

10. Providing for journeys to and from school

Providing for journeys to and from school is usually regarded more as a matter for school boards. Municipalities also have an interest, because of the advantages to the community of having less motorized transport and of having children and youth who may sustain practices of active transport into adulthood. Actions by municipalities can have an impact on travel to and from school. As noted in the text for Guideline 15 below, these trips are more likely to be motorized if residential densities are low, or if there are no means to walk or cycle to school. The ability of municipalities to encourage school boards to help provide for active travel to and from school should not be overlooked. Opportunities to collaborate with school boards can be created through a process known as School Travel Planning.⁹⁹

The sparse available data and informal reports suggest that more and more children and youth are being driven to school. A Saskatchewan planner and single father offered several reasons why this might be happening, set out in Box 7.

Box 7. Reasons why people drive their kids to school

- new, flexible, work start time allows you to take your kids to school and then be off to work
- fear that someone will snatch your kid
- taking kids to day-care, then they get shipped by bus to school, then bused back to day-care and picked up after work, and driven home
- weather – it is cold, very cold in the winter
- moms are off to their mom groups after dropping off their kids; they also ‘car pool’ other kids
- split parent duties, it is hard to have kids bouncing around, and off to ‘here and there’
- extracurricular activities (kung-fu, snowboarding, swimming ...).

Guideline 15. Help ensure that school policies and practices favour walking, cycling, and other modes of active transport for trips to and from school, and also regular public transport where this is available and appropriate.

More person-kilometres may happen in school buses in Canada than in the vehicles of all of Canada’s transit systems.¹⁰⁰ Where distances to school are too great for walking or cycling, and there is no feasible transit alternative, school buses can be a more environmentally sound and more convenient alternative than being driven or driving to school.

However, school buses present problems. Children may stay in them too long because of the way routes are arranged. Air quality inside school buses may be poor. Some say bullying on school buses can be a worse problem. Time spent in buses is time not spent walking or cycling, or achieving independence by travelling on the regular transit system.

School bus travel is made necessary by large school catchment areas, which in turn arise because residential densities are low or schools are large, or both. Distance to school and residential densities are key factors that influence active commuting to school.¹⁰¹

Children can spend quite long periods in school buses. There are few data on actual travel times. For 11-15 year-olds in south-central Ontario, the median length of the journey to school by school bus is only three kilometres. However, more than one in 20 of these students travel more than 15 kilometres by school bus.¹⁰² Given the usual stops and starts of school bus trip, the time in the school bus could well be considerably more than an hour.

Even within the City of Winnipeg, students can spend up to 75 minutes per trip.¹⁰³ Outside Winnipeg, they may spend longer. This is acknowledged, for example in the policies of the Interlake School Division, one of which is “The maximum ride for any student on any route or combination of routes will be one hour and thirty minutes.”¹⁰⁴

Section 43.1 of Manitoba’s *Public School’s Act*, as amended in 2008, requires school boards to use their best efforts “to ensure that a pupil’s one-way travel time to his or her designated school is not longer than one hour.”¹⁰⁵ It also gives school boards until 2013 to meet this requirement, as long as they are making progress towards it.

Thirty minutes used to be regarded as a long one-way school bus trip.¹⁰⁶ Considering the potential for poor in-vehicle air quality (see Section 3.2 above), a limit of 20 minutes per trip, or 40 minutes per day, could be more reasonable. Achieving this could be costly in terms of the need for additional buses and operators, and even additional schools. On the other hand, given the evidence noted in Section 3.2 on air quality in school buses, not reducing children’s exposure to pollutants in these vehicles could be more costly in the long run.

Alternatives would be to design school buses so that there is little infiltration of polluted air or to ensure adequate ventilation. However, these options would not reduce the time children spend in buses, forfeiting the opportunity of exercising, or the time during which they see the world as a passing show rather than something to be interacted with.

Yet another alternative would be to reduce the availability of school buses, especially for older students where shorter distances are involved. The *Public Schools Act* seems to encourage busing of all elementary and high school students who live 1.6 kilometres or more from their schools and the provision of bus routes to within 0.8 kilometre of each young person’s home.¹⁰⁷ Relaxation of these requirements could result in more active

transportation. On the other hand, it could also result in less walking and cycling and more chauffeuring to and from school.

Parents may sometimes welcome longer school bus journeys for their children because they can leave for work earlier knowing that someone else is responsible for their children. If this is true, it would likely be less true if information about potential poor air quality inside school buses were better known (See Section 3.2 above.) Shorter school bus journeys could create a need for additional child care, perhaps at the school. The public cost of providing such care could be lower than the cost of ill-health through exposure to in-vehicle pollution.

Concern about the exposure of children to poor air quality in school buses appears to be stronger in the U.S. than in Canada (see Box 8).

Box 8. Guidance to school officials developed as part of the Clean School Bus USA program¹⁰⁸

- Establish anti-idling policies.
- Work with bus companies to ensure anti-idling policies are adopted.
- Minimize the time that children spend outside when school buses are arriving or departing
- If possible, shorten commute times for children.
- Discourage drivers from following directly behind other large vehicles, including school buses – especially if they see visible smoke being emitted.
- Deploy cleanest buses on longest routes.
- Post no-idling signs on school grounds.
- Provide a space inside the school where drivers can wait on cold days.
- Limit idling of delivery vehicles on school grounds.
- Develop educational programs for students about air pollution.

Land use and transport planners can help reduce school bus travel by ensuring higher residential densities. School boards and municipalities can explore options for reducing school bus routes through strategically placed infrastructure that enables students to walk or cycle safely. Where available, transit routes can be rearranged so transit can be readily used for travel to and from school.

Parents could be encouraged to take their young children to school by regular transit by not requiring them to purchase two fares to do it: one to the school and one to their place of work or back to home. Transit systems that allow a fare to apply for a fixed period after first use, rather than for a particular trip, are more convenient for dropping off children.

Older students could be encouraged to use public transit rather than school buses, where transit is available. Some transit systems go out their way to serve high-school and even some younger students. Others do not. Generally, young people are not scared by transit but, to use the words of a workshop participant “are thrilled to use it, especially without adults.” However, in some communities transit has an unsavoury reputation that deserves attention so as to make it more appealing to young people, and others.

Rising fuel costs and growing school board transport budgets provide additional incentives for collaborative efforts regarding school travel demand management.

Guideline 16. For younger children, help arrange walking school buses and other means of supervision.

This guideline applies mainly to walkable regular journeys to and from school, kindergarten, and day care, and might be best implemented through those organizations. It can also apply less regularly for trips to neighbourhood events and birthday parties, and then would be implemented directly by parents and caregivers. In all cases, municipalities could offer encouragement and even facilitation.

Figure 7. The rear part of a walking school bus¹⁰⁹



The essential feature of a walking bus is a line of children, even holding a rope if they are under five years, led by and followed by one or more adults with perhaps another one or more adults roving the line. (See Figure 7 – in which more than the usual number of accompanying adults may have joined the bus for the picture).

Older children and youth can supervise walking school buses. This has been done with success at Westvale Public School in Waterloo, Ontario.¹¹⁰ The school’s Trailblazer program has students in Grades 5 and 6 walking younger children to and from school (see

Figure 8). The program has been extended to other schools in the Region of Waterloo. It has been endorsed by the police service and three municipalities.

A walking bus shares responsibility for children's travel and provides social interaction for children and their caregivers. It helps teach traffic safety. Above all, it adds to the opportunities for children to travel by walking.

Figure 8. Student-led walking school bus¹¹¹

