

## Viscount Alexander's Walking School Bus: A Program Model & Best Practices Resource



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Walking School Bus at Viscount Alexander Public School in Ottawa was created to address the need for increased physical activity for students, while also impacting positively on the environment. It has been successful in decreasing the use of school buses by children who live within walking distance of the school; it has also increased engagement between the community, the school and parents of children who attend Viscount Alexander Public School.

The Walking School Bus (WSB) initiative may be of interest to school boards, community health centres, community services, parents, and other stakeholders who are interested in supporting school-aged children to engage in physical activity.

This document aims to provide a program model, resources, and lessons learned for others hoping to start their own Walking School Bus.

### 1.0 BACKGROUND

#### 2.1 What is the Rationale and Motivation for This Initiative?

There is a 1.5 kilometre guideline in place to restrict access to the school bus for children at Viscount Alexander Public School. Children in Kindergarten and those outside the 1.5 km walking boundary are entitled to take the school bus. However, older children can apply to be granted access to an empty seat. Children who live in close proximity to the school often take the school bus or are driven to school. 80% percent of the school population are within the 1.5 km boundary, a reasonable walking distance.

The primary concern raised by this situation is that many children are missing an easy opportunity to increase their level of physical activity. According to Health Canada, children in both the age 6-9 and 10-14 age groups should be getting 90 minutes of physical activity per day<sup>1</sup>; children aged 10-14 are also encouraged to exercise for a minimum of 90 minutes per day.<sup>2</sup> Walking to school is one way to increase the physical activity level of school-aged children, while also having a positive impact on the environment and levels of community engagement.

#### 2.2 Vision of Initiative

The primary goal of the Walking School Bus initiative is to reduce the number of children within walking distance who take the school bus or are driven to school. The desired outcomes of the initiative include increased physical activity for the children, enhanced parental and community

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, Family Guide to Physical Activity for Children, p. 3 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pag-gap/cy-ej/pdf/kids-family-guide-eng.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, Family Guide to Physical Activity for Youth, p. 3 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pag-gap/cy-ej/pdf/yth-family-guide-eng.pdf>

engagement, improved air quality, reduced traffic congestion on city streets, increased awareness/connection to geographic spaces, and improvements in sidewalk and traffic safety.

### **2.3 History of the Program**

The idea of a Walking School Bus was originally introduced to Viscount Alexander Public School by a retired community member who was involved in the Kickoff to SummerActive 2009. Her interest stemmed from research on physical activity and childhood obesity, as well as from her perception of the neighbourhood as being a very “walkable” community. This community member, as part of Active Ottawa, gave prizes to anyone she saw walking to school on Winter Walk-to-School Day. This was followed by the promotion of Walk-to-School Week in spring 2009; approximately 20 of the 139 children enrolled at the school walked to school twice during this week.

The Viscount Alexander Public School’s WSB started running with two routes in October 2009, walking to school two mornings per week, with 9 children participating. Each Walking School Bus route was accompanied by one or two parents and/or community volunteers, known as “walking school bus drivers”. Routes and pick-up locations were determined based on the location of participants’ homes. Numbers dropped quickly due to a combination of factors including cold weather, a tragic fire in the home of one family who participated, and relocation of some of the participants. Participation did not return to the original level regardless of efforts to re-engage students and parents in the initiative. This school year ended with one committed student walking to school with the Walking School Bus two days per week.

Accompanied by a new breakfast program, the WSB restarted in September 2010, with two routes to school running five days per week. Currently (as of November 2010), up to 10 children per day participate, including 3 “junior bus drivers” who assist with keeping the younger children safe during their walk to school.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Implementation**

1) Partnership is crucial. Our partnership includes the Viscount Alexander Public School, Action Sandy Hill (the neighbourhood’s community association), and the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre (SHCHC). This is how having champions in each partner organization made it possible:

a) The operations of the Viscount Alexander Public School Walking School Bus have been led by a volunteer of the SHCHC who is also a member of the community association. Without her active leadership in establishing and sustaining the initiative, it would most likely not have been possible. For schools interested in establishing a similar program in the absence of such a volunteer, this role could potentially be filled through the school council or parent association.

b) The principal at Viscount Alexander Public School supported the initiative from its inception. Although the students are not the responsibility of the school outside of school hours, the principal enthusiastically promoted the WSB and supported the community’s efforts

to implement the initiative. The school committee chairperson provided a wonderful example as a parent committed to having her children arrive at school via active means.

c) The Community Developer at the SHCHC supported the initiative in many ways. She attended events to promote the WSB, bought snacks for special walk to school days, recruited participants, paid for police checks for volunteer “bus drivers”, and provided administrative support by printing and copying documents needed for the project.

2) Have a liability study for the Walking School Bus in your neighbourhood. This will offer volunteers security from possible liability.

3) Ensure that all of your volunteers pass a police security check and are insured with respect to liability and injury. We had all of our parents and community members who acted as “bus drivers” insured as volunteers of the community health centre.

4) Tap into potential demographic-based groups as a source of volunteers. Retirees and post-secondary students have been important to the running of our WSB.

5) Introduce the idea of a Walking School Bus through a Walk-to-School Day, a Walk-to-School Week, and/or any other initiatives designed to promote an increase in children’s physical activity.

6) Send an invitation to join the WSB home with each of the children. The invitation should include days, pick up times and routes, as well as an explanation of how the Walking School Bus works and the rationale for the initiative. Attach a sign up sheet for parents to complete and return to the school. The sign up sheet should outline clear expectations, and should include room for the parent to enrol their children and/or volunteer to be a “driver”. See Appendix A and B.

7) Promote the initiative early in the school year, both at the school and in the community. Send home flyers giving information about the initiative. Integrate promotion of the Walking School Bus into Meet the Teacher night, school barbeques, open houses, and any other activities where parents will be present. This will provide an opportunity for parents to ask questions and discuss concerns, as well as giving existing volunteers and supporting partners an opportunity to recruit children and parents to participate. Our Community Developer from the CHC promoted the WSB at the community’s homework club and tenants’ association meetings. We also had our community newspaper (IMAGE) run a brief story giving information, urging participation and volunteer recruitment, and showing photographs of the Walking School Bus.

8) Assess the neighbourhood with respect to street safety issues. Speak with your Community Police Officer or School Resource Officer about any safety concerns, and lobby your municipal government to address dangerous areas. In our community, the City responded to some of our concerns by posting “School Speed Zone” signs along the route near the school.

9) Encourage older children to continue to participate through giving them the title of “junior bus driver”. They are more likely to remain involved if they are able to contribute and receive recognition for their help.

10) Take demographic issues into account. One barrier to walking is the need for some families to manage preschool-aged children while getting older children ready for school. Having “bus stops” directly in front of homes where this is an issue will make it easier for those families to participate. Be sensitive to cultural differences, as some families may originate from cultures that would find it inappropriate for their child to walk to school unless escorted by a family member.

11) Contact Green Communities Canada for more resources. The head of this national organization was very helpful in answering questions and providing resources, including the “Active and Safe Routes to School” booklet (published January 2004).

12) Becoming involved with Green Communities Canada’ School Travel Planning (STP). Project STP has provided us with an excellent opportunity for evaluation. The STPC recently administered a survey to determine the methods used by students at Viscount Alexander School to travel to and from school, as well as examining the barriers to more active ways to travel. Much of the survey examined barriers to walking as children’s primary mode of travel. The research is in progress. An informal traffic observation at identified problem locations is scheduled for mid-November 2010, hopefully to be followed by official observations conducted by the City. Our expectation is that the results of this research will encourage the City to address the most common barriers to walking for children in this community which may, in turn, increase student participation in the Walking School Bus. If you do not have access to an STPC, try to engage with your community police, public health nurse, and/or city traffic department.

13) Budget for photocopying and/or printing costs, display materials (for school events), safety vests (approximately \$10 per vest), occasional snacks for special Walk to School Days, and police checks of volunteers. A regular police check costs \$15 and an express costs \$80. In Ottawa, volunteer agencies can send a letter with their volunteers when they present for a police check to have the fees waived. We have found the Walking School Bus expenses to be minimal.

### **3.2 Evaluation**

Evaluation of the program has been informal in nature. The Walking School Bus can be seen as a successful initiative simply by the increased participation of the student body. From one Walk-to-School day, the initiative has grown to a daily Walking School Bus that covers three routes. Up to 10 children (of a student body of 139) and 4 volunteers participate weekly.

Other indications of the success of the program are as follows:

- “School Speed Zone” signs have been posted along the route near the school to increase safety for pedestrians.
- Two of the “bus drivers” have become increasingly involved with the school as volunteers, indicating the initiative’s ability to enhance parental involvement with the school.
- Three children have been designated as “junior bus drivers”, demonstrating their investment in the Walking School Bus.
- Anti-idling pamphlets were received from Green Communities Canada and were distributed to drivers waiting for their children after school. We hope this has led to an increased awareness of environmental concerns and a reduction in idling for community residents.
- Volunteers report the following: increased physical activity, increased knowledge of the community, enhanced sense of belonging and connectedness within the community, and feeling “ready to take on the day” after their morning walk
- “Bus drivers” remain in the school yard until a teacher is available to provide supervision, offering extra safety and security to the children in the mornings before school begins. This was an unexpected benefit of the initiative.
- The School Travel Planning Committee, overseen by Green Communities Canada, has invited representatives from the Walking School Bus to sit on the committee. This allows our key community volunteer, parents, and staff from the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre to give input to the committee’s processes.

#### **4.0 LESSONS LEARNED**

1) Parental involvement is the key! Inform and involve parents at all stages of development. Develop ongoing relationships with the parents of children in the school.

2) Incentives work! Crazy Hat Day, the school breakfast program, and the provision of snacks and stickers for walkers have increased enthusiasm and participation.

3) Be responsive to the parents and the community. Do your best to respond to the specific needs of families in your neighbourhood.

4) Don’t give up! Persevere regardless of levels of participation, in order to allow time for people to buy into the initiative. If you keep promoting the Walking School Bus, families will get on board!

#### **5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Our thanks to the following for their contributions to the origins and growth of this initiative: students and parents who participate in the program; community volunteers who initiated the Walking School Bus and continue to give their time and energy; staff of Viscount Alexander Public School; members of Action Sandy Hill; staff of the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre;

Bill Blackstone for photographs of the Viscount Alexander Public School's Walking School Bus; Green Communities Canada and the School Travel Planning Committee for their ongoing interest and support.

## **6.0 REFERENCES & SOURCES**

Public Health Agency of Canada. Family Guide to Physical Activity for Children, p. 3. Accessed October 18, 2010 at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pag-gap/cy-ej/pdf/kids-family-guide-eng.pdf>

Public Health Agency of Canada. Family Guide to Physical Activity for Youth, p. 3. Accessed October 18, 2010 at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pag-gap/cy-ej/pdf/yth-family-guide-eng.pdf>

### **Liability Concerns:**

Wyseman, D. "The Walking School Bus Liability Concerns"  
<http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca/downloads/WSB-Liability-Concerns-D-Wyseman-May07.pdf>  
(Accessed December 8, 2010)

Wyseman, D. Municipal Risk Services Management "Liability from the Walking School Bus"  
<http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca/downloads/WSB-Liability-Report-D-Wyseman-May07.pdf>  
(Accessed December 8, 2010)

For more information and resources on Walking School Bus Initiatives, please visit Active and Safe Routes to School at: <http://www.saferoutestoschool.ca/walkingschoolbus.asp>.

Appendix A: Walking School Bus Information Poster



Enjoy the spring and sign up for  
the  
Walking School Bus  
To Viscount Alexander School

Every Tuesday and Thursday morning  
Pick up times Between 7:30 a.m. -  
7:40 A.M.

How it works: Parents and volunteers from the community meet children at a certain point and continue walking on a route to the school, picking up other children along the way - just like a real school bus.

There will be two routes:

Route A: Upper Sandy Hill starting at Charlotte and Laurier

Route B: Mann and Strathcona Heights

(Note: We can add or adjust routes if needed.)

**Why do this ?** Physical activity is great for kids. Walking (instead of getting a ride to school) improves air quality and reduces congestion on our streets. People out and about add to our vibrant neighbourhoods and build communities.

**Sponsored by the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre  
in partnership with Viscount Alexander School  
and Action Sandy Hill**

To sign up, just complete the attached sign up sheet and return it to the school. You will be contacted and a pick-up point designated.

If you have questions, contact (name and contact information of coordinator).

**Appendix B: Walking School Bus Form**

**Walking School Bus Form**

(Please complete the top portion of this form and return it to your Walking School Bus leader. Tear off the bottom portion of the sheet and keep it for your reference.)

*The Walking School Bus is an initiative of the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre in partnership with Viscount Alexander School, and Action Sandy Hill and is dependent on community volunteers and parents. Getting your child to school safely and happily is very important to us. By completing the form below, you and your child(ren) agree to the following conditions:*

- We will be on time to the pick up location or be responsible for our own transportation to school.
- We will follow all safety rules and guidelines set out by the walking leaders.
- If possible, we will inform the walking leaders of absences in advance.
- When we arrive at the school, we will enter the school or playground as directed and report to the classroom or play area as required.
- We will make sure we are dressed for the current weather conditions.

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

My child's/children's name(s): (1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

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Yes, I have read the above document and agree to the conditions as described.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

**Walking School Bus - WELCOME ABOARD!!!!**

Your child's pick up location:

Time of pick up:

Days of the week:

Please call this number the day before or by 7:00 a.m. of the school day if your child is NOT going to be walking to school or at any time you have questions or concerns.

**Appendix C: Walking School Bus Form (Occasional Walker)**

**Walking School Bus Form (Occasional)**

(Please complete the top portion of this form and return it to your Walking School Bus leader. Tear off the bottom portion of the sheet and keep it for your reference.)

*The Walking School Bus is an initiative of the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre in partnership with Viscount Alexander School, and Action Sandy Hill and is dependent on community volunteers and parents. Getting your child to school safely and happily is very important to us. By completing the form below, you and your child(ren) agree to the following conditions:*

- My child(ren) will be **occasional walker(s)**. If my child(ren) is/are not at the designated pick-up point at the designated time, I am responsible for my child(ren)'s safe and timely arrival at school.
- We will follow all safety rules and guidelines set out by the walking leaders.
- When we arrive at the school, we will enter the school or playground as directed and report to the classroom or play area as required.
- We will make sure we are dressed for the current weather conditions.

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

My child's/children's name(s): (1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

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Yes, I have read the above document and agree to the conditions as described. I would like my child(ren) to be an **occasional walker**.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

**Walking School Bus - WELCOME ABOARD!!!!**

Your child's or children's pick up location:

Time of pick up:

Occasional Walker:

Please call (contact name), the Walking School Bus Coordinator, (contact phone number) if you have any questions or concerns.

**Appendix D: Walking School Bus Withdrawal Form**

**WALKING SCHOOL BUS WITHDRAWAL FORM**

*(Please Print)*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to withdraw my child(ren):

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

from the Walking School Bus program at Viscount Alexander School. I acknowledge that the program is no longer responsible for escorting my child(ren) to school.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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For administration purposes:

Date received: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix E: Job Description for Walking School Bus Program Coordinator**

### **Walking School Bus**

### **Job Description for Walking School Bus Program Coordinator**

#### **Position:**

Walking School Bus Program Coordinator (Volunteer Position with the SHCHC)

#### **Job Summary:**

To coordinate the Walking School Bus Program for Viscount Alexander School

#### **Qualifications:**

Have an interest in promoting health and supporting the environment through the Walking School Bus program

Must be dependable and responsible

Must be able to communicate effectively

Should have experience managing volunteers and organizing programs

#### **Required Duties:**

Work with walkers-drivers to develop the safest route to school using the domicile location of the participants on your route.

Coordinate participant's information and ensure walkers-drivers contact participant's parents and clarify route, meeting time, and expectations from participants as outlined in flyer document.

Develop tools and guidelines for the Walking School Bus Program to be approved by the WSB Coordinating Committee.

Support the WSB Coordinating Committee by attending meetings, taking notes, and following up as required.

Manage any problems with program, participants or their families, traffic and safety issues, or another other circumstances that affect the Walking School Bus Program in consultation with WSB Coordinating Committee

Support the walkers-drivers with information and tools to perform their jobs.

Coordinate periodic WSB meetings or training. (One per school term on average.)

Recruit new leaders as required.

#### **Optional Duties:**

Work on advocacy issues to improve walkability in Sandy Hill area

Encourage special events or features for routes and participants. (I.e.: everyone wears a certain colour one day, silly hats, sing songs, etc.)

## **Appendix F: Job Description for Walker-Driver Walking School Bus Job Description for Walker-Driver**

### **Position:**

Walker-Driver (Volunteer Position with the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre)

### **Job Summary:**

To meet and safely escort children to Viscount Alexander School

### **Qualifications:**

Have an interest in promoting health and supporting the environment through the Walking School Bus program

Must be dependable and responsible

Must be able to communicate effectively

Should have the capacity and interest in walking in the community in all types of weather

### **Required Duties:**

Develop the safest route to school using the domicile location of the participants on your route.

Contact participants' parents and clarify route, meeting time, and expectations from participants as outlined in flyer document.

Escort children to school at the appointed time and drop children at the appropriate location on the school grounds.

Identify any problems with program, participants or their families, traffic and safety issues, or any other circumstances that affect the Walking School Bus Program to the Walking School Bus Coordinator

Wear provided vest or other apparel that stands out

Attend periodic WSB meetings or training. (One per school term on average.)

### **Optional Duties:**

Work on advocacy issues to improve walkability in Sandy Hill area

Add special events or features to your route and for your participants. (I.e.: everyone wear a certain colour one day, silly hats, sing songs, point out features on route, etc.)

**Appendix G: Guidelines for Walker-Drivers**  
**Viscount Alexander Walking School Bus**  
**Guidelines for Walker-Drivers**  
**Revised October 2010**

All children must have submitted the Walking School Bus Form completed by their parents and submitted to Viscount Alexander School. The WSB Coordinator will let you know who is on your route and how to contact his or her parents to make arrangements for a meeting point.

**Expectations of Parents and Participants**

The children and parents have agreed to the following:

- We will be on time to the pick up location or be responsible for our own transportation to school.
- We will follow all safety rules and guidelines set out by the walking leaders.
- If possible, we will inform the walking leaders of absences in advance.
- When we arrive at the school, we will enter the school or playground as directed and report to the classroom or play area as required.
- We will make sure we are dressed for the current weather conditions.

**Safety Rules En Route**

- Children will walk (not run) to school and stay with the group.
- It is advised to have one leader at the back and one leader at the front of the group.
- Cross at intersections only - obeying all traffic signs and signals.
- Wear safety vest provided (or equivalent) while walking to the school.
- Ensure that everyone has a good line of site to surroundings.
- Check that shoe laces are tied, back packs are on straight, and apparel is done up before walking.
- Never go into a home to meet the children.
- En route, do not perform other errands or stop to visit with people. These things can be done on the return once the children are at school.
- Report any problems, suggestions, questions, etc to (name of coordinator), WSB Coordinator. (contact info for coordinator)
- You are a volunteer with the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre which sponsors the WSB in partnership with Viscount Alexander School and Action Sandy Hill
- Have a good time, enjoy the fresh air, and the great company.

**Arriving at the School**

When the weather is OK, older children can be left at the back of the school to play upon arrival. Kindergarten children should be escorted to the east door near the walkway and dropped off there or brought into the school and handed off to their kindergarten teacher. When it is raining (and maybe later in the year extreme weather conditions) and there are no other children outside, all children will be brought into the school and they will continue to their classrooms or gym as directed by school staff.

**Children should not arrive at the school before 7:45 am and should arrive no later than 8:00 am. Breakfast Club arrives at 7:30 am.**

## **Appendix H: Volunteer Information**

### **Walking School Bus**

#### **June 9 and 11 - Volunteer Information**

Thank you for volunteering for Viscount Alexander School's Walking School Bus Pilot Project. Here is some information you need to know.

- Be on time to your gathering spot
- We have designed the routes to be direct but avoid busy streets as much as possible.
- Review safe walking rules with group before starting (walk together, wait until signal before crossing streets, stay off lawns.)
- You may have some additional people show up at the last minute who did not submit their form. Welcome them and give their names to the principal.
- If you have anything yellow, please wear it to be both visible and festive!
- Wait no more than 5 minutes for your passengers.

#### **Route A "Drivers"**

Names and phone numbers (removed)

#### **Your "Passengers"**

Names (removed)

**Your Route:** You meet at the water fountain in Strathcona Park at 7:35 am. We recommend following the sidewalk through the park to Somerset. Head west on Somerset to Chapel. South on Chapel to Mann. Mann to the school.