

Let's Walk to School Together!

A Walking School Bus Training Manual
for Safe Routes to School Programs





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What is Safe Routes to School?

The number of children who walk or bicycle to school in the United States has steadily decreased over the past 50 years. At the same time, communities are seeing increases in traffic around schools, traffic collisions, air pollution, and childhood obesity.

“Safe Routes to School” programs are designed to increase the number of children walking and bicycling to school safely. In addition to positively impacting many communities across the nation, these programs:

- Teach children how to walk to school safely
- Improve student health by cultivating early physical activity habits
- Make walking to school safer by reducing motor vehicle collision injuries and fatalities
- Reduce driving and traffic congestion around schools, leading to better air quality
- Improve academic performance, self-confidence, and independence among children
- Increase physical activity for the whole community

A comprehensive Safe Routes to School program involves multiple approaches with different partners. A complete Safe Routes to School program should address the following “5 E’s”:

1. Engineering – making sure the streets and sidewalks around the school are built for safety
2. Education – ensuring children, parents, and neighbors know how to walk, bike, and drive safely
3. Encouragement – making it fun for children, parents, and neighbors to walk and bike
4. Enforcement – ensuring traffic laws and school policies are followed
5. Evaluation – checking progress of the program and making changes as needed

The “5 E’s” involve different types of skills and talents. For example, Engineering is usually the responsibility of your local city, whereas Enforcement is usually the responsibility of school police and local law enforcement. Successful Safe Routes to School programs need help and support from several types of people, including:

1. Parents
2. School and School District staff
3. City staff
4. Law Enforcement Officials
5. Local Businesses
6. Neighbors

Parents have an important role in Safe Routes to School programs. They are familiar with the school, families, and community, and are invested in the safety of their child. Getting a group of dedicated parents to start Safe Routes to School programs at their school increases the success of such programs continuing over many years.



What is the Walking School Bus?

The Walking School Bus is one of many possible adult-led Safe Routes to School programs. Instead of being driven to school in a traditional yellow school bus, students walk to school with the Walking School Bus. It is a group walk to and/or from school supervised by adults. Parents, neighbors, and school staff volunteers meet at a specific, pre-determined location and time, and supervise children for the walk to school. Parents can either drop their children off at the Walking School Bus “bus stop,” or walk their children along with the group.

The Walking School Bus is a fun and engaging way to get more students physically active by walking together. This program is especially successful when parents are interested in having their child walk to school, but are concerned about letting their child walk alone, unsupervised.

Who should use this Walking School Bus Training Manual?

The Walking School Bus Training Manual is designed as a comprehensive resource for leaders of Safe Routes to School committees, general Safe Routes to School volunteer coordinators, and adult or parent school volunteer leaders. A Walking School Bus can be customized to your school, and be as fun, engaging, and creative as you want it to be.

What does the Walking School Bus Training Manual include?

The training manual outlines 6 phases to implement a Walking School Bus program. The 6 phases are flexible and do not necessarily need to be completed in the order they are listed.

The resources listed in this manual are additional detailed materials for planning a Walking School Bus program. All can be found at

http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/place/PLACE_Built_Environment_Resources.htm

and include:

- Sample forms to recruit parent volunteers and register children for the program
- Talking points to engage the school principal
- Sample flyers to inform neighbors
- Tips to train children about road safety

On the web page, sample documents are organized in the order they are introduced in this manual. After reading the manual and becoming familiar with the planning phases, volunteer leaders will be more prepared to launch a successful program.



Recommended Phases for Planning a Walking School Bus

PHASE 1

Establish a relationship with school staff and parents

Successful Walking School Bus programs have support from school staff. Having these relationships will make planning and launching the Walking School Bus program much easier. Meet with the school principal to explain what Safe Routes to School is and ask for support in starting a Walking School Bus. Talk to the principal about any concerns he or she may have about the program. Work with the school principal to ensure the Walking School Bus program follows any required or recommended school and district procedures (such as volunteer background checks, permission slips, volunteer trainings, etc.).

If needed, ask the principal to connect you to the school district's legal staff to determine any risk management or insurance needs for the Walking School Bus program. School districts usually have a large insurance policy covering a range of school-sponsored activities, like off-site field trips.

For more information about liability for Safe Routes to School visit:
<http://saferoutesinfo.org/sites/default/files/liabilitytipsheet.pdf>

Next, find ways to connect with other parents, school staff, and community members. Ask the principal to connect you to other parents and school staff through events such as "coffee with the principal," or through the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Use these meetings to introduce the Walking School Bus and build interest in the program.



- Keep a list of contact information (name, phone number, e-mail, and relationship with school) of all interested people, as they will form the foundation for a Walking School Bus Committee.

PHASE 1 RESOURCES:

- (1) *Sample phone talking points to principal*
- (2) *Sample informational handout to school staff*
- (3) *Sample informational handout to parents*



PHASE 2

Establish a Walking School Bus Committee

After you have done some initial outreach, identify a core group of the volunteers (principal, teachers, parents, neighbors) who will commit to meeting regularly to develop, organize, and implement the Walking School Bus program. This committee could even be part of an existing group, such as the PTA or English Learner Advisory Committee. Reach out to these contacts and invite them to an initial committee meeting.



- **The more volunteers you have to help plan the Walking School Bus, the less responsibility and time each person will need to commit to the program.**

PHASE 2 RESOURCES:

(4) *Sample parent training flyer*

PHASE 3

Establish roles and responsibilities of the volunteers

During this phase, your committee will need to agree on the details of the Walking School Bus program as well as the roles and responsibilities of each committee member. Identify a Walking School Bus coordinator to serve as the lead organizer.

This person will lead the committee meetings, keep the committee focused, and help organize action items for the Walking School Bus program. The coordinator should become familiar with the training manual and be ready to lead future meetings.

The following are key concepts to be discussed during the first committee meeting; the points listed below can serve as an agenda. The group should be able to discuss and assign the following parts of a Walking School Bus program during one, 90-minute meeting.

1. Decide when to have the **first Walking School Bus** event. Often, schools have used International Walk to School Day as a launch event, which happens on the first Wednesday of October. It is likely that your committee will need *at least* one month to plan for the first event.
2. Decide on the best way to communicate with all committee members between meetings. For example, you can create a **communication phone tree** where each member is responsible for passing on messages to two other members, and each of those two members have two other designated people to call, and so forth until the message reaches all of the members.
3. Decide on **Walking School Bus meeting location(s) and route(s)**. Consider having a large map available at the meeting to help document the group's ideas. In deciding on location(s) and route(s), consider:



- Location
 - Distance from school – is it within a reasonable walking distance to the school (one mile or less)?
 - Size – is there enough space for the volunteers and children to gather at the meeting spot safely?
 - Availability of parking – is there enough parking nearby for parents to drop off children at the meeting location?
 - Safe place to meet – is it visible, a community landmark, and a recognizable place?
 - Location - is it close to a large number of potential walkers, or to where most families live or where children are already walking from?
 - Route and Safety
 - Length – is it a reasonable distance for the age of students (young children may only be able to walk short distances)?
 - Number and type of street crossings – are there few intersections, and do the streets have traffic signals or stop signs?
 - Sidewalks – are there sidewalks available along the route?
 - School start time – is the route reliable so that students will get to school on time?
4. Develop a **walking schedule** for each route. When developing the schedule, be sure to consider that young children walk more slowly than adults, and it will take a group of students longer to walk to school. As a group, decide if the route is long enough to need “bus stops” along the way. Bus stops would allow students living along the route to join in as the group walks by instead of having to start at the first meeting location. The Walking School Bus should always leave at the same time to ensure that the students arrive to class on time.
 5. Assign parents and/or adult **volunteers** as “walk leaders” for each route. At least 3 adults are needed for each Walking School Bus route (one in front, one in back, one in the middle), but it is preferable to have more adults to accompany children. The number of dedicated volunteers will determine how many children and routes the Walking School Bus can organize.
 6. Discuss how to make the Walking School Bus program **exciting**. The program should be fun and exciting to encourage students, parents, and school staff to participate. This is a great opportunity to get creative and tailor the program to your school. For example, ask “can we make the Walking School Bus fun at school by holding classroom poster competitions?” or “can we make the actual route fun by handing out incentives before the walk or holding hand-made posters?”
 7. Discuss how to **advertise** the Walking School Bus. For example, ask “how should we let parents know about the Walking School Bus?” or “how does the school usually communicate with parents and can we use the same methods?”



8. Work backwards from the kick-off Walking School Bus event date to develop a **timeline** of the tasks necessary to start the program. A part of each committee meeting should include an update on the timeline and the work completed to date.
9. **Decide how often the committee will meet** to plan the Walking School Bus, and check-in on progress. How often you meet will depend on the goals of the program. It may be helpful to establish a standing meeting such as, “the first and third Monday of the month at 5:00 p.m.”



- **Take detailed and organized notes during the planning meeting(s) of discussion points, key decisions, and action steps. This will help you document the group’s thoughtful and intentional Walking School Bus planning process.**
- **Get permission from participants to take photos and document the planning meetings.**
- **Try and give committee members at least 2 – 3 weeks to complete assigned tasks from the first phase.**
- **It is a good idea to have the proposed walking route reviewed by the school, city officials, and local law enforcement. You can use a map planning tool such as the one found on the “Walk Bike to School” website (<http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/keep-going/map-a-route>) to document your route, or simply print and draw on a paper map. You should also check with any local business owners about meeting in their parking lot, as needed.**

PHASE 3 RESOURCES:

- (5) *Sample committee meeting agenda*
- (6) *Sample meeting sign-in sheet*
- (7) *Sample phone tree*
- (8) *Volunteer emergency contact information*
- (9) *Sample Walking School Bus map*

PHASE 4

Recruit Walking School Bus program participants

This next phase focuses on building support and enthusiasm from the larger community to participate in the Walking School Bus, and follow-up on key tasks from the previous phase. Much of the work described will need to happen outside of committee meetings, and will be the responsibility of individual volunteers.

1. **Confirm walk leaders.** Follow-up with those who signed up to be walk leaders, and ensure the volunteers are committed to the first Walking School Bus event. At least 3 adult walking leaders should be present with each Walking School Bus. Ask walk leaders whether they have access to a cell phone; at least one walk leader should have a cell phone



to easily communicate with the school or emergency services. In addition, be sure to have emergency contact information available for all the volunteers.

- 2. To participate.** Use the communication channels that work best for your school (assemblies, record phone messages, school website, etc.) to reach parents. Your outreach should describe the Walking School Bus program, its benefits, the walking schedule with location(s), route(s) and time(s), as well as provide instructions on how to register students.

The registration form should also include information on potential risks and a voluntary consent with required signature from the parent. Work with your school and committee to develop a system for collecting and documenting the registration forms.

- 3. Inform neighbors about the program.** It is important to inform neighbors and local business owners along the Walking School Bus route so they know what to expect the day of the Walking School Bus event. Distribute flyers or door hangers to neighbors along or near the Walking School Bus route. Include information describing the program, how it will impact them, and invite them to come out in the morning during the walk to encourage the students walking to school. If any residents are interested in volunteering, be sure to have them sign the consent forms and follow the same training and “sign up” procedures as other school and parent volunteers.
- 4. Inform the larger community.** It is also a good idea to work with your local city staff, law enforcement, fire department, business owners, and other community stakeholders. Reaching out beyond the school environment to include more community members will increase ownership of the program, and help build and strengthen community ties. Use existing community methods to advertise and remind neighbors of the Walking School Bus such as door hangers, local newspaper, community centers, and town hall meetings.
- 5. Gather materials and incentives.** Below is a list of items you may want to consider keeping on hand for your Walking School Bus. These materials are optional; however, they will make the coordination and execution of the Walking School Bus smoother. Consider gathering the following:
 - High visibility safety vests – for Walking School Bus leaders to wear and to enhance visibility of the group
 - Whistles – to get the attention of participants for important announcements or in case of safety concerns
 - Traffic flags – to carry when crossing the street to increase visibility of the group to drivers
 - Clipboards – to check-off participant names and fill-out any last-minute forms
 - Backpacks – to carry all materials for the program
 - Paper – to print registration forms, flyers, and handouts
 - Pens
 - Storage bin – to store all materials between Walking School Bus days

Incentives can make the program more fun for children and help increase and encourage participation. Incentives should be age-appropriate. Examples of incentive items for elementary school children include:



- Pencils
- Stickers
- Water bottles
- T-shirts

Examples of incentive items for middle school and high school children include:

- Pedometers
- Re-usable bags
- Light-up bracelets
- Gift certificates

Prizes can be given out to celebrate milestones such as participating in five Walking School Bus days, classroom competitions for most students walked, or longest distances walked, etc.

Donations of the above and other materials to help promote or sustain the program can be very helpful. Consider reaching out to the PTA, local businesses, public school foundations, local community foundations, and your city for donations.



- **Once the committee has a list of potential volunteers, the list should be shared with the school for approval. Work with the school and the school district to carry out established procedures for vetting the volunteers.**
- **Keep paperwork organized and complete when registering children for the Walking School Bus. Make a master list of registered students and make copies for each Walking School Bus group.**
- **Get creative with your outreach techniques and incentive items to match the interests of your community and school.**

PHASE 4 RESOURCES:

- (3) Sample informational handout to parents*
- (10) Sample launch flyer with bus route and bus schedule*
- (11) Sample student registration form*
- (12) Sample parent and student expectation registration forms*
- (13) Sample volunteer sign-up form*
- (14) Sample approved volunteer list*
- (15) Sample informational flyer to neighbors along bus routes*
- (16) Sample donation letter*



PHASE 5

Train Walking School Bus leaders and the volunteers

During this phase, you will focus on training Walking School Bus leaders on safe walking strategies, as well as ensure all committee members are aware of their duties prior to the kick-off event. Committee members should meet one last time, at least one week before the first Walking School Bus, to ensure all responsibilities are covered. Use a flyer to promote open trainings for interested volunteers.

- 1. Train Walking School Bus leaders and volunteers.** Walking safely with a large group of children is different than walking alone, or with a single child. Finding the right volunteers, training them, and supporting their role in the program is a key responsibility of the Walking School Bus committee. Take time during this phase to make sure walk leaders are trained, and feel comfortable leading the walk. Below are some key points to consider reviewing with the volunteers:
 - **Set clear expectations for walk leaders and volunteers.** Walk leaders will have several responsibilities during the walk, such as ensuring the Walking School Bus leaves on time, shepherding students across intersections safely, or photographing the event. It may be useful to print “volunteer instruction cards” to hand out the day of the event. For example, while the Walking School Bus may have other adults joining the walk (parents walking with their children or school staff), the walk leaders are in charge of the Walking School Bus and are strongly encouraged to wear safety vests.

Examples of day of duties include:

- Arriving early to the meeting location(s) with any necessary equipment (cones, safety vests, posters, incentives, etc.)
 - Designating front, middle, and back walk leaders
 - Greeting families and students as they arrive
 - Check-off registered children from master list
 - Noting unregistered children to register and/or register day of
 - Distributing incentives (if available)
 - Reviewing rules of the Walking School Bus with students and parents
 - Photographing the event for promotional and educational materials
 - Ensuring a timely departure schedule
- **Set expectations and boundaries for students.** It is important to review basic rules for all students at the start of each Walking School Bus. This will help maximize safety, minimize the need for behavior management, and make the walk smoother for walk leaders. Create 3 – 5 simple rules to share at the beginning of each walk. You may want to make a big sign of the rules for students to read along. It is also a good idea to print out the rules for all walk leaders and adult volunteers. For example, one rule could be “students should not pass the front walk leader, or fall behind the back walk leader.”



- **Review how to cross intersections with large groups.** Practice crossing the street with the Walking School Bus leaders. Have one walk leader stand in the middle of the intersection during the crossing, while the rest of the adults guide the Walking School Bus across the intersection. A group ratio of 10 children (or fewer) to 1 adult is ideal to maximize safety. Break the Walking School Bus into smaller groups when crossing busy intersections.
- **Learn proper hand signals to communicate with vehicles.** Teach adult volunteers firm and clear hand signals to communicate with drivers. Local law enforcement may be able to provide training or provide additional resources.
- **Establish communication channels.** If walk leaders are different than the Walking School Bus planning committee members, decide on the best way to communicate with all walk leaders before and in-between Walking School Bus days. For example, you can create a **communication phone tree** where each member is responsible for passing on a message to two other members, and each of those two members have two other designated people to call, and so forth. The communication plan will be used to pass on news such as a cancelled Walking School Bus due to weather, or when a walk leader cannot make a scheduled shift and needs to find a substitute.
- **Discuss other policies and procedures related to the Walking School Bus.** It is very important that all the volunteers and committee members clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. Other policies to develop include: how to handle injury or illness en-route, how to handle behavior issues, how to handle children who participate but are not registered, etc.



- **Work with your local law enforcement, school, and city to see if they can provide formal trainings for the volunteers.**
- **Keep track of which volunteers complete trainings.**

PHASE 5 RESOURCES:

- (4) *Sample parent training flyer*
- (8) *Volunteer emergency contact information*
- (10) *Sample launch flyer with bus route and bus schedule*
- (17) *Sample photo release at event entrance*
- (18) *Sample volunteer instruction card for day of Walking School Bus*
- (19) *Sample safety tips*
- (20) *Principles behind child pedestrian injury for volunteer training*
- (21) *Tips on training children about road safety for volunteer training*
- (22) *Tips to safely cross roads*
- (23) *Sample phone tree*
- (24) *Sample sensitive and personal information*
- (25) *Example contingency plan for the Walking School Bus*



PHASE 6

Launch your Walking School Bus!

Your hard work has paid off – it's time to launch the Walking School Bus!

Before the Walking School Bus kick-off event, work with the principal, school staff, and students to advertise the event. Use school methods such as assemblies, newsletters, take-home reminders, and posters to let the school community get excited for the event. Work with students to make signs and posters to use during the kick-off. Make sure everyone is invited and aware of the event: principal, school staff, students and families, city staff, law enforcement, businesses, community members, etc. To increase participation, let students know of any incentives they can earn by joining the kick-off event and walking with additional Walking School Buses.



- **Have fun and celebrate the Walking School Bus kick-off event! Everyone worked very hard to plan and launch this exciting program.**
- **After the event, meet with the committee to discuss what worked and what could be improved. Determine the date of the next Walking School Bus!**



Additional Information

1. The National Center for Safe Routes to School
 - <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/>
 - <http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/>
 - *10 Tips for Safe Routes to School Programs and Liability Tip Sheet*
 - i. <http://saferoutesinfo.org/sites/default/files/liabilitytipsheet.pdf>
2. City of Los Angeles Walk to School Day
 - <http://www.walktoschoolday-la.org/>
3. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership
 - <http://saferoutespartnership.org/>
4. Walk Bike to School
 - <http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/>
 - <http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/keep-going/map-a-route>
5. Oregon Safe Routes to School
 - <http://walknbike.org/>
6. Changelab Solutions (Public Health Law and Policy)
 - *Safe Routes to School: Minimizing Your Liability Risk*
 - i. <http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/SRTS-resources>
7. Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center
 - <http://www.pedbikeinfo.org/>
8. Government of Western Australia, Department of Transportation. “The Walking School Bus Departmental Volunteer Training Manual”
 - http://www.transport.wa.gov.au/mediaFiles/activetransport/AT_TS_P_WSB_training_manual.pdf
9. Beach Cities Health District. “Walking School Bus Volunteer Training Program”
 - <http://bchd.org/wsb>

Endnotes

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