

The Walking School Bus Program

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LEARNINGS FROM VICHEALTH'S PILOT PROGRAM 2001

In 2001, the Wellness Promotion Unit, Victoria University (VU), was contracted by VicHealth to undertake a multi-project evaluation of the first 12 months of VicHealth's Pilot Walking School Bus Program. This report summarises the findings from this evaluation.¹ Additional information has also been sourced from *The Walking School Bus Program: An Exploratory Study of the Perceptions and Experiences of Council Coordinators* by Susan Scard.²

We are very pleased the Walking School Bus Program has caught the community's imagination. It is a key program to increase physical activity and improve mental health and wellbeing of young school age Victorians. Our job at the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation is to recognise such great opportunities to improve Victorians' health and then support their development until they gain a foothold in the community.

The physical, mental health, safety and environmental benefits that can flow to the community and individuals by participating in the Walking School Bus have been widely recognised. This has meant tremendous interest has been shown by Councils, schools teachers and parents to find out how to establish a walking school bus in their community. VicHealth's pilot program, from which the results of this evaluation are drawn, funded four local councils in 2001-2002 and had 13 participating schools. It was such a success that VicHealth funded a further 29 local councils to implement phase 2 and 3 of the Program in 2002-2003. As a result, there are currently around 145 primary schools in Victoria involved in running or getting their walking school buses off the ground. It is our objective to see programs such as the Walking School Bus offered by all primary schools in the State.

The evaluation was undertaken by the Wellness Promotion Unit, Victoria University. It led to this report prepared by VicHealth and helps inform the program's expansion. We are now able to make it available to a wider audience so that those involved in walking school bus projects at the local level can give their projects every chance of success. It's a great program and we thank everyone who has contributed to its initial success.



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Copies of this publication may be obtained from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

It is also available at: <http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/wsb>

Cover: Students and volunteers from St Kilda Park Primary School on the walking school bus.

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- Victoria University, Wellness Promotion Unit who undertook the evaluation process
- Tess Pryor for bringing together the final evaluation report
- The councils, schools and volunteers involved in the implementation of the Pilot Walking School Bus Program.

Background

THE WALKING SCHOOL BUS PROGRAM

Today, most children are likely to be transported to and from places and activities by car. One third of Melbourne children spend less than five minutes walking per day. More than 80% of trips made to accompany children to school in Melbourne are by car. A United Kingdom report has indicated that journeys to school by car doubled in the last decade.³

Inactive children are more likely to be overweight.⁴ The proportion of Australian children who are overweight recently reached 25%.⁵ Any opportunity for school children to be more physically active is good for developing healthy physical activity habits which may continue into adulthood. Studies show that less active children tend to become less active adults.⁶

A recent study from the University of Bristol looking at children who walk to school has found that boys who walked to school were more active after school and in the evening, than those who were driven to school.⁷

Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of premature death as well as coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, Type 2 diabetes and can improve mental health. It is also vital for the health of muscles, bones and joints.⁸

VicHealth recognises physical activity and mental health and wellbeing as two priority health action areas.⁹ With this in mind, concepts such as the Walking School Bus model were explored. Various Walking School Bus Programs had been implemented effectively in other countries. Evaluation of these programs showed that participation in the program had lead to increased physical activity and increased community connectedness among participating children and adults.¹⁰

In 2001, VicHealth was invited by the Lead Agency Committee on Physical Activity to take a leading role in initiating and developing a Walking School Bus Program in Victoria. The development of a Victorian Walking School Bus model was assisted by a statewide network of government and non-government agencies that had already generated or planned complementary initiatives and policies across Victoria.

The Walking School Bus – What is it?

The Walking School Bus is not a vehicle but an alternative way to encourage primary school children to walk to and from school rather than being driven. Children walk in a group with an adult driver/supervisor at the front and an adult conductor/supervisor at the rear. The bus travels along a set route picking up additional passengers along the way at designated bus stops.

Walking School Bus routes are safety audited and the ratio of adults to children is at least 1:8. Children and adult volunteers often wear bright distinctive safety sashes. The drivers and conductors are registered under the participating Council's Volunteer Policy, are subject to police checks and required to undergo training in road safety, duty of care and first aid.

There are several international Walking School Bus Programs in countries such as New Zealand, United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada and Denmark.

The Walking School Bus Program has the potential to deliver considerable individual and community benefits.

- **Health benefits** – walking to and from school provides children with the opportunity to engage in regular physical activity.
- **Environmental benefits** – every journey made on foot reduces traffic congestion and pollution outside and around schools and helps improve the local environment for all.
- **Safety benefits** – walking helps people become more familiar with their community, increases the number of people on the streets thereby improving a sense of personal and community safety and provides children with the chance to develop and improve road safety and pedestrian skills.
- **Mental health benefits** –the establishment of co-operative relationships between local government, primary schools, families and the community has the potential to contribute to a more positive sense of community and increase the opportunities for people to access social networks.

VicHealth Walking School Bus Pilot Program

VICHEALTH'S WALKING SCHOOL BUS PILOT PROGRAM

In 2001, VicHealth invited proposals from local councils and shires to work in partnership with primary schools and community agencies to establish a Walking School Bus Program. Four municipalities were funded to pilot the program: City of Greater Dandenong, Shire of Campaspe, City of Whittlesea and City of Port Phillip. Each council was expected to manage the project at the local level and to engage at least four primary schools.

The objectives of the Walking School Bus Program were to:

- encourage more primary school children to walk safely to and from school;
- replace short, regular car trips with daily walking;
- support the development of local, social and community networks of participating adults and children;
- build capacity within local government to facilitate the establishment and ongoing support of Walking School Bus programs with their local primary schools;
- establish a cooperative relationship between local government, primary schools, families and the community;
- evaluate, document and disseminate the outcomes of the funded activity.

Walking School Bus project officers were appointed by each council and were responsible for the recruitment of schools, the provision of training and other support for the volunteer walkers, liaison with agencies such as VicRoads and Victoria Police and assistance with the evaluation requirements of VicHealth.

Table 1 is a summary of the participating councils and schools and the number of Walking School Bus Routes implemented during the pilot program.

Table 1: Councils and number of Routes Operating

Council	Everyday	Twice a week	Once a week	No. of Schools Participating
City of Greater Dandenong	1	2	2	4
Campaspe Shire Council	1		2	3
Whittlesea Shire Council	2		3	4
City of Port Phillip		2	3	3
			(plus one scooter bus and one bicycle bus)	
TOTAL	4	4	10 (plus scooter and bicycle)	14

Evaluation of the Walking School Bus Pilot Program

The Wellness Promotion Unit, Victoria University (VU), was contracted by VicHealth to undertake a multi-project evaluation of the first 12 months of VicHealth's Pilot Walking School Bus Program.

The evaluation methodology was designed to examine the implementation issues associated with the program as well as reflect upon the development and implementation processes.

METHODOLOGY

Multiple data sources and collection methods were employed in order to extract common themes of the Program. Evaluation questions were developed in consultation with VU, VicHealth, key stakeholders and pilot councils.

The questions for the process evaluation focused on addressing the strengths; weaknesses; opportunities and threats to development; implementation; and expansion of the program.

The outcome evaluation questions were tailored to identify impacts in the specific domains that VicHealth identified as being desirable for the Walking School Bus Program.

The identified domains were **behavioural**, **social**, **organisational** and **environmental**.

The **behavioural** domain looked at the number of children and adults participating in the program, changes in patterns of physical activity, changes in attitudes towards walking and driving, changes in the level of pedestrian skills and changes in confidence levels regarding willingness to walk in the neighbourhood.

The **social** domain looked at people's sense of social connection and personal relationships within their community, and their sense of belonging and participation within that community.

The **organisational** domain looked at issues associated with the development, implementation and promotion of the Walking School Bus Program within the councils and schools.

The **environmental** domain looked at environmental factors that impacted on the implementation of the program. This included the built environment, infrastructure and traffic related safety issues.

Data Collection Strategies

Data was gathered from principals, teachers, volunteers and students. Survey tools were developed accordingly.

Student surveys

Two pre-program questionnaires were developed for primary school children participating in the Walking School Bus Program.

The first survey was distributed to Grade Prep – Grade 2 students. The questions focused on how children travelled to and from school each day. Surveys were collected from 709 students attending primary schools in two of the council areas participating in the pilot Walking School Bus Program. Children were selected using a stratified random sampling technique within each school.

The second survey was developed for older students in Grades 3 – 6. This survey was more comprehensive asking the students how they travelled to school and then how they would ideally like to get to school. The survey also explored the students' attitudes to walking to school. Once again schools were chosen from two of the council areas participating. There were 339 surveys received.

Principal or school coordinator interviews

Principals or designated school coordinators were interviewed face-to-face using semi-structured interviews designed to look at the school's experience of the Walking School Bus Program, the issues associated with its implementation and the nature of relationships formed outside of the school due to participation in the project.

Of the 14 schools participating, 13 agreed to be interviewed at this senior level.

Teacher interviews

The teacher survey was designed to examine the impact of the Walking School Bus Program on the classroom behaviour of children using the bus. It also looked at whether the Walking School Bus Program had been incorporated into the school curriculum.

Twenty-four teachers from eight participating schools agreed to be interviewed. Sixteen took part in small group interviews, one had a one-to-one interview and six completed their interviews by email.

Volunteer interviews

Twenty volunteers were interviewed across the four council projects. They consisted of a sample of 15 parents, two grandparents, one community volunteer and two teachers whose children also walked with the bus.

Most of the volunteers were woman (17) with only three men participating.

Survey participants were recruited from the operating buses, with most interviews taking place in each school's staff room. Three interviews were conducted during the bus walk itself.

Data Collection

Observations

In order to examine how the buses operated, systematic observations were undertaken using a specific coding system. Specific types of behaviours and interactions were identified and noted. Other behaviours that were not in the coding system were noted, as were general comments made by the children, volunteers and other community members along the routes – including school children who were not participants on the bus. Two observations were undertaken at each of the 12 participating schools. These observations focused on different routes including morning and afternoon buses and buses that travelled on different days of the week.

Council coordinator interviews

Seven Walking School Bus coordinators and managers across the four pilot council projects were interviewed. The questions examined the coordinators' perceptions of the implementation of the Walking School Bus project.

Areas explored included:

- the resources needed;
- the recruitment and training of volunteers;
- internal and external partnerships required and developed; and
- details of participating children and schools.

Table 2: Participants and Data Collection Strategies

Participants	Strategy	Information Collected
Younger students Older students	Pre-program survey Pre-program survey	Current transport to school Current transport to school Attitudes to walking to school
Principals/school coordinators	Interviews	School level implementation experiences – recruitment, relationships developed, traffic and safety, sustainability etc.
Council coordinators	Interviews	Recruitment of schools, volunteers, planning of routes, relationships developed, sustainability etc.
Teachers	Interviews	Curriculum, behavioural and social impact on students.
Volunteers	Interviews	Experience of WSB, behavioural and social changes in children, road safety, commitment to WSB in future, recruitment of volunteers.
Buses	Observations	Behaviour of children on buses, social interactions, volunteer behaviours, road safety or behavioural issues.

Table 3: Transport Mode for Children Grade Prep to Grade 2

In order to get a picture of the current transport practices of the children in the participating schools, some baseline and attitudinal information was obtained through two pre-program surveys.

The survey completed by the younger children – Grade Prep to Grade 2 – indicated that 71.5% of the children were driven to school each day and 27% of them walked.

Transport Mode	Frequency Used	%
Walk	184	27.0
Car	489	71.5
Bicycle	3	0.4
Public Transport	2	0.2

Table 4: Transport Mode for Children Grade 3 to Grade 6

A similar pattern emerged from the survey of older children from Grades 3 – 6. The results showed that 72.3% of the children were driven to school and 24.0% walked. There was no significant difference found between genders.

Transport Mode	Males (n=176)	Females (n=160)	Total	%
Walk with another child	22	9	31	9.2
Walk with an adult	9	14	23	6.8
Walk alone	19	8	27	8.0
Car	123	120	243	72.3
Bicycle	2	4	6	1.7
Public transport	1	5	6	1.7

Table 5: Transport Preference for Children Grade 3 to Grade 6

When asked how they would prefer to get to school, 61% of the children from Grades 3 – 6 said they would prefer to walk. The majority of these children (48.0%) also said they would prefer to walk with another child. There were 31.7% of children surveyed who said they would like to be driven to school.

Transport Mode	Males (n=172)	Females (n=159)	Total	%
Walk with another child	81	79	160	48.0
Walk with an adult	7	11	18	5.4
Walk alone	18	5	23	7.0
Car	49	56	105	31.7
Bicycle	12	2	14	4.2
Public transport	5	6	11	3.3

Table 6: Negative Factors for Walking to School Grade 3 to Grade 6*

The children were asked what they saw as negative reasons for walking to school. The single most important negative reason given was a fear of strangers, followed by getting wet. Importance was also placed on traffic and infrastructure issues such as the traffic being too fast, the lack of safe pedestrian crossings and the footpaths being too rough. When grouped together, traffic and infrastructure concerns totalled 28% of all responses.

Transport Mode	Males (n=176)	Females (n=160)	Total
Fear of strangers	72	91	163
May get wet	53	41	94
Too much traffic	39	31	70
Too much to carry	25	43	68
May get bullied	37	31	68
Too far to walk	37	31	68
No safe crossings	23	33	56
Traffic too fast	18	15	33
Footpaths too rough	14	8	22

* Students could choose more than one item

Table 7: Positive Elements of Walking to School Grade 3 to Grade 6

The same students were able to identify a number of positive reasons for walking to school. The social aspect of being able to talk with friends before they arrived at school was seen as the most important reason. Some children saw walking as a fun activity, that provided entertainment and gave them a sense of freedom and independence. The children also reported a feeling of better health, that they were doing something better for the environment, and that they enjoyed arriving at school on time.

Transport Mode	Males (n=176)	Females (n=160)	Total	%
Talk to my friends	98	81	179	25.0
It is fun	55	55	110	16.0
Arrive on time	57	44	101	14.5
Better for the environment	34	67	101	14.5
Makes me feel healthier	47	52	99	14.3
Do things along the way	30	22	52	7.5
I can choose which way to go	34	16	50	7.2

* Students could choose more than one item

Findings

The data received from interviews with principals, teachers and volunteers, as well as the observations of the buses operating, was entered into a qualitative analytical program NVivo and then grouped into thematic areas.

The identified themes were:

- Behavioural
- Social
- Environmental
- Organisational

Walking School Bus coordinators from the four projects were also interviewed about the issues associated with the implementation of the program. These findings will also be presented under the four themes.

BEHAVIOURAL

The behavioural theme reflected two different elements which emerged from the data – community and safety.

Community elements related to participation in the school bus and its operation within the wider community. The safety elements referred to issues associated with the set-up and the operation of the program at the local level.

School level findings

Participants commented that participating in the Walking School Bus Program helped people meet, be seen and be validated as members of their local community. This increased community engagement, attributed to the Walking School Bus Program, operated at a number of levels. With children engaging more with the local community and adults interacting with other adults, this interaction helped decrease the perception that the streets were unsafe to walk on.

CONNECTING PEOPLE

“Good for the community, people in the neighbourhood get to know each other. Adults get closer.”
“Our community has lots of isolation, lots of single parent families, no grandparents...”
this helps expand the kids’ world, gets them to see they can trust others.”
“Generates community when parents walk with the bus.”

The safety element included the safety requirements of setting up and operating the program at the local level. This issue included the behaviour of children while they were walking on the bus. Observations were based on a variety of questions. Did the children hold hands when they walked? Were older children taking more responsibility for the younger ones? Did the walking volunteers use whistles? Did the children feel comfortable wearing the reflective vests?

The training of volunteers was seen as a crucial and positive part of developing the program and vital to the safety of the participants.

Adult volunteers who participated in the program had to register as a Council/Shire Volunteer and adhere to conditions outlined in the Council’s Volunteer Policy. Under the Walking School Bus Program, volunteers are required to undertake police checks and training. The volunteers are then covered by each councils’ Volunteer Policy which includes public liability insurance. (Each council/shire has its own Volunteer Insurance Policy).

The volunteer training, provided by Walking School Bus coordinators, included information on road safety, pedestrian safety, duty of care and basic first aid.

VOLUNTEER TRAINING

“We did a fabulous training course...they really showed from a child’s perspective, crossing roads and what they see and how different it is to what we see.”

Coordinators’ findings

Council coordinators reported that parents’ commitment to the program was vital for ongoing success. A perception of safety determines parents’ confidence in allowing children to play outside the house, walk to school or cycle in the streets. Some parents were concerned about their children walking on streets that were not designed for walking. Others were nervous about allowing their children to be in the care of “strangers”, even though the volunteers were parents at the same school.

Liability insurance was another concern with hypothetical “what ifs” raised.

PERCEPTION RULES

“Certainly community safety is a political issue. Local media over a 6-month period would have run 6 – 8 stories on crime per week. This, along with associated mainstream press and television and popular radio, has generated a really strong sense of fear in the community. Perceptions of community safety data from the Department of Justice suggests our community has a disproportionate fear – it’s higher than the state average. Volunteers have expressed concern about community safety and the fear of being sued. There are perception issues with parents and volunteers about letting children participate. There is a very strong culture of protective chauffeuring in our municipality. The media is driving a lot of this generating a perception of fear, stranger danger and lack of community safety.”

DRIVING THE DECISIONS

“The program is asking parents to take a risk with their own kids. It is a hard thing to ask a parent to take a risk with their child. If they say ‘No I am not prepared to do that’ it is hard to counter. All the things the Walking School Bus helps children with such as road safety and perception of their environment, don’t necessarily alleviate the parents’ fears.”

Some parents were reluctant to change a morning routine preferring to continue to drive their children to school as this was more expedient.

“Individual car usage is the backbone of our society. People are used to having the vehicle at their disposal without thinking too much about its usage and the impact it is having on the environment and the effect it is having on their children.”

“I think the ethical issue is that it is unethical to drive children to school while it is destroying their health and destroying their environment. People will continue to drive their children to schools if the traffic around schools remains heavy and if walking is difficult and dangerous.”

SOCIAL

The data collected under the social theme looked at the types of relationships that were formed between children, between children and adults, and between adults.

School findings

Teachers noted that children who walked on the buses were socialising with children they hadn’t had friendships with before and were experiencing deeper levels of participation and belonging both at school and within their community.

INTERACTING AND BELONGING

“Instead of going home and sitting in front of their computers, some of the children are now staying after school and chatting with their friends.”

“Kids from the same street are now getting together in the park on weekends.”

“Kids like to be part of something, a sense of belonging is important.”

The adult volunteers commented on the positive relationships they had formed with the children as they walked together.

“The kids tell you what they have done. They love to run out to the bus stop and tell you what they did on the weekend or during the day.”

“Volunteers are enjoying it, chatting along the way.”

Some volunteers said that the presence of children and adults on the street had a positive impact on other children who weren’t participating on the bus. It helped provide a perception that the streets were safer for all in the community.

The volunteers also saw the Walking School Bus as a valuable conduit to the development of relationships with other members of the community.

One volunteer had become involved in the program specifically so her son could get to know some local people.

“Both kids and volunteers say ‘Good Morning’ to the lollipop lady.”

“There is a real sense of community, people socialise with each other and talk to people along the way. For example kids called out hello to builders working on a house as they passed.”

“It’s important to mix with people, especially other nationalities.”

Coordinator’s Findings

The data revealed that parents from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds had a low participation rate in the program. Coordinators commented that this was probably due to language barriers, a reluctance to allow their children to walk with people they did not know and different cultural values and expectations. Some coordinators addressed some of these issues by producing training and promotional materials in community languages and by involving active community members in the dissemination of information about the buses.

ENVIRONMENTAL

This theme examined the built environment and infrastructure surrounding the schools:

- the routes used
- the associated traffic issues
- the planning and cooperation required between agencies

School level findings

Data revealed that some very positive partnerships were established between agencies to maximise the catchment area for children and to ensure the walk to school was as safe as possible. Consultations between traffic engineers, town planners, police, VicRoads, schools, and other community agencies were held.

Older children tended to be less likely to walk on a supervised route. Organisers found that designing Walking School Bus routes through the most populated areas was not always the best option.

Some urban design elements made areas less conducive to walking because of dangerous roundabouts, lack of pedestrian crossings and fast moving traffic.

"There was a five way roundabout and even with safe crossing, someone came flying through yesterday and could have skittled us all."

There was also a hope expressed that Walking School Buses would bring about changes in the traffic environment around schools although there was no hard data collected to determine whether this objective was met.

REDUCING CONGESTION

"Once we've got all three routes going it will reduce traffic congestion around the school."

"We have shocking parking problems...shocking parkers when dropping kids off, so if we can minimise driving, that's fantastic."

This area focused on those elements integral to the development and sustainability of the program.

Coordinators' findings

Some areas such as traditional suburbs with wide footpaths, well-connected streets and diverse housing were found to be very conducive to walking. However, other urban design features like cul-de sacs and courts, the lack of linking streets and the presence of heavy arterial crossings make people very car dependant and less likely to walk. In some suburbs, a one kilometre distance "as the crow flies" becomes a three kilometre distance as children traverse in and out of cul de sacs and walk long distances to the nearest safe pedestrian crossing. These design elements had a definite impact on the uptake of walking school buses in some areas.

BARRIERS TO WALKING

"I thought this area was conducive to walking as footpaths are flat and in good condition. However there is some development going on which may impact; roads going everywhere and little nooks and crannies. We have collected information about kids that live within 500 metres of the schools, but to actually walk to school, it may become a one kilometre trip."

"We are high density. No large house blocks which makes it perfect for walking. People are located quite close to their schools. Most of the schools we are working with are in areas where most people are in the two kilometre catchment area."

The weather was seen as a factor in some of the projects. Many of the buses started walking in winter. This was seen as a less attractive time to recruit volunteers and to convince adults and children to change their transport habits.

ORGANISATIONAL

This area focussed on those elements integral to the development and sustainability of the program.

School level findings

Promotion of the project was seen as crucial to recruiting both children and volunteers. Promotional activities ranged from talks at school assemblies, notices in school newsletters and morning and afternoon teas.

Word of mouth was seen as the most effective way of promoting the project to parents and students.

“If they read an article often it doesn’t have enough impact, so word of mouth is important. It’s word of mouth and targeting specific people that works.”

The confusion over public liability insurance and the need for volunteers to be registered under each Council’s Volunteer Policy caused concern for some people. While there were plenty of interested children, insurance worries had an impact on the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

“Some of the volunteers were very nervous about the insurance issue, even though they had training and all of that.”

Comments were received about the day-to-day logistics of running the program and how these were managed at a local level. There was concern expressed about the amount of time school administrators had spent on the project and whether this was sustainable in the future.

“Schools tend to be a one-stop-shop, but we can’t do everything...we want to keep the involvement of the council, they’re the ones with public liability etc...we don’t have that insurance and in the long term I would hope that they continue to work with us.”

Coordinators’ findings

A key component of each coordinator’s role was implementing organisational tasks. These tasks included obtaining across-council support for the project, the identification and recruitment of schools, the recruitment and training of volunteers, clarification of insurance issues, liaison with traffic engineers and VicRoads for the identification of the routes, promotion of the project across the local community, participation in VicHealth evaluation requirements and attendance at VicHealth “cluster” meetings and relevant forums.

The interviews revealed that the coordinators’ ability to develop strong, positive relationships with external agencies was an essential element in the success of the program. These included school principals and key teachers, VicRoads, Victoria Police and Neighbourhood Watch groups. The support and resources made available by VicHealth was seen as a positive and vital component of the development and implementation of the projects. The regular “cluster” meetings held by VicHealth were well received.

LEADERSHIP CRUCIAL

Most coordinators said that strong support from leaders of various agencies and schools assisted the implementation. It was far easier to get the project going if there was strong support from a principal and if there was a designated contact person within the school.

“The principals and the schools are the driving force. Schools have to be willing partners. If the schools are distant and the leadership in the schools is not good enough, it is hard. They are the drivers. Leadership is important, principals who demonstrate school leadership have that inner feeling of “my school, my children”, and clearly in other schools you see the principal focussed on “my job”. Commitment and innovation from schools is necessary.”

ACROSS COUNCIL SUPPORT

Across-council support, particularly from senior managers and councillors was also seen as providing a healthy foundation from which to develop the project.

“We had nine officers on the council team to get everything in order before the buses started. We had a lot of assistance from transport engineers, the coordinator of the school crossings, input from Children’s Services, risk management input from our insurance people and managers at a senior level”.

“We get a lot of good support. The Communications department helped us build a communication strategy. Two superiors are totally dedicated to sustainable transport. Engineers are progressive enough to see that this is a very important project and they have given us support with assessment of routes and signage”.

The coordinators all raised concern over the sustainability of the buses. The funding by VicHealth was seen as crucial to starting the projects. Real concern was expressed over whether council would provide funding in the future in order to enable the project to be expanded into other schools in the area.

Some projects approached local businesses for sponsorship and saw this as a way of both defraying costs and involving local businesses as positive contributors in the community.

Summary of Key Learnings

The Walking School Bus concept is a simple one. A group of children are walked to and from school under the supervision of adult volunteers. It receives positive publicity and provides a fun experience for those that participate. At its simplest level, it provides children and adult volunteers with a set amount of physical activity and social interaction each time they walk with the bus.

The pilot program has shown that running a Walking School Bus Program can have far-reaching and desirable effects on the participants, the schools and the wider community. More children walking to school results in less cars around the schools which means less pollution and potentially safer roads. Increased social interaction between adults and children can result in a more positive sense of community, increased levels of trust and general feelings of wellbeing.

A number of key learnings can be extracted from this evaluation of VicHealth's Pilot Walking School Bus Program.

ORGANISATIONAL

The interviews showed that for the project to get off to a good start, **key organisational mechanisms must be in place.**

If the buses are to begin walking at all, it is crucial that there is a commitment from council and the schools to invest resources solely for the project. Coordinators remarked on the need for across-council support and for a designated contact person to be available at each school to help with the leg work. Schools commented on the time commitment needed to organise the buses, especially their role in recruiting volunteers.

The data showed that the implementation process is more likely to succeed if there is a central reference/project management group which includes all stakeholders such as representatives from council, schools, parents/volunteers and other relevant community agencies. Council coordinators also reported that they had at least one councillor who supported the program which was valuable especially in relation to assisting with the generation of positive publicity.

A key task for the coordinators was the need to develop strong and reciprocal partnerships with external agencies such as VicRoads, the local police, community organisations, Parents Associations, Neighbourhood Watch and in some instances, local businesses, especially in the early days of development. This, coupled with the ability to call on existing partnerships within the local community, was seen as vital to a successful project.

The Walking School Bus coordinators across the four councils also formed, with assistance from VicHealth, a network that met both formally and informally to discuss strategies and share learnings. These networks were valuable in the development and promotion of the buses, in the sharing of ideas and resources, and in providing encouragement and support to the coordinators.

The pilot projects showed that involving VicRoads, the police, local council traffic engineers, community safety officers, parents and school staff in the identification and auditing of routes, helped promote feelings of safety in each area. This also served to encourage community ownership of the buses.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

Buses cannot walk without volunteers. All projects commented on the difficulty in **recruiting and retaining volunteers.**

Future projects need to consider the following issues when addressing this.

1. Insurance cover is important and needs to be addressed when developing a Walking School Bus Program. Liability concerns are alleviated if the projects are managed by council and volunteer walkers are registered under the council's volunteer policy.

Councils and community organisations who have volunteers are also advised to familiarise themselves with the *Wrongs and Other Acts (Public Liability Insurance Reform) Act 2002* which looks at liability issues in relation to volunteers working in a range of defined areas.

The Wrongs and Other Acts (Public Liability Insurance Reform) Act 2002 is available at <http://www.dms.dpc.vic.gov.au>

2. Parents are not always the best group to target for volunteers. Strategies are needed to expand the potential pool of volunteers to include other members of the community. Potential recruitment sources could include retired people, the elderly who enjoy walking or need to exercise, community leaders within culturally and linguistically diverse communities, senior students undertaking community subjects that have a volunteer requirement and members of neighbourhood houses, community centres and seniors groups.

Feedback suggests that informal recruitment works best. Parents and teachers are encouraged to approach people that they believe may be interested in participating.

"I think there are lots of people around who are looking for something to do, but they like to be asked, they won't come and volunteer."

3. All volunteers need to be trained but it is important to keep the training component of the program simple and accessible. The coordinators reported that training programs worked best when they were aligned with pick up/drop off times at the school or when they didn't impact on the parents' time during the day. In areas with diverse populations, it is important that community languages are included in the training materials.

CRITICAL FACTOR FOR SUCCESS

"All you need is one or two enthusiastic staff and one or two enthusiastic parents and the program will take care of itself. Getting adults to volunteer their time to walk the bus is the most difficult and most important aspect to the Walking School Bus. It is the single most important factor that ensures the project's success. If no parents get involved, as in the case of one of my schools (which incidentally has very high enthusiasm amongst the children), no Walking School Bus will run. On the other hand if 20 parents got involved, I'm convinced that the children would fill the buses quickly."

BUILT ENVIRONMENT, URBAN DESIGN AND INFRASTRUCTURE.

The **nature of the built environment** can have a real influence on the implementation of the buses. The existence of arterial roads, lack of safe pedestrian crossings, street design features such as cul-de-sacs, courts and indirect walkways provide challenging obstacles. Involving traffic engineers in the auditing of routes helps with the identification of hazards and can facilitate minor infrastructure repairs in the area.

VicRoads can provide assistance in resetting the “green man” timing on traffic lights at pedestrian crossings if the existing timing is not adequate enough for groups of children to cross safely.

The weather can impact on the enthusiasm of participants. It is preferable not to start the buses in winter, but some council areas overcame this by providing umbrellas for the children.

“Lovely to see kids happy. Even when it rains they just bring umbrellas.”

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS

The Walking School Bus Program, while originally designed to increase physical activity amongst school children, has a **real impact on the development of new social connections within the communities and the strengthening of existing ones**. There was demonstrated success in establishing Walking School Buses in areas that already had strong community networks and community participation in other activities. Schools that have active and positive parent participation had greater success in recruiting volunteers and sustaining the program.

The Walking School Bus Program can support families to build new networks within their neighbourhood and help them link into other available programs. While the Walking School Bus Program has demonstrated it can contribute to increasing social connectedness within communities, it is important for future programs to take into consideration diverse needs of communities. Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be encouraged to participate through the adoption of additional strategies. This could include producing multilingual promotional and training materials and encouraging community leaders to participate in the Walking School Buses. Prominent community members could also assist by training and educating to encourage community sensitivity to other cultural beliefs and values.

PROMOTION AND PUBLICITY

To ensure the uptake and sustainability of a Walking School Bus Program, **continual and innovative publicity and promotional activities are crucial**.

One coordinator commented on how they marketed the program locally by accessing many groups and local organisations.

ACTIVE PUBLICITY

“I have relationships with all of these people. I have put up posters. I have put out news releases (local papers). I have written articles for magazines. I want people to have an awareness of what we are doing. When people see the children walking I want them to recognise “that is the walking school bus”. Most people in the region seem to know what it is about. I have put posters up in all the community houses and youth groups.”

Strategies could include:

- letters to parents, councillors, local businesses;
- articles in the local paper and school newsletters;
- information evenings at council offices or schools;
- competitions at schools, such as designing a poster to promote the walking school bus within that school;
- prizes for children throughout the year that are presented at school assemblies;
- incentives for children who walk a certain distance over a certain time period;
- having novelty days – “walk to school days” for the whole school;
- inviting local celebrities or prominent local businesses to walk with the bus;
- making the buses as visible as possible so others can see how it operates on a normal day;
- getting local businesses to provide some type of sponsorship or promotion;
- informal get togethers for parents; or
- rewards for volunteers such as a breakfast, a barbeque or an end of year celebration.

Conclusion

The findings from this evaluation indicate that the Walking School Bus Program has been successful on a number of levels. As well as providing children and adults with more physical activity, it has had a positive impact on the local community in various ways. Neighbourhoods have been reinvigorated with more social interaction amongst residents, with children and adults forming new and positive relationships, less cars are being driven near schools and people are recognising that streets are safer to walk on.

The success of this pilot program, coupled with enormous interest from councils and schools alike, has informed VicHealth's development of a much larger Walking School Bus Program across Victoria.

For more details go to www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/wsb or phone 03 9667 1333.

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