



In an effort to reduce potentially dangerous traffic congestion around Darwin School during busy pick-up and drop-off times, the Darwin School Climate Committee is looking for parents who are interested in exploring the creation of an Active and Safe Routes to School (ASRTS) Program at Darwin School. The focus of this program is to reduce car dependence on the journey to and from school while encouraging and facilitating safe routes for students to walk and/or bike to and from school each day. The program is coordinated by Green Action Centre – a non-profit community organization in Winnipeg. More information can be found at www.greenactioncentre.ca under programs.

One of the main components of the ASRTS program is the development of a network of Walking School Buses in Darwin's school neighbourhood. The Walking School Bus concept was developed in Australia by David Engwicht (now an internationally recognized authority on environmental transportation issues). Like a regular transit bus, a walking bus has designated bus stops along the various routes to school and scheduled times for the bus to arrive. However, in this case, the bus is simply a parent-escorted group of students which gets progressively larger as it picks up more and more kids and gets closer to the school.

The ASRTS program has many benefits including:

- **Increased physical activity for children and youth**

More than one-half of Canadian children and youth are not active enough for optimal growth and development. With time spent sitting and inactive in front of the television, computer, video games and at school, youth are spending an average of 56 hours per week idle. Walking, cycling or other forms of active transportation (i.e.: skateboarding or scootering) to school are ideal ways for children to get regular exercise and to establish healthier lifelong travel habits. Regular physical activity develops cardiovascular fitness, strength, flexibility, and also nurtures confidence and builds self-esteem.

- **Less traffic congestion around schools**

Many parents say that the most dangerous part of their children's journey to school are the roads surrounding the school. Parents drive their children to school in order to ensure their safety, and, at the same time, their driving behaviour often endangers their own and other children when they come to or leave school. When more students walk or cycle to school, traffic volume and congestion decrease during peak pick-up and drop-off times, making the trip much more pedestrian and cyclist friendly.

- **Safer, calmer streets and neighbourhoods**

A physically active commute to and from school can be a fun social time for children and youth. It is a chance for them to spend time with their families, friends, neighbours and peers while learning about their communities. When parents walk with their children, they have the opportunity to teach their children about road safety skills and how to move safely through their neighbourhood. They get the chance to check their child's judgement and reinforce safe decisions. It is also a wonderful community building opportunity for children as they explore their world and become aware of their neighbours and neighbourhood.

- **Improved air quality and a clean environment**

About one quarter of all vehicle trips made during peak morning and afternoon rush hours are trips transporting children to and from school. These trips are often less than 2 kilometres in distance and contribute a significant amount of air pollution because they typically occur when the engine's pollution control system is cold and ineffective. Vehicle emissions erode human health due to the effects of the particulates and gases that are a by-product of burning fossil fuels. This pollution particularly affects children's respiratory systems, as they breathe more rapidly than adults, and pollutants have an impact on the development of their lung function. By reducing the number of short vehicle trips, the air quality in a school's neighbourhood will be reduced, and the amount of greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change will also decrease.

- **A healthier lifestyle for the whole family**

Parents who walk with their children gain positive health benefits from participating in regular physical activity, and having their children participate in planned walking groups such as Walking School Buses provides them with the opportunity to meet and get to know their peers and their peers' parents. The Walking School Buses concept also provides parents with more flexibility and reduces the time required each day for them to chauffeur their children to school.

Never before has the issue of children's health and physical activity been addressed as broadly as it is being dealt with today; and never before have the traffic conditions around public schools been so dangerous due to the number of students that are being unnecessarily driven to school. Issues such as chronic disease prevention, climate change, loss of a sense of community and automobile safety are other topics at the forefront of people's minds. The Active and Safe Routes to School Program is an initiative which seeks to comprehensively address these issues, and which takes a proactive approach to finding long-term, sustainable solutions to the challenges and issues facing child and youth transportation today.