

1. Dictionary

Walking School Buses

By Marie Huyghe (Planner)
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Walking school buses and bicycle school buses are alternative forms of school transport, under the supervision of volunteers. Veritable bus routes (albeit without buses) are punctuated with stops, where children wait at scheduled times.

Walking school bus refers to the escorting of children to school on foot. The routes are punctuated with “stops,” which are served at set times. A single walking school bus can have several lines. Supervision is provided mostly by parents, who take turns based on their availability, but also by other volunteers such as retirees or, more rarely, municipal employees. Creating an association of children and chaperones is not necessary, but can help to limit complications in case of an accident. Bicycle school buses are based on the same principle, but with the bike as the primary mode of transportation.

It is hard to date the first walking and bicycle school buses [1], since they are basically a structured, official form of informal ancestral practices. According to some sources, the first walking school bus was the Walking Bus imagined by Australian David Engwirth in 1991. Today, several hundred walking school buses exist in Europe (Belgium, Switzerland, France, Italy and the U.K.) and around the world (Canada and Australia), and go by many names (Carapattes, Mille Pattes, Walking School Bus, etc).

This practice is becoming more institutionalized, as local authorities see it as a means of reducing traffic jams near schools. The latter - which are polluting, prone to causing accidents and detrimental to the flow of traffic during peak hours - can be countered by these new practices, and are in keeping with public health’s goal of fighting obesity. Walking and bicycle school buses likewise offer other advantages:

- improving safety by reducing the number of cars near schools. Widespread use of the car for home-to-school trips [2] causes congestion near schools at certain times of day, giving way to a vicious cycle: the more vehicles, the greater the risk of accidents, and hence more parents who choose to drive their children to school.
- practical: non-escorting parents are no longer obliged to escort their children to school. A new family organization can then be considered, allowing some parents to adopt other modes of transportation for their home-to-work commutes (public transportation or carpooling).
- environmental: Home-to-school commutes are generally short trips [3] and thus add considerably to the pollution when made by car [4]. By eliminating these trips and offering parents an alternative mode of transportation, walking and bicycle school buses can lead to an overall reduction in CO2 emissions. A study done in Canada of 19 School Travel Planning [5] projects showed an average decrease of 2.1% in the number of car trips, equal to a reduction of 41.7 tons of greenhouse gases emitted.

Organizers of walking school bus and bicycle school bus experiments also highlight other benefits for parents and children, including [6] :

- for children, they are above all an educational tool for teaching road safety and altermobility, helping children become independent and improving their awareness of environmental issues. In

North America, emphasis is put on the role of walking school buses in the fight against obesity. Several studies [7] have shown that children who walk to school each day have a lower fat mass index on average. Finally, walking and bicycle school buses trips are a good way to discover the neighborhood.

- for parents, in addition to saving time and money, walking and bicycle school buses are vectors of sociability, and foster acquaintanceship and improve mutual support within neighborhoods.

Clarifications

Where, and by who?

One finds walking and bicycle school bus experiments in all types of areas (urban, suburban, and rural). The main criteria for their implementation is that the distance between the home and school is short enough to be made via foot or bike.

Walking and bicycle school buses are often implemented in home-to-school transport programs (PDDE in France, School Travel Plans in Great Britain, etc.) [8], but can be initiated by diverse actors, including parents, parent or environmental protection associations, school teachers or principals. Support from local representatives is often necessary to launch the project and ensure its perennality, as well as considerable cooperation between the different actors. Marc Dumont [9], discusses the need for balanced governance between all of the actors involved in walking school bus initiatives, based on the findings of S. Depeau. In particular, if the institution is too involved, the walking school bus comes to be considered a service, which in turn could lead to divestment by parents. And yet, walking school buses “are originally based on the continued involvement of parents.”

Resources

The setting up of a walking school bus or bicycle school bus requires little financial investment in terms of operation costs or infrastructure. Besides the purchase of fluorescent vests for the students, the marking of crosswalks or the extension of sidewalks is sometimes required. Similarly, it could lead to the creation of walking school bus stops or shelters. In France, the ADEME provides financial support for school projects that use ecomobility approaches.

The primary investment is human, as walking and bicycle school buses essentially function thanks to parents and other volunteers who take turns escorting the children to school one or more times a week. Safeguarding the perennality of such initiatives means ensuring the continued involvement of volunteers, and adapting the lines based on their availability. When escorts are lacking, certain lines may be temporarily suspended or abandoned altogether.

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Notes

[1] www.pedibus-geneve.ch

[2] In the early 2000s in France, 70% of elementary school students on average were driven to school. Depending on the municipality, this average was somewhere between 20% and 80% (ARENE & ADEME, n.d.). In Montreal in 2003, this figure was 30% (Groupe de recherche Ville et Mobilité, 2008).

[3] In France, home-to-school trips rarely exceed two kilometers in urban areas, due to zoning (ARENE & ADEME (n.d.); in the Greater Montreal area, 83% of students attend schools that are less than 1.6 km from their homes (Groupe Ville et Mobilité, 2008).

[4] According to the ADEME, it is the first 3 kilometers by car that are the most polluting.

[5] Metrolinx (2014)

[6] Conclusions issues de l'analyse de nombreuses expériences de Pédibus, françaises et étrangères.

[7] TURNER L. et al (2013) ; MENDOZA J. et al (2010) ; JANULEWICZ P. (2008) (p.10)

[8] These initiatives are "collective approaches for developing ecomobility for home to school trips." They provide knowledge on home-to-school trips (distance, modes of transportation, traffic and safety conditions) and propose actions for reducing these trips by car and encouraging a modal shift towards soft modes, public transportation and carpooling.

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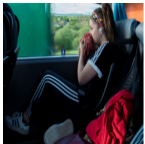
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2 <http://www.pedibus-geneve.ch>