic Crashes As a Leading Cause of Death in the United States, 2005, Available: <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810936.PDF>. Accessed: February 15, 2012.**

Slide 6 (40 sec): Why Kids Don't Walk to School, #3: Personal Safety Concerns, photograph of older child walking to school alone

When promotion of walking and bicycling to school is discussed, the issue of personal safety often arises. The range of concerns is broad and often not unique to the trip to school - parents and children may face fears around bullying, violent crime, exposure to gang activities or even abduction. At some schools, there are real challenges to keeping students safe on their journey to school while, at others, the perception of what might happen is the greatest concern. Whether the risks are real or perceived, personal safety and traffic safety must both be addressed if more kids are going to walk to school in the future. One of the strengths of the Walking School Bus program is that it elegantly addresses both concerns, and it can be an important component of a broader, community-wide, response.

Slide 7 (20 sec): Why We Need More Kids Walking to School, #1: Child Overweight and Obesity, map graphic showing current child overweight and obesity rates by state

So against these kinds of odds, why try to increase walking and bicycling? Since 1980, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has tripled among school-age children and adolescents, and it remains high at approximately 17%. These kids - more than ten million of them - are at increased risk for cardiac disease, type-2 diabetes, stroke, and certain cancers; many could face a lifetime of chronic disease, disability, and early death.

Citations:

- I. **Trust for America's Health and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010). *F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future*. Available at <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2010/Obesity2010Report.pdf>. Accessed on March 25, 2011.**
- II. **Ogden, C. L., Margaret, C. D., Curtin, L. R., Flegal, K.M, & Lamb, M. M. (2010). Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents, 2007-2008. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 303(3), 242-249.**
- III. **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA (2009). *Overweight and Obesity*. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/consequences.html>. Accessed March 25, 2011.**
- IV. **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Office of the Surgeon General, Rockville, MD. (2007). *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*. Available at http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm. Accessed March 25, 2011.**

Slide 8(40 sec): Why We Need More Kids Walking to School, #2: Physical Activity, photo of kids walking vigorously

Not getting enough physical activity is a key risk factor for obesity and walking and bicycling to school are ways to build physical activity into a child's day. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that children get one hour or more of physical activity every day. A daily Walking School Bus program – operating in the morning and afternoon can help participating kids attain needed physical activity. Ongoing research using 24-hour accelerometers (pedometers that record total activity levels) suggests that children participating in a Walking School Bus program show less of a decline in physical activity as they age compared to children not participating in the walking school bus program. The Walking School Bus program may be a trigger for developing a more active lifestyle in general.

Citation:

I. Sayers, SP, in review, American Journal of Preventive Medicine

Slide 9 (50 sec): Why We Need More Kids Walking to School, #3: The Learning Environment, photo of kids in classroom

Many elementary school teachers will tell you that their students perform better when they are getting regular physical exercise. And yet, today's children often move from bed to breakfast table to school bus to classroom without burning any calories or getting any oxygen to their brains. The result is a combination of lethargy, lack of engagement, and disruptive behavior, simply because they haven't had the chance to burn some energy ... Ongoing research is starting to demonstrate improvements in both behavior and educational achievement when children engage in early morning physical activity, such as walking to school. One principal at a Columbia school, where a staging post Walking School Bus program operated during certain months commented, "There is a palpable reduction in tension in the hallways when the Walking School Bus is operating. The program gets our school day off to a calm and productive start, which carries through to the final bell."

Slide 10 (40 sec): Why We Need More Kids Walking to School, #4: Traffic Congestion and Air Quality around schools, close-up photograph of bus or car tailpipe

Another health risk for children is the high level of vehicle exhaust fumes that accumulate around schools. With literally hundreds of cars and school buses crawling around the circle drive and past the front door, much of this polluted air ends up inside the school building. Parents' vehicles are often idling for ten or fifteen minutes in close vicinity of the school. Is this a good environment for children to study and learn? Walking School Buses can play a role in reducing congestion and improving air quality by encouraging fewer cars on the road and vehicle emissions in the air, especially around the school. Every student who walks or bicycles to school is potentially one less car on the road.

Slide 11 (40 sec): Why We Need More Kids Walking to School, #5: Transportation costs, photograph showing large number of schoolbuses

Finally, as a result of school migration to the edges of cities over the last generation, transportation costs for school districts and individual families has risen. Most districts provide free transportation for thousands of children, and so - as travel distances have increased and walk-to-school rates have fallen - the transportation cost to school districts has ballooned. In the 2004-2005 school year, a total of \$17 billion was spent on student transportation nationwide. ... With current budget cuts, free transportation is now being withdrawn in many districts, leading to more parents driving their kids to school. However, Walking School Buses can be part of the solution to this problem by providing a safe and healthy way for some children to travel to school.

Citation:

I. Digest of Education Statistics, 2007. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008. Available http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_176.asp?referrer=list. Accessed March 6, 2012.

Slide 12 (40 sec): The Walking School Bus model, photograph of kids on a WSB

With its central feature of trained adult volunteers leading groups of kids, the Walking School Bus program addresses both the traffic danger and personal safety concerns of parents. Not only does it address many reasons why children don't walk to school anymore, but it also has added benefits.

Slide 13 (50 sec): Benefits of the WSB program, #1: Social Opportunity, photograph of kids having fun while walking to school

If you have ever participated in a Walking School Bus or a Walk-to-School Day, you will know that this is an activity that children enjoy – especially those who usually travel to school in a car or bus. ... Along the way, many kids like to pick up sticks and stones, study bugs and interesting fungi, or just walk together and talk. As long as important safety rules – which I will discuss in detail in Module 3– are obeyed by everyone, these are perfectly normal activities, which help make the walk to school an enjoyable experience for everyone. ... The Walking School Bus is a great social opportunity for adults, too. Whether the leaders are parents, college students, or community volunteers, the chance to walk and talk with friends or make new ones is a valuable experience. And everyone is getting that important physical activity at the same time.

Slide 14 (20 sec): Benefits of the WSB program, #2: Social Support, photograph of WSB led by parents

Even with an understanding of the many benefits of walking to school, many families find it challenging to work into their work schedules every day. A Walking School Bus that may only require the parent to be a leader one or two days a week provides a support system to allow a family to participate that otherwise may have to opt out. And you can even include students who live too far away to walk or bike from home by establishing a remote drop off site, or staging post. A staging post is a location up to half a mile from the school where cars and buses unload. Children then walk – under adult supervision – from the staging post to school in the mornings, and back in the afternoons, gaining the dual health benefits of exercise and clean air.

Slide 15 (20 sec): Benefits of the WSB program, #3: Pedestrian Safety Education

While many parents and schools may provide safety education materials to children, nothing takes the place of learning while doing. Walking School Buses provide the opportunity for adults to teach children safe pedestrian behaviors, and for children to practice these skills in a real but safe setting while supervised, giving them skills they will use for a lifetime.

Slide 16(1 min): Benefits of the WSB program, #4: Changing the Habits of an Entire Generation, photograph of James Oberstar

Lastly, I want to talk about a long-term potential benefit of the Walking School Bus program. Congressman James Oberstar, who crafted the first federal Safe Routes to School program back in 2005. He described the legislation as, “Changing the habits of an entire generation.” ... Mr. Oberstar realized that the conditions that conspired to reduce walk to school rates from forty-eight percent to thirteen percent would not be reversed overnight – that this was a long-term project that would require a transformational change in cultural attitudes to transportation. Millions of Americans would need to start walking and bicycling for short journeys, and start demanding policies and infrastructure changes that make active transportation safe and feasible. And where better to start than with the current generation of children? Children are instinctively active, they are less set in their routines than adults and more open to new ideas, and those new ideas will stay with them for a lifetime. Therefore, every child who participates in a Walking School Bus has an increased potential to grow into an adult, voter, or policymaker who will advocate for healthy, active communities for everyone.

Slide 17 (40 sec): Policy Opportunities, photograph of large number of kids walking to school together

Many Safe Routes to School organizers work to change public policies, transportation funding priorities, and infrastructure to make it safer, more convenient, and more normal for kids to walk and bicycle to school. By establishing a popular and well-organized Walking School Bus program at your school, you can become the spokesperson for a credible and effective effort to change public policies that will result in more kids walking and bicycling to school. Policy changes may take place at the school, school district, City or County level. Examples range from enforcing a single-line car and bus drop-off policy that improves safety in front of school, to organizing an educational campaign that leads to the allocation of public funds to build sidewalks, crosswalks and traffic calming systems around schools. We’ll talk more about policy opportunities in Module 7.

Slide 18 (30 sec): The Five “Es” with “#1 Encouragement” and “#2 Education” highlighted, photograph of WSB program

Safe Routes to School programs use “The Five Es” to help practitioners plan and organize their work. The first and second “Es” are “Encouragement” and “Education” and the Walking School Bus approach is a great example of both. In addition to encouraging parents and children to walk to school on a regular basis, children have the opportunity to learn and practice pedestrian safety skills. The program can also be designed to incorporate education about the numerous benefits of walking to school.

Slide 19 (30 sec): The Five “Es” with “#3 Enforcement” and “#4 Engineering” highlighted, photographs of enforcement and engineering solutions

The third and fourth “Es” in the “Five Es” framework are “Enforcement” and “Engineering.” In this area, school officials, parents, children and others involved in the Safe Routes to School program can inform the community about pedestrian safety around schools, work with police departments to step up enforcement of speed limits around schools and work with policymakers to impose stricter speed limits where children might be walking. Safe Routes to School practitioners can also work with elected leaders to construct sidewalks, crosswalks, and traffic calming devices, where they are needed.

Slide 20 (40 sec): The Five “Es” with “#5 Evaluation” highlighted, graphic showing part of Student Travel Tally Form

The fifth “E,” Evaluation means measuring and tracking progress to determine the results of your efforts. To do this, you’ll need to know how the kids are traveling to and from your school before you start your Walking School Bus. After you complete this module, you can go to the “downloadable resources” section and download the National Center’s Student Travel Tally Form for determining the numbers of children who normally walk to school, ride a bicycle, or arrive by car or bus. This form makes it easy for teachers and volunteers to collect accurate data in class. Instructions are included with the form and it is recommended that you repeat the survey annually, at the same time of year so you can monitor any changes and hopefully see an increase in walking and bicycling numbers.

Slide 21 (20 sec): Summary of Module 1, photograph of a Walking School Bus

Well, this is the end of Module 1. I discussed the reasons fewer American children are walking to school than a generation ago, some issues our children and schools face today, and the many benefits a Walking School Bus program can provide a community. In the next module, I will help you to start planning your Walking School Bus program.

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