

How to Drive a Walking School Bus:

establishing active transportation systems in Seattle elementary schools

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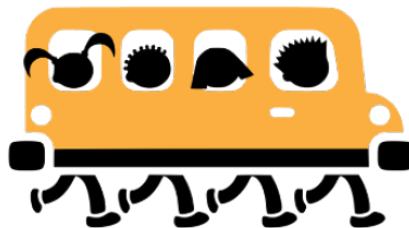
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Abstract

With 21% of Seattle youth suffering from obesity and 83% of students living within the walk zone of their school, there is a clear need and opportunity to encourage students to walk to school. A Walking School Bus aims to meet this need by providing children with an adult supervised walking group that commutes to school along designated routes. Although research shows that schools in low-income communities have the most to gain from Walking School Buses, these communities often lack the resources needed to organize such programs. Under the assertion that all students should have a right to safe and healthy access to school, this report considers how the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) can support the development of Walking School Buses at elementary schools across Seattle. This report (1) discusses how capacity among schools differ, (2) evaluates case studies of Walking School Buses in Seattle, and (3) looks toward active transportation campaigns from around the world to synthesize a vision for the future of walking to school in Seattle. The product of this report is a list of recommendations that outline how SDOT can most effectively drive Walking School Bus growth. By raising a generation of active commuters, Seattle can take a big step toward building resilient mobility systems that improve quality of life for all.



Preface.....	3
Context.....	5
Project Statement.....	9
Methodology.....	9
School Capacity.....	12
<i>The Power of a School Community</i>	
<i>Involving Parents</i>	
<i>Social Capital in Walking</i>	
<i>Respecting School Culture</i>	
<i>Synthesis</i>	
Seattle Walking School Bus Experience.....	20
<i>Walking School Bus Narratives</i>	
<i>Analysis</i>	
Global Examples.....	31
<i>Ottawa, Canada</i>	
<i>Auckland, New Zealand</i>	
<i>Analysis</i>	
Recommendations.....	35
Conclusion.....	38
References.....	39

Preface

I believe that a walk a school has an underappreciated potential to improve quality of life across Seattle. Over the last fifty years, the percentage of children who walk or bike to school in the United States has dropped from nearly 50% in 1969, to 13% in 2009 (Safe Routes to School National Partnership 2018). While this statistic may represent deep societal transformations of the family's relationship with the city, it also highlights an opportunity we have to reignite a sense of community in our neighborhoods around the promotion of an active commute to school. Especially in a city that is growing as rapidly as Seattle, it is critical that our understanding of human mobility shifts to prioritize sustainable and safe transportation options. By raising a generation of students who walk to school, we can instill values around the legitimacy of pedestrian mobility while building social capital through walking together.

My own childhood in Seattle was largely defined by bus routes and sidewalks. Between school, home, and various activities, I got around on my own and developed an understanding of the city through its transit networks. As Seattle continued to experience increased population and development, I grew up alongside it, making my own path through the city streets. I have always found something liberating about getting from place to place in my own way. Without having the ability to drive a car, I created my own maps of the city through its bus and walking routes, which gave me a sense of confidence in the city at a young age. I knew my way around and I could never be lost. While many people will argue that car ownership represents independence and freedom, I believe that being constrained to a single mode of transportation is an insult. Where is the freedom in being forced to sit in traffic? How does having to pay for fuel, parking, and car maintenance give me autonomy? By relying so heavily on cars to get around, we are making ourselves vulnerable to an unsustainable system. We are forced to pay more when the price of car ownership increases because for many people it is impossible to live without a car. We have limited the flexibility of our own mobility to the extent that we are at mercy to whatever the car culture demands.

Furthermore, in a city that is designed for cars, mobility becomes a luxury instead of a right. Families who can't afford the financial burden of car ownership are not able to navigate the city. Without quality transit systems and walkable communities their mobility gets reduced to none. This limits their access to healthy food, education, quality public spaces, and other resources. Our dependence on the car is a threat to freedom, equity, and quality of life, not to mention environmental implications. I am not advocating for the expulsion of cars entirely, but for a shift towards a more integrated transportation network that creates resilience in mobility.

In 2016, I participated in a study abroad trip in Europe that opened my eyes to the potential of sustainable urban transportation. Throughout the trip I studied how Danish and Dutch communities have weaved walking programs and active transportation norms into their educational structures. I was inspired by the far-reaching effects of their Safe Routes to School (SRTS) initiatives that led the countries toward becoming some of the most bike-friendly places in the world. This experience helped me realize that significant shifts in transportation norms start with small changes in everyday habits. By helping children develop an appreciation and value for walking and biking at a young age, sustainable mobility systems have a stronger likelihood to develop roots within the culture.

Upon returning to Seattle from my study abroad, I started interning for the Seattle Department of Transportation's (SDOT) Safe Routes to School team, where I helped to support active transportation campaigns and maximize traffic safety around schools. In addition to the multi-pronged approach used to achieve their goals, SDOT SRTS has started looking toward Walking School Buses as a possible strategy for increasing the number of children who walk to school. As someone who strongly believes in the potential of Seattle to be a catalyst for healthy and sustainable living, the thought of groups of children walking to school in "buses" across the city got me excited. Every public school in Seattle offers yellow school bus services to students who live over a mile from school, but the 83% of students living within a mile of their school are left to their own transportation resources (Seattle Department of Transportation Fall 2015). Unfortunately, being driven to school has become the default for students living within that mile, with 52% of children commuting by car (Seattle Department of Transportation 2016). However, if students were provided with a reliable and safe system to walk to school, the value of active transportation could be realized.

A small handful of elementary schools in Seattle have experimented with versions of Walking School Buses, but most tend to lose momentum over time. I have chosen to take on the task of unpacking the challenges and best practices involved with creating and sustaining Walking School Buses. This report delves into a discussion around the capacity that schools have to maintain such programs, evaluates case studies of walking programs at Seattle Public Schools, and considers active transportation campaigns from around the world to synthesize a vision for the future of walking to school in Seattle. The product of this report is a list of recommendations that outline how SDOT, as a government entity, can most effectively support the development of Walking School Buses at Seattle elementary schools.

Context

At its most basic level, a Walking School Bus is a group of students walking to and/or from school, led by a parent or community member volunteer. Typically, a Walking School Bus is made up of several routes that weave through the neighborhood toward school, picking up students along the way. This system aims to make walking a viable mode to get to school for students who live within a mile of the school. Walking School Buses provide students with an opportunity to start the day with physical activity and improve neighborhood traffic safety by reducing the number of cars driving to the school. Students also gain safe pedestrian skills as they learn to look for cars, use crosswalks, and safely navigate intersections with an adult lead.

Since a Walking School Bus relies on the community, parents, and school to operate, the system may look very different from school to school. Ranging from informal groups of parents taking turns walking their kids to school, to elaborate multi-routes systems with registration procedures and safety trainings, Walking School Buses are not one size-fits all. In addition to reducing the number of students being driven to school, walk-to-school programs also give students who lack reliable transportation options a *means* to get to school. In this sense, the program reaches beyond surface-level traffic safety goals to provide access to education. Improving access to resources through modes of transportation other than a car is what resilience in mobility is all about. Walking School Buses provide an opportunity for young children to become comfortable navigating their neighborhood and harness the ability of their own two feet.

WHY WALK TO SCHOOL

Studies consistently show that students who walk to school engage in higher quantities of overall physical activity in their free time, compared to those who do not (Cooper, Anderson, et al. 2005) (Cooper, Page, et al. 2003) (Schoeppe, et al. 2013). Walking to school also increases blood flow to the brain, improves general circulation, and raises endorphin levels, which prepare students to be more attentive in the classroom and achieve better academic outcomes (Taras 2005). Walking to school is an economic and environmentally friendly mode of transportation. It is a great way to involve parents with their child's school and develop a sense of community in the neighborhood around keeping children safe. Although it has been widely identified that parents are concerned with student safety while walking to school (Macridis 2016) (Zhu 2008) (Sheldon 2002), organized walking programs are proven to maximize student safety by teaching road safety skills, reducing the number of cars on the road, and increasing neighborhood awareness of pedestrian presence (Kingham and Ussher 2007) (Davison, Werder

and Lawson 2008) (Yeaton and Bailey 1978) (Miller, Austin and Rohn 2004). Students have a lot to gain from creating a habit around walking to school, and a Walking School Bus program is a way to start the trend.

While the benefits of walking to school are extensive for students themselves, the rest of the community also experiences positive outcomes. The level of involvement and commitment required to operate a Walking School Bus brings the school community together for a cause. Parents get to know other parents, which strengthens their social networks and improves trust within the school community. The school as a whole, benefits from reduced traffic congestion and a student body that arrives on time and alert. Walking School Buses are proven to improve truancy at schools by investing in a more integrated transportation system that provides all students with reliable transportation to school (Muzyka 2013).

Recognizing the viability of walking to school opens up a world of mobility that has been largely undiscovered for many urban families. Students who are driven less than a mile to get to school are missing out on the human-scale experience of their neighborhood. Traveling on foot allows children to become familiar with their surroundings and develop their own sense of space and position. A walk to school turns transportation into a multi-sensory experience of sounds, scents, sights, and questions that are otherwise bypassed when traveling at 30mph. Learning the spatial makeup of a neighborhood and becoming comfortable traversing it helps children develop confidence in navigation. Strengthening their relationship with the neighborhood through active transportation helps families enjoy the city and gain access to quality public spaces (Karsten and Felder 2015). By participating in a Walking School Bus, families can develop healthy and sustainable habits while exercising a breadth of mobility that has been lost in our attachment to cars.

SEATTLE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Over the last fifteen years, Safe Routes to School movements have been gaining momentum around the country in a collective effort to highlight the value of walking and biking to school. In 2005, a federal Safe Routes to School program was established to allocate funds to support infrastructure and programming in all states to make it easier for kids to walk and bike to school (Safe Routes to School National Partnership 2018). The federal Safe Routes to School program has evolved over the years to reflect new research, fluctuating funding, and shifting administrations. Since then, the federal program has been absorbed into broader transportation alternative programs that distribute Safe Routes to School funds to states that choose to participate. Many states and local municipalities, including Washington State and Seattle, have Safe Routes to School programs housed in their department of transportations.

The Seattle Department of Transportation's (SDOT) Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program operates under an approach of the 6 E's that is characteristic of most SRTS programs around the country.

Education: ensuring that everyone learns how to travel safely.

Encouragement: promoting walking and biking in the school community.

Engineering: infrastructure projects that improve sidewalk and street conditions.

Enforcement: partnering with the Seattle Police Department to enforce traffic safety laws.

Evaluation: tracking progress toward our shared safety goals.

Empowerment: providing resources to school champions.

Through this multi-pronged strategy, SDOT SRTS aims to increase the number of students walking and biking to school and maximize traffic safety around schools. The program operates according to a 5-year action plan that guides investments and informs methods for achieving their goals (Seattle Department of Transportation Fall 2015). As SDOT SRTS prepares for the current action plan to wrap up in 2020, the team is in the process of putting together an updated plan that will reshape their procedures for the future. Inspired by the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative, SDOT SRTS has committed to guiding the development of their next long-term plan with an equity-driven approach. The effort is largely guided by a racial equity analysis, to create an understanding about what equity looks like for SRTS and how to best provide equitable services moving forward. This senior project intends to supplement this work by taking a closer look at how Walking School Bus programs could be implemented at schools across Seattle to provide all students with a reliable and safe way to get to school. A particular emphasis will be put on understanding how the existing capacity of a school might shape the program structure and character of a Walking School Bus. By unpacking the barriers to creating Walking School Buses and figuring out the most effective ways to support different schools, this research aims to help give all young students in Seattle an opportunity to walk to school safely.

RECENT HISTORY OF WSB IN SEATTLE

In 2009, all Seattle Public Schools were drawn attendance boundaries that assign students to attend their neighborhood school (Seattle Public Schools 2009). Students who live further than a mile from their neighborhood school qualify for yellow bus or Metro services, and students living within a mile are left to get to school on their own. The one mile radius around the school is known as the walk zone. Despite the fact that 83% of students live within the walk zone (Seattle Department of Transportation Fall 2015), many families choose to drive their children

to school (Seattle Department of Transportation 2016). This poses a significant opportunity to increase the number of students walking and biking to school.

Several schools in Seattle have ventured to organize their own walk-to-school programs, but there is no official record or centralized database that document these efforts. While I have had success tracking down many schools that have had experience with Walking School Buses, it is safe to assume that efforts at some schools have gone unnoticed. The Walking School Bus experience in Seattle has differed widely from school to school. Many walking groups form through a collection of families who live near one another and take turns walking their kids to school. Other schools have implemented more involved systems with spreadsheets, outreach campaigns, and in-house coordinators. A few external organizations have also been involved with increasing the number of students walking to school in Seattle. The local non-profit Feet First has worked with a number of schools to organize Walking School Buses through funding from both SDOT and Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) grants. Aside from a few rare exceptions, most of these programs last a year, maybe two, and end up withering off for a variety of reasons. A portion of this project takes a closer look at a few case studies from around the city to gain insight into how these systems worked and what factors prevented them from being sustained.

It is also important to recognize the circumstances that have led some schools to experiment with Walking School Buses. Establishing such a routine walking program requires a considerable amount of internal preparation and communication that is most feasible for schools with involved parents, strong school social networks, and access to funds. Every school in Seattle is different, and many do not have access to the resources necessary to maintain a walk-to-school program. This project seeks to understand how SDOT can provide contextual support for schools and meet the needs of the community in a way that reflects how walking to school works best for the people who live there.

Project Statement

The Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) Safe Routes to School (SRTS) team approaches their mission of ensuring safe, sustainable, and equitable access to school from many angles. Over the years, their strategies have evolved to reflect new research and a changing urban environment. This report delves into one of those strategies, the Walking School Bus, to discover how SDOT could most effectively take on this approach to support walking to school in Seattle elementary schools. This project does not claim the Walking School Bus model to be the only or the best way to support children's active transportation in Seattle, but it considers the option extensively to determine best practices, should SDOT choose to pursue this program.

Methodology

To determine how SDOT can effectively support elementary schools to help them establish and sustain their own Walking School Bus, an attention toward the many stakeholders involved is essential. A program that aims to influence the norms within a school community will rely on students, families, the school itself, and the surrounding neighborhood. Every elementary school in Seattle differs in their culture, geography, and access to resources, which will surely affect how a walking program appropriately supports the school community. A Walking School Bus is an infinitely malleable system—how does it work and what makes the program successful? This report also hinges on the Seattle Department of Transportation and their role as a facilitator in the development of Walking School Buses in elementary schools across Seattle. To address these questions, I developed three sub-topics to explore using the methods outlined below.

CAPACITY

A movement to implement a Walking School Bus is an ask for the school community to support a new set of values around active transportation. The program aims to establish new traditions that influence how families and the school conduct their daily routines. Encouraging such a lifestyle shift turns the idea of a Walking School Bus into a social question. How does the capacity to accept the idea of the Walking School Bus and maintain it through the resources in the community differ among schools? To investigate what *capacity* means, this section features a literature review that explores the world of elementary school communities to understand what factors shape programmatic reform in general at schools. Following the literature review,

insight from interviews that I conducted with Anita Koyier-Mwamba¹ and Gia Ledesma² will inform a discussion around involving families in meaningful conversations to build internal support for a Walking School Bus.

SEATTLE WALKING SCHOOL BUS EXPERIENCE

There is no single way to organize a Walking School Bus. A culture around walking to school could develop into a highly structured system of routes, or into a few informal groups of students walking to school. Following the exploration into how a school's capacity affects program development, this section seeks to understand how different program structures have been effective, or not. Several schools in Seattle have had experience with Walking School Buses, which provide examples that can be learned from.

For this part of the methodology, I interviewed individuals from four Seattle elementary schools who spearheaded the Walking School Bus effort at their school. All four interviews consisted of an hour-long conversation through which I asked questions about the motivation behind the growth of their program, strategies used to sustain it, the dynamic among families and with the school, challenges they faced, and many other questions that came up through the talk. Upon the conclusion of each talk, I wrote a short narrative that explained the Walking School Bus experience at the school from the perspective of the leader. From those narratives, I then developed a list of several key themes that I found most contribute toward successful Walking School Buses.

Although it is important to recognize the limitation of only learning from four schools, all of which are located in affluent neighborhoods in Seattle, the key themes identified through their experiences could help inform the kinds of support that other schools may need.

GLOBAL EXAMPLES

Determining how SDOT fits into the picture of Walking School Bus development in Seattle is the crux of my project. After researching elements of school capacity and programmatic success, the last part of my methodology focuses on SDOT's perspective as a provider of services. I consider examples from other municipalities that have experimented with providing Walking School Bus support to their communities. After describing the approaches used in different examples, I compared the tactics and critiqued them based on effectiveness. From that I

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developed a list of a few key takeaways that should be applied in SDOT's approach to Walking School Bus support.

FINAL PRODUCT

This project progress through each of these sub-topics to develop a comprehensive understanding about the factors that should inform SDOT's involvement in Walking School Bus growth in Seattle. Each topic concludes with a synthesis of findings that will contribute to the final list of recommendations that I created for SDOT. These recommendations outline best practices for supporting the development of Walking School Buses at elementary schools across Seattle.

School Capacity

The challenge with creating a plan to help schools across Seattle establish their own Walking School Bus is that the program is not one-size-fits-all. Because every school has a unique student body and has access to different resources, the development of a successful, sustainable Walking School Bus at one school may not be compatible with the culture at another. Through the following literature review, I explore the world of elementary school communities to learn how schools achieve programmatic reform in general, and what contextual factors affect a school's capacity to do so. I will look at the roles that family involvement and social capital play, and then think about how these assets could be maximized for the implementation of a Walking School Bus.

THE POWER OF A SCHOOL COMMUNITY

For the first decade of a child's life, the American elementary school is the social core of most student's childhood. As a major source of activities, responsibilities, relationships, and new experiences, schools are a prominent and influential setting in child's interpersonal development. Students have an opportunity to grow up among a common group of peers and instructors who, in a supportive and collaborative environment, can develop a strong school community. Researcher Victor Battistich, found that "students' motivation is enhanced in schools in which they feel cared for, supported, valued, and influential—schools that they experience as communities" (Battistich, et al. 1995, 652). Academic institutions for young learners have an amazing potential to positively shape the lives of students by creating a community for them to connect with. In his book Building Community in Schools, Thomas Sergiovanni celebrates the value of students, teachers, and parents coming together for the betterment of the school. "The bonding together of people in special ways and the binding of them to shared values and ideas are the defining characteristics of schools as communities" (Sergiovanni 1994, 4). Sergiovanni emphasizes the unique ability that schools have to develop their own culture, rally support for families, and establish visions that pull the school community together. When considering the introduction of new programs or ideas into a school, Sergiovanni urges that "community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort" (Sergiovanni 1994, xi).

Long time elementary school principal and education researcher Karen Lynn Casto affirms that a "shared vision" is an essential condition for building a school-wide community (Casto and Audley 2008). Creating collective goals and including the voices of students, families, and staff will help develop an appreciation and value for the school. Building support starts with recognizing the value of the community, just as Battistich proves that students who are

respected and given the space to make meaningful contributions are much more likely to feel committed to the group's goals and values (Battistich, et al. 1995)

In successful school communities, involvement, communication, and collaboration are key. Schools provide a remarkable opportunity for children, parents, families, teachers, and the administration to join forces across cultures and generations to provide a space where students can blossom. Organizations such as the *Center for Disease Control* (CDC) and *Action for Healthy Kids* recognize this and leverage school communities to promote their messages (Center for Disease Control 2005). The CDC's "Make a Difference at Your School" guide is designed to help existing school programs adopt the goal of reducing childhood obesity.

Schools are great places to reach the minds of young children and instill positive habits into the lives of families and community members. So why do many schools struggle to inspire change? Sergiovanni speaks of *epistemological errors* as those that "reduce good ideas to prescriptions" (Sergiovanni 1994, xii). This is an issue with perspective. Good ideas often have trouble making roots in a school when they are adopted at the level of practice without being accepted at the level of theory. A Massachusetts school superintendent, Irwin Blumer, supports that "change can only be achieved through people's acceptance of responsibility to further their goals through their words and their actions" (Blumer 1992, 1). In the words of Karen Lynn Casto, school reform movements are most successful when "students, staff, and families all have a role in deciding 'what we believe' and all understand 'why we do things this way'" (Casto and Audley 2008, 19).

In order to build excitement and appreciation around walking to school, it is critical that a Walking School Bus program does not overlook the power of school communities. The aim of inspiring such a major shift in transportation habits is one that relies on serious buy-in from families and staff. The development of a culture of walking to school is not a single-handed feat, but one that requires involvement, collaboration and what Karen Lynn Casto would call an establishment of "common knowledge". Just as the literature encourages school reform movements to grow from within, a Walking School Bus program must also look to the assets within the community in order to be successful.

INVOLVING PARENTS

Although the physical school building hosts a world of student activities and connections, a school community is incomplete if it ignores the value that families contribute toward a student's experience within it. Karen Lynn Casto dedicated a whole chapter to discussing family involvement strategies in her book, *In Our School: Building Community in Elementary Schools*.

She strongly encourages schools to involve families in their children's education by listening to their insights, inviting them to visit and volunteer, and welcoming them to contribute to the school programs and policies (Casto and Audley 2008). Building trust between families and the school allows for a breadth of collaboration and understanding that provide students with consistent support.

Programs that concern children's transportation habits, such as Walking School Buses, highly depend on parent participation to sustain the program, involve their children, and reinforce the value of an active commute. Understanding the nature of parent involvement and learning how to effectively strengthen family-school relationships will help inform best practices for implementing walking programs.

EPSTEIN'S FIVE TYPES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In the field of education, the importance of overlapping family and school spheres started to take off in the 1980s. Conversations around characterizing parents and schools as partners in a child's education gave way to decades of research that have evolved the concept of family-school collaboration into an institutional standard. This body of ideas was largely established upon the work of Joyce L. Epstein PhD, an icon in the education world who has directed several organizations and authored over 100 publications on family and community involvement. One of Epstein's most influential works identified five types of involvement that schools have a responsibility to provide for families (Epstein, Parent Involvement 1987):

- 1) Parenting – Schools should enable families to provide the skills and knowledge needed to support children as students.
- 2) Communicating – Information about school programs, events, opportunities, needs, etc. should be communicated appropriately to all families in an effective and equitable manner.
- 3) Volunteering – Opportunities for parents to support the school community in person and attend school functions should be offered.
- 4) Learning at Home – Schools should guide parents so they can help their own children through monitoring, discussing, and helping with school work.
- 5) Decision Making – Parents should be included in school decisions and have space to become leaders and parent representatives.

A sixth type of involvement, suggested through additional research (California State Board of Education 1988), is Collaborating with Community, which emphasizes the importance of schools to identify and integrate resources and services from the community. Although this component is not part of the original typology and has not been tested as extensively as the other five, its relevance and need for further research has been recognized by Epstein.

This typology of parent involvement establishes opportunities for strengthening collaboration among families and schools. Schools with programs that exercise all five types of involvement help parents become active participants in their child's education and share in the vision of the school community (Epstein and Dauber, School Programs and Teacher Practices of Parent

Involvement in Inner-City Elementary and Middle Schools 1991). It is important to recognize that each of these elements of involvement are meant to be guides that can be expressed in countless forms depending on the school and program at hand. Eugenia Hepworth Berger, an active professional and researcher in education, has published eight editions of her book Parents as Partners in Education, that provides hundreds of examples about how to effectively invite parents into their children's education (Berger 2000). Every school should approach family involvement in a way that speaks to their community and reflects the needs of their program.

It is clear that a successful Walking School Bus will require parent involvement on a number of levels. Schools that only invest in trying to get students to register for the program will not be able to develop an essential community value around walking to school. Efforts to educate families about what the program is, why they should care, how they can help shape it, and make it part of their routine are just the start of how schools might seek to apply the five (and sixth) types of involvement to their Walking School Bus.

It is also important to recognize, as Epstein states, that "schools can take different directions in program development if they learn about the needs and interests of their families, students, and teachers" (Epstein and Dauber 1991, 294). However, a question still remains concerning the challenges associated with parent involvement. Why is it easier for some schools to connect with parents, and more difficult for others?

BARRIERS TO INVOLVING FAMILIES

Researchers in the fields of sociology and education have spent decades deliberating over the determinants of parent involvement in schools. As one of the early thinkers on equity in education, Reginald Clark examined how family life affects student success. He found that parents' desire for their child's success in school was not correlated with income level, cultural practices, or household composition (Clark 1983). Although families in more privileged communities are often more engaged in their children's schooling and appear to provide more support, it does not follow that these parents care more about their children's education. It has been proven time and time again that, for the most part, all parents want their children to excel in school and pursue higher education (Clark 1983) (Lareau 1987) (Rouse and Ware 2017), but Clark identified that many low-income families simply do not know how to be involved. Elizabeth Rouse takes it a step further by claiming that many "unfreedoms" exist in minority neighborhoods that prevent families from building social capital and accessing the information they need to be involved with their children's school. Poor housing, language barriers, school context and curriculum, disrupted parental schooling, and trauma all affect families' ability to create necessary school relationships (Rouse and Ware 2017).

Laurie Leitch argues that the problems between family-school connections are rooted in “the lack of specific planning, and lack of knowledge about how each can use the other person most effectively” (Leitch and Tangri 1988, 74). Leitch is pointing toward a significant lack of communication and speaks of the stereotypes that parents and teachers have of each other. Misconstrued expectations of parents and that of the school can cause mounting frustration and diminishing trust that cause school communities to weaken and parents to distance themselves (Leitch and Tangri 1988). Annette Lareau suggests that many of these misunderstandings originate from incongruent cultural norms. Parents who have low academic standing or who spend significant amounts of time at work to support their family may feel incapable of being a part of their children’s education. Likewise, Lareau found, similar to Leitch, that some households maintain beliefs that education is the sole responsibility of the school and that there is no place or need to participate. Lareau’s findings indicate that middle- and higher-income families tend to understand education as a shared enterprise, constantly reaching out to teachers, reading to their children, and attending school events. “It is important to stress that if the schools were to promote a different type of family-school relationship, the class culture of middle-class families might not yield a social profit”. Lareau is saying that the social culture of higher-income families is not intrinsically better than that of lower-income families, but that “the social profitability of middle-class arrangements is tied to the schools’ definition of the proper family-school relationship” (Lareau 1987, 82).

Clark, Rouse, Leitch, and Lareau are highlighting the structural rigidity of American elementary schools which is limiting the ability of schools to draw on the assets of multi-cultural families in the community. Schools in diverse neighborhoods with a variety of family structures, cultures, and income statuses suffer from a lack of contextually appropriate opportunities to involve parents in their child’s school, which reduces the quality of support that students experience in their school communities.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Family-school relationships have also been addressed from a similar intellectual stream that considers the social networks of parents as the avenue toward building strong school communities and increasing parent involvement. This literature is largely established on Coleman’s concept of *intergenerational closure*, which comes from a sociological perspective to suggest that common understandings in communities are developed when communication circles horizontally and vertically between social structures (Coleman 1988). In the context of schools, this means that when parents talk to parents of other students, social capital strengthens, which creates a “trustworthiness of social structures that allows the proliferation of obligations and expectations” (Coleman 1988, 107). It is important to recognize that parents

are not just isolated figures, but rather social actors with their own relationships and communities that influence their values and decision-making. When parents build connections with other parents at the same school, their children's education becomes the binding element of those social networks.

Parents who build relationships with other parents have more opportunities to discuss school matters, share information, hear about school events, and learn about their children's experiences. In fact, educational psychologist Steven Sheldon found that parents' social networks are predictive of how involved they are in their child's school, with stronger social networks leading to more participation (Sheldon 2002). These social networks do not need to be excessive—two to three parent connections are enough to connect parents with the resources they need to build a relationship with the school (Sheldon 2002).

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN WALKING

The literature thus far suggests that strong relationships among families and the school correlate to the school's ability to adopt collective values such as walking to school, but what if the act of walking in itself could be a path toward strengthening a school community? In a recent study, Brommelstroet et al. explored the potential influence that different forms of mobility have over our social and spatial experiences. People who walk are able to create a relationship with their surroundings and develop a confidence in their sense of navigation in a way that is lost when traveling by car (Brommelstroet, et al. 2017). This sense of awareness and comfort in one's own neighborhood leads to greater trust among people which supports social development (Leyden 2003). By walking to school, students get to know other students, and families can become familiar with other families that live near them. The opportunity of building social capital is heightened through walking because people can see each other's faces, share a wave, and get to know their neighborhoods (Waygood, et al. 2017) (Carver, et al. 2005) (Grannis 2009).

In this sense, walking to school has the potential to create a sense of connectedness among families at a school, which has been proven to strengthen school communities as a whole (see *earlier sections*). Especially in schools that struggle to develop meaningful relationships and mutual trust with families, rallying the school community around active transportation could be a great way to create a social platform from which a school community could grow.

RESPECTING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Every elementary school is different, and the way that a Walking School Bus could best support the needs of a community while making room for social development will be unique in every

context. Anita Koyier-Mwamba, the Family Partnerships Manager at Seattle Public Schools, emphasizes the importance of talking with families and helping them feel empowered to participate in active transportation. Anita explains that a program that successfully supports the school culture is one in which families feel valued and confident. Offering parent yoga classes, tai-chi, or even walks around the neighborhood could be good ways for families to develop appreciation for physical activity and engage families in conversation to build mutual understanding. Families must be given the space to develop their own motivation for encouraging their kids to walk to school and a Walking School Bus program should stem from those motivations to reflect the voices of the people who live there.

Gia Ledesma, the Family Engagement Manager at the Seattle University Center for Community Engagement, agrees that building trust in a school community can be very challenging. As discussed earlier, imposing a program at a school from an overhead organization is a disregard for the culture that already exists. Gia suggests that efforts to incorporate values around active transportation in schools should be leveraged through trusted school champions and two-way parent communication. “Go to the places where families congregate”, Anita supports, “where is there already community in the neighborhood?”. In order to help parents learn about the opportunity of active transportation and start building an appreciation for it in the school community, these ideas should be introduced in the social networks that already exist.

However, family engagement can only go so far if parents do not have the capacity themselves to operate the Walking School Bus. When considering how to offer the opportunity of a safe walk to school for students, it is important to ask questions about how to get the school community excited about walking to school, as well as investigating the kind of support they may need. While schools in upper- middle-class neighborhoods may have parents with flexible work schedules, many working-class families don’t have time to volunteer to be involved. Most Title I schools in Seattle have organizations that are already working directly in schools to provide support such as tutoring, afterschool care, family communication, health services, among others. These groups already have ties within the school community and could be good partners in the dual efforts of parent engagement and maintaining a Walking School Bus. Several of these organizations, provided by Gia, include:

- Americorp
- United Way of King County
- City Year
- Center for Multi-Cultural Health
- Neighborhood Health
- Other community health clinics

Gia also discussed the idea of supporting Walking School Bus growth from larger organizations that have access to connections at schools on a broader range. The Puget Sound Educational Service District has a family engagement program that supports school districts in the region

and could become involved in Walking School Bus support. YMCA/YWCA is already committed to working with children to promote physical activity and health, and could possibly provide coordinators and walking leaders. The Seattle Public School District could also be a good host for providing centralized Walking School Bus support since they have close relationships with school communities already.

STNTHESES

A school community is a complex atmosphere that weaves together the cultures of families, school staff, and the neighborhood itself in an infinite variety of ways. Learning how the opportunity of a safe walk to school can be supported at an elementary school would require SDOT to think beyond transportation. Relationships between the school and families, and among families themselves are indicators of the strength of a school community, and its capacity to accept new norms as a whole. Schools that suffer from miscommunication or mistrust with families lack the mutual understanding needed to collaborate over movements to support their children. A successful Walking School Bus program relies on parents who believe in the value of walking, as well as a school that reinforces those messages. Without the essential community at a school, values around active transportation have no space to gain momentum, and a Walking School Bus is without fuel.

In neighborhoods where school community is lacking, it's important to learn where social networks already exist. Whether it's at a church, a park, or a market, engaging with families where they naturally congregate is a step toward contextually appropriate outreach. By educating families about the opportunity of having their children walk to school, these conversations can spark interest in active transportation while leading families to create connections with the school. Furthermore, walking to school has a potential to support social development at schools by helping families create connections with other families who live nearby.

Trying to impose such a program from an overhead perspective is a denial of the family/school support needed to develop a true appreciation for walking to school. Supporting the growth of a Walking School Bus requires an attention to social relationships and an understanding of parent capacity. While some schools might only need to learn about walking to school to get parents motivated, other schools may need deeper family engagement strategies and further staff support to operate the program.

Seattle Walking School Bus Experience

Over the past twenty years or so, Walking School Buses have been popping up organically in a handful of elementary schools around Seattle. These programs often grow out of the efforts of motivated parents who recognize the benefits of walking to school and who have free time to see it through. Unfortunately, many of them lose momentum after a few years. This section of the report seeks to unpack some of the challenges these schools faced and the elements that helped them be successful when trying to establish walking programs. This investigation also aims to reveal any unique aspects of the Seattle context that influence how a Walking School Bus works best in the area.

This section features Walking School Bus narratives from four elementary schools that were created through interviews with individuals who spearheaded the development of the program at their school. Lawton Elementary and Genesee Hill Elementary both have active Walking School Buses, providing a perspective on the current experience of maintaining the program. Bryant Elementary does not have a regular walk-to-school system, but has a strong bicycle culture that achieves many of the same goals around leveraging school communities to promote sustainable habits. Lastly, the West Woodland Elementary narrative reflects back on a once thriving Walking School Bus that withered off after about nine years. Several other schools around Seattle have also experimented with Walking Schools Buses, but for the purposes of this project only four were evaluated due to limited time and responsiveness from interviewees.

School	Walking School Bus structure	Walking School Bus presence	Percent of students identified as white	Percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch
Lawton Elementary	Four routes, twice weekly, morning WSB	Active since 2006	72.07%	9.88%
Genesee Hill Elementary	Nine routes, daily, morning WSB	Active since 2016	75.63%	9.91%
Bryant Elementary	School community committed to bicycling	Building bicycle culture since 2008	76.99%	5.16%
West Woodland Elementary	One daily WSB route, morning and afternoon	2005 - 2013	75.56%	7.06%

Outline of evaluated schools, including information about the Walking School Bus and demographics.

All four elementary schools evaluated in this report are located in affluent, white neighborhoods. Schools that have access to resources, benefit from strong school communities,

and have families with free time generally have a larger capacity to start their own Walking School Bus. In an effort to learn from individuals first-hand about the Walking School Bus experience in Seattle, these examples were studied with an acknowledgement of the limitations. Although this perspective is limiting in its insight into how a Walking School Bus would fit into a broader range of socio-economic contexts, these narratives still demonstrate insight into the resources necessary to maintain such a program.

WALKING SCHOOL BUS NARRATIVES

LAWTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Interviewee: Lyon Terry – Lawton teacher

Lawton Elementary has the longest-lasting formal Walking School Bus program in Seattle. For the last 10 years, a Lawton teacher has taken on the responsibility of coordinating the Walking School Bus as families come and go over the years. To gain a better understanding about how this program works and what makes it successful, I interviewed that teacher, Lyon Terry, the founder and current coordinator of the Lawton Walking School Bus.

The Lawton Walking School Bus operates two mornings per week with four routes through the neighborhood. One to two parent volunteers who wear yellow safety vests lead each route to school picking up students along the way. As the Walking School Bus coordinator, Lyon assembles a Google Maps file with the walking routes and posts it on the school website. He also recruits volunteers, supplies safety equipment, and is a central point of contact for the participants. A large part of the success of the Lawton Walking School Bus lies in the consistency of the coordinator. Opposed to other schools with parent coordinators who leave the school when their kids graduate, Lyon has been able to develop a routine that he can improve upon year after year. He has experimented with distributing incentive prizes, holding walking contests, and requiring safety contracts as strategies to help the walking program grow. Despite the sustainability of the Walking School Bus over many years, Lyon does not believe that it would continue if he left (and the parent volunteers agree). Lyon says that it is essential to have someone in the school building who owns and promotes the program.

Before starting the Walking School Bus, Lyon created a school safety patrol at Lawton in response to the principal's interest in improving traffic safety. Lyon and several students patrol the main intersection outside the school and facilitate student drop off and pick up every day. In this position, Lyon noticed significant congestion from parents driving their kids to school; kids who he knew lived very close. Lyon lives three blocks from the school, knows his neighborhood well, and recognized an opportunity to encourage students to walk to school.

It all started when he noticed a parent who walked his son to school every day. Lyon asked the parent if he could walk a couple other kids who lived nearby in a small walking group. And with that, the Walking School Bus was born. Lyon discovered that the few families who already walk to school are great initiators toward building a walking system. He emphasizes that a Walking School Bus doesn't need to be fancy; it's just parents and students getting together to walk to school. He views his job simply as a central point who connects those families so they can realize the value of walking, together. Knowing the community is very important, Lyon points out. Knowing who walks, where they live, how they get to school, where the safe routes are, which intersections to avoid, etc. all inform how a Walking School Bus works best for the community. While the initial motivation for a Walking School Bus at Lawton came from reducing congestion, it also aligned with the environmental goals of the emerging Green Team at the school. Incorporating conversations of the value of active transportation into multiple platforms at the school helped to increase awareness and appreciation for the program.

Some of the biggest challenges that Lyon faces are parent and student recruitment. The families that do participate are very involved, but getting new participants is difficult. At open houses Lyon sets up a booth where parents can sign up to be volunteers, but aside from that and announcements at assemblies, outreach is limited. Lyon comments that spreading awareness, getting people talking about it, and kids excited about it are important strategies toward keeping the program alive. The Lawton Walking School Bus does have one volunteer who has been leading routes for over ten years. After his kids graduated from Lawton, this parent decided to continue volunteering for the walking bus. Mr. Miller enjoys being involved with the school and getting to know his neighbors by taking a walk with them in the morning. His commitment and enthusiasm for the program is a valuable contribution toward the success of the Walking School Bus.

When considering how other schools might be able to develop their own Walking School Buses, Lyon suggested providing a stipend for Walking School Bus coordinators. For his position organizing the school safety patrol, Lyon receives a small amount of compensation, which shows that the school values the patrol. Providing pay for someone to coordinate a Walking School Bus would help to legitimize the responsibility and communicates that the work is important. Lyon also suggested that the Seattle Public School District could be a good source from which to organize Walking School Buses around the city. The school district knows where students live and could draw appropriate routes to assign students to walking buses just like yellow school bus services. This approach could help push to normalize walking as a viable and safe way to get to school.

GENESEE HILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Interviewee: Elaine Bailey – parent

When Schmitz Park Elementary was absorbed into a new and bigger building to become Genesee Hill Elementary in 2016, the transition team made sure that increasing the number of students walking to school would be a priority. Elaine Bailey, the parent who made this goal a reality, explained how a Walking School Bus set a new standard for transportation in the community.

Elaine first discovered the Walking School Bus when she saw groups of students walking to the nearby Lafayette Elementary and Fairmount Park Elementary schools. After meeting with parents from those schools, she sent out a survey to Genesee Hill parents to gauge interest in starting their own Walking School Bus. With a significant majority of the school population living within the walk zone, Elaine easily recruited dozens of interested families. By the first day of school in 2016, Genesee Hill had 9 operating Walking School Bus routes.

The Walking School Bus operated every morning for the entire school year. Parents took turns walking the routes, rain or shine. Elaine took her role as coordinator very seriously. She created a flyer for each route with a map, schedule, list of participants, rules and did a test walk on each route with the parents before the first day of school. Elaine engaged in constant outreach by emailing parents, posting in the online bulletin, and even setting up a table on the playground to inform families about the opportunity. Her level of organization and commitment to the success of the program helped the Walking School Bus become popular.

Nevertheless, Elaine comments that there is still work to be done to establish walking to school as a community norm. After the first year of the Walking School Bus, Elaine handed over her role as coordinator to another committed parent who now runs the program. Although the program has thrived over the last two years, the school community is still defining a culture for itself as a new school. Elaine believes that if the Walking School Bus can maintain enough momentum over the next several years, walking to school could be anchored in the school as a tradition. Looking into the future, Elaine has a vision for an RFID kiosk at the school that kids could scan into to track their trips to school. This information could be used as a learning device to display carbon emission savings and total miles walked by different individuals, grades levels, and the school as a whole. To engrain active transportation as a habit among families, it is important to celebrate it within other facets of school life.

In addition to the successes of the Genesee Hill Walking School Bus thus far, parent recruitment has been a major challenge. When introduced to the idea of the Walking School Bus, parents

were excited, but viewed it more as a service and less as a community operated program. Constant outreach and advertising is required to keep parents involved.

BRYANT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Interviewee: Michele Solis – parent

Although Bryant Elementary does not have an established Walking School Bus, the school community has made significant strides toward building a culture around active transportation that other schools could learn from. I interviewed Michele Solis, a current Bryant parent and a leader in school biking and walking campaigns for the last eight years.

Unlike other schools, the push for active transportation at Bryant started with bikes. Biking is a faster mode of transportation than walking and it provided an opportunity for fun games and events on two wheels. Established in 2008 by two motivated families, *Bike2Bryant* became the slogan for a host of group bike rides and bike-themed challenges. Michele recalls the contagious enthusiasm for biking to school that the original two families emulated. By standing by the bike racks in morning to welcome kids to school, the families helped kids feel proud to ride their bikes. Michele continues this tradition by recognizing families who bike on platforms such as the PTA blog. Sharing people's stories and posting about the success of their bike events in newsletters with stats and pictures helps sustain the excitement for biking. Momentum grows when families see other families having fun biking. The conscious effort to celebrate biking to school has been a key element of success for Bryant's active transportation culture.

Michele will be the first to attest that keeping the celebration alive takes work. When Michele came to Bryant two years after the bike movement started, she was able to become involved with the events and eventually take the lead in continuing the traditions that the previous families started. This handoff, Michele comments, was an important step toward sustaining the bike agenda that would otherwise be lost as families graduated from the school.

As an entirely parent-led program, communication among families is essential. Michele explains that walking and biking cultures are built when parents develop habits together. The habits are more likely to become permanent when parents are involved, rather than relying on a single coordinator to promote it. In this sense, Michele sees her leadership role as one that encourages biking through events, games, and celebration to encourage families to develop active transportation habits as a community.

Included in the inventory of bike events that Michele helps facilitate are several fun traditions that Bryant families look forward to. For Top-Pot donut rides, parents and students meet at the

local donut shop to meet for a snack and bike to school together. On Bike Fairy Fridays, student bikers who find the parent dressed as a biking fairy in the neighborhood receive prizes. Once per year parents bring out a homemade bike obstacle course that test students' agility navigating their wheels. For walkers, parents have also created Walk-to-School BINGO to help students start their day with a scavenger hunt on their way to school. Although Bryant is known for their bikes, they take Walktober very seriously. In honor of walk-to-school month in October, parents set up stations on corners a few blocks from the schools where families gather before school to share treats and socialize. Michele emphasizes the value of families getting to know each other in order to build connections and learn who their neighbors are. Even though the walking events are only held in October, students are often so involved that they will walk those routes throughout the year, because parents become comfortable with each other and their surroundings.

Lastly, even though Bryant's active transportation culture rests upon the efforts of parents, support from the school goes a long way. Students who see their principal biking to school with the Top Pot donut crew get excited to ride alongside them. For a school wide bike challenge, Bryant's PE teacher said she would shave her head if the school reached a certain number of miles. Involvement from the school further reinforces the positivity around participating in active transportation.

WEST WOODLAND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Interviewee: Glen Bradburn – parent

The Walking School Bus at West Woodland Elementary thrived for many years through the support of a close-knit group of parents. Glen Bradburn, one of the main coordinators of the program, sat down to talk with me about how and why it worked.

Starting an organized walking program at West Woodland was the obvious thing to do, Glen says. Several students already had a habit of walking to school and many of them lived in the same area. A Walking School Bus would give these students, and others in the neighborhood an opportunity to walk to school together. It also allowed parents to trade off their responsibility of bringing their kids to school, which motivated more families to join. As the coordinator, Glen created a spreadsheet that listed the students involved and identified which parents led the group each day. Other than hosting the spreadsheet in the main office of the school and occasionally making announcements over the intercom, the administration was never involved with the program. To Glen and the other parents the Walking School Bus was just another version of a carpool, and to them, the school had no responsibility to organize carpools.

The Walking School Bus operated every day, starting around 2004. The group had a single meeting point where parents would drop their kids off to be led to school by the parent leader. Glen reported that the walking group reached a maximum of 17 kids on some days. The program operated rain or shine, which helped the kids learn to make a consistent habit of it. In general, the West Woodland Walking School Bus didn't face many obstacles. Kids were excited to be a part of the program and it was convenient for parents. It wasn't until around 2013 that the Walking School Bus disbanded on account of disciplinary conflicts among students and parents. Although the program had established rules for conduct, behavior issues grew enough to deter families from continuing, Glen reports.

In the walking group's prime, families had a lot of fun growing as a community through the program. They threw end-of-the-year Walking School Bus parties and kickoff events at the beginning of each school year. The families even hosted a walking tour dinner that featured a multi-course meal that walkers enjoyed as they walked from house to house. The strong social network among families was the driving force behind the success of the program. Parents knew the families that lived near them and developed a community in their neighborhood

One of the most unique aspects of the West Woodland Walking School Bus was their commitment to an afterschool route. Many schools struggle to achieve the organization necessary to gather students after school for the commute home. Glen comments that the Walking School Bus was established enough that students knew what to do and consistently reported to the afterschool parent leader every day. This component of the Walking School Bus heavily relied on the personal relationships between families. The parent leader knew all the kids and the parent who picked each of them up at the route's end point. Glen comments on the difficulty and liability that the school would face if they were involved with organizing a school-wide Walking School Bus program.

ANALYSIS

The stories compiled from Lawton, Genesee Hill, Bryant, and West Woodland Elementary Schools provide insight into the how these schools were able to internally build a Walking School Bus program or strong tradition of active transportation. Though these schools each face their own set of challenges, their experiences share consistencies that inform best practices toward successful Walking School Buses. Below are five key themes derived from the Walking School Bus narratives.

1. A WALKING SCHOOL BUS COORDINATOR

Maintaining a system that manages several walking routes with alternating adult leaders and specific student pick up locations requires a strong sense of coordination. Having someone in charge to oversee the routes, promote participation, and address emerging issues is clearly essential. The Walking School Bus at Genesee Hill that boasted nine daily routes starting the first day of school was achieved through the dedicated efforts of Elaine, the coordinator. She sent out a survey to gauge interest, developed schedules, and created pamphlets for each walking leader outlining their responsibilities. For a brand-new school, Elaine recognized the need to provide a very organized structure so families could feel comfortable. Glen, the Walking School Bus coordinator at West Woodland, took on a more casual role. At West Woodland, many families already walked to school and the Walking School Bus was instituted as a way for parents to trade off walking duties. With the motivation to walk already instilled, Glen simply arranged a spreadsheet identifying participants and the daily parent volunteer. Every school has different contexts that affect how a Walking School Bus would work best and it is important for the coordinator to be informed about those needs and address them appropriately.

Lyon, the Walking School Bus coordinator at Lawton, maintains the belief that a school staff member is the most effective leader of a school walking program. As the coordinator for over 10 years, Lyon's consistent presence has helped him develop his techniques over the years and ensure the sustainability of the program.

Regardless of how the Walking School Bus coordinator is affiliated with the school, it is most important that they are motivated by the value of active transportation, trusted within the school community, and knowledgeable about the contextual needs around walking to school. At schools where motivation is low, but growing, a stipend for the coordinator would be an effective way to emphasize the legitimacy of the position and hold the coordinator accountable for their duties.

2. GAINING MOMENTUM FROM FAMILIES WHO ALREADY WALK

At all four case study schools, traditions of walking/biking to school grew from families who were already doing so. At Lawton, Lyon simply noticed a parent who walked his son to school and asked if he could walk with a couple other students who lived nearby. Families who already have habits of walking to school are great supporters in the effort to spread the concept. With 83% of Seattle students living within a mile of their school, I believe that people don't realize the opportunity of walking to school, or they don't know the best way to go about it.

At Bryant, sharing the stories of families who bike to school on the newsletter has been one of Michele's most impactful strategies. She posts pictures with praise such as, "Sarah walked a whole half mile to school this morning carrying her saxophone!". When families see other families walking or biking to school, they can become more aware that there is more than one way to get to school.

When building excitement around a Walking School Bus program, it's important to identify how students are already getting to school, to learn where the assets and opportunities are. Taking advantage of the parents and students who are already walking to school helps other families see the value, and can contribute toward establishing new norms.

3. COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF A WALKING SCHOOL BUS FROM MULTIPLE ANGLES

For a Walking School Bus program to develop roots within the school community, conversations around walking to school should be reinforced throughout the school. Talking about the benefits of walking to school in different contexts helps the program connect with the school community on several levels. At Lawton, the Walking School Bus came at a time when the school Green Team was communicating the importance of reducing carbon emissions. The Walking School Bus was able to become a part of that agenda, which augmented value around the program. Including discussions around a walk to school in the classroom and pedestrian safety in physical education classes could also stimulate interest around walking to school. Teachers at Bryant got on board with the growing bicycle participation by standing at the bike racks to welcome students to school in the morning. Receiving that affirmation from the leadership at the school helped students feel proud of the transportation habits and created an enthusiasm around active transportation in general.

Elaine, from Genesee Hill Elementary, has a vision to install RFID readers that students could scan into with a tag on their backpack when they walk to school. This technology would allow students to track their walking trips and feel rewarded for walking to school. With a large results board, this feature would provide learning opportunities to get students excited about reducing emissions, create math problems, and hold contests.

4. OUTREACH TO FAMILIES

The biggest pitfall for the Lawton Walking School Bus is the lack of knowledge about the program in general. Although Lyon has several very committed volunteers that keep the

program going, he comments that most parents at the school don't even know that it exists. Until a Walking School Bus is engrained in a school community to the extent that it become normal, consistent communication to educate families about the program is essential. At Genesee Hill, Elaine engaged in constant outreach by emailing parents, posting in the newsletter, sending out surveys, and even setting up booths on the playground to inform parents. Her efforts were successful in recruiting dozens of participants and more importantly, getting parents to talk about the opportunity. Parents who feel motivated to walk to school first need to know that it is an option. This goal can also be further supported through the other themes listed in this section, such as connecting the program to other parts of the school and celebrating it.

Parents who can learn from each other and talk about walking to school to become involved, even just by sharing their opinions or talking about it with other parents, helps the Walking School Bus evolve to fit into the school culture even better. As a community-operated program, and one that aims to influence norms, family engagement is vital.

5. CELEBRATION OF THE WALKING SCHOOL BUS

Like many elementary school traditions, walking to school should be fun. Whether it's getting families excited by sharing pictures or praising students who walk to school, there are many ways to build enthusiasm. Walking to school can be turned into a game by providing stamp cards for students to track their number of walks. Lawton has experimented with this tactic and other incentive strategies such as handing out bracelets and recognizing walkers at school assemblies. Bryant takes walking games a step further in school-wide contests. In one example, the PE teacher challenged the school to collectively bike a certain number of miles, and if it was achieved, she would shave her head! This level of school support along with the principal biking to school with students on occasion has helped Bryant establish a reputation as a biking school.

The celebration of a Walking School Bus also includes showing appreciation to the adult walking leaders to reinforce the importance of their position. The distribution of pedestrian safety cards for families further communicates the community's commitment to the program.

The effort to assemble extra steps to celebrate a Walking School Bus takes a lot of work. For schools with less parent availability to promote such initiatives, achieving similar levels of enthusiasm could be very challenging. Providing a guide that includes step-by-step

strategies to build enthusiasm around a Walking School Bus could make executing the initiatives less burdensome on the coordinator.

Organizing walks to school does not need to be anything fancy. In the words of Lyon from Lawton, it's just parents and students getting together to walk to school. A Walking School Bus shouldn't be hard to establish or sustain, and if it is, it's because people don't believe in it. Even at schools in upper-middle-class neighborhoods, Walking School Buses will wither off if parent support is lacking. The five themes above are elements that have proven to support a school-wide appreciation for active transportation so that walking to school can be easy and accessible for everyone. Even though the Walking School Buses in the case study schools grew from motivated parents who have time to be involved with the program, effective support for other schools can cultivate appreciation for walking to school and provide programmatic support where necessary.

These findings show that incorporating values around active transportation in the school and among parents creates a platform of support. A trusted and motivated coordinator with an understanding of the needs of the community can work off of that support to make walking accessible through a Walking School Bus.

Global WSB Examples

The opportunity of walking to school is not unique to Seattle. Many municipalities around the world share similar goals of promoting active transportation among children, and their experiences can help inspire strategies for SDOT. This report highlights two examples from Ottawa, Canada and Auckland, New Zealand. Both cities have ventured to provide Walking School Bus support from a government entity, using different approaches to promote program growth. After analyzing what capacity means for schools and learning how a Walking School Bus works best, this section seeks to learn how SDOT can use that knowledge to invest effectively in Walking School Bus support. These case studies show how other agencies have worked with schools to promote walk-to-school programs. The two international examples are described below, followed by a critical analysis.

OTTAWA, CANADA

The Ottawa Student Transportation Authority (OSTA), in partnership with Green Communities Canada (GCC), Ottawa Safety Council, and Ottawa Public Health recognized the many challenges that prevent Walking School Buses from being successful. To overcome the difficulties of retaining parent volunteers, coordinating the program, and facing hesitation from schools, OSTA and GCC put together the Ottawa Walking School Bus Pilot project in 2014. These organizations aimed to reduce the internal burden of organizing Walking School Buses and instead coordinated the program as an outside entity.

Eight schools were carefully selected to receive the program. Together, the four organizations developed and disseminated recruitment materials to encourage students and adults to sign up. Walking leaders were trained, received background checks, and were paid to lead the routes. The organizations also hosted a centralized website where parents could sign their kids up and get assigned specific “bus stops” where the Walking School Bus would pick them up (Beaton 2015). After the first year of the pilot program, OSTA received funding to continue organizing Walking School Buses through 2016. After 2016, funding ran out and the program dissolved.

This approach is similar to yellow school bus planning. It is a service-oriented method that aims to create a reliable system to give students an opportunity to walk to school. The goal was to provide the logistical support of a Walking School Bus so that schools and families wouldn’t have to struggle through the demanding process of sustaining the program on their own. As of

the Fall of 2016, about 50% of the student walkers were previously driven to school (Green Communities Canada 2017).

AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Auckland Transport³ (AT) maintains the stance that “Walking School Buses are owned and operated by volunteer parents and caregivers, and supported by the school and Auckland Transport” (Auckland Transport n.d.). They make it clear that it is up to the parent/school community to initiate and sustain the program. Contrary to OSTA’s approach of coordinating the entire walking program, AT encourages active transportation among students by leveraging school communities. They provide dozens of lesson plans, videos, campaign guides, games, and events that are aimed directly for teachers and parents in schools (Auckland Transport 2018). These tools are used to build an attention and appreciation around road safety that make conversations about it normal. They put a particular effort forward to insert these resources directly into the classroom and into the hands of parents.

By establishing a strong sense of awareness about student traffic safety and active transportation, AT is able to influence school communities to build their own motivation to want a Walking School Bus. AT has a designated Walking School Bus webpage⁴ that provides a wide variety of information about what a Walking School Bus is, why it’s great, and how to start one. With several downloadable documents and detailed how-to guides, AT strives to make it as easy as possible for parents who are interested in pursuing the program to make it happen. Parents or the school can also reach out to AT Community Transport Coordinators who will provide guidance including route identification, hazard rectification, and general support. Encouraging schools to utilize ready-made certificates and birthday cards for student participants are part of AT’s effort to celebrate the program at the school. AT also hosts an annual “Megastars Award Night” that recognizes all Walking School Bus volunteers and lead teachers. These strategies emphasize AT’s commitment to providing maximal resources and encouragement for schools to maintain thriving Walking School Buses. In the city of Auckland, there are about 350 active walking school buses and over 4,000 students who walk to school daily (Auckland Transport 2018).

ANALYSIS

Ottawa’s service-oriented Walking School Bus system is fundamentally different than Auckland’s community-supportive approach. The Ottawa Student Transportation Authority

³ Auckland Transport is the government transportation agency of Auckland, equivalent to Seattle’s SDOT.

⁴ <https://at.govt.nz/cycling-walking/travelwise-school-programme/walking-school-bus/>

(OSTA) took on the role as a centralized Walking School Bus coordinator to provide walks to school as a service. As an overhead organization, they aimed to manage all of the planning and execution of the walk so parents wouldn't have to. Auckland Transport (AT), on the other hand, put their efforts toward building values around active transportation inside the school so families would be equipped with the enthusiasm necessary to sustain a Walking School Bus on their own, with guidance from AT.

The root of these opposing strategies lies in the way the organizations perceived the challenges associated with creating a Walking School Bus. Both OSTA and AT recognize that coordinating a walking program and maintaining volunteers is a lot of work for a school community to take on. OSTA saw this as a detriment and decided to provide a Walking School Bus as a service that doesn't require any effort from families or the school. AT chose to understand this challenge as an opportunity to build a school culture around active transportation to make it easier to internally manage a Walking School Bus in the first place. By giving a school resources to develop their own values for walking to school, the community is motivated to pursue a Walking School Bus and is able to shape the program in a way that works best for them. This approach also helps the school create a tradition of active transportation that influences habits and creates a lasting support base that helps sustain a walking program. OSTA's hand-off approach is a cookie-cutter Walking School Bus that operates the same at every school. There is no room for program adaptation that can respond to the needs of the school. Furthermore, when OSTA ran out of funding in 2016, there was no community motivation to sustain the walking programs because the families and school were not encouraged to care.

Although AT puts forth an admirable approach by empowering school communities to develop their own Walking School Buses, this strategy assumes that all schools have the parent capacity to do so. Even with extensive Walking School Bus resources and agency guidance, operating the program still requires a time commitment. OSTA's idea to supply schools with a coordinator and walking leaders may be a necessary resource for some schools.

When thinking about how SDOT might learn from these examples to support Walking School Buses in Seattle, several key takeaways should be applied:

1. **Empowering families and the school to build enthusiasm and internal knowledge about traffic safety and active transportation.** AT achieves this by providing dozens of in-class resources for teachers to facilitate conversations around these topics.
2. **Giving schools the authority to shape a Walking School Bus themselves.** Imposing a structured walking program at a school does not make room for community members to

voice the knowledge they have about the needs of the school and develop a sense of ownership over it.

3. **Providing Walking School Bus guidance and resources.** Creating a Walking School Bus is an involved process. Making it as easy as possible by offering information about how to start it and a variety of strategies to sustain it would make the program more feasible.
4. **Supporting schools that lack parent capacity.** Although OSTA did not build the necessary internal value for walking to school, their approach to lessen the dependence on parents to operate the program could be helpful for some schools. Providing trusted coordinators and walking leaders or even paying parents to be involved could give the school the boost that it needs.

Recommendations

A Walking School Bus is intended to give students who live within a mile of their school a reliable and safe way to walk to school. In the City of Seattle, where 83% of students live within the walk zone of their school, many families are not taking advantage of an opportunity for their children to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines, arrive at school attentive and refreshed, and develop a navigational competence in their neighborhood. Every Seattle school can benefit from more students walking, but the reality of doing so will look very different in each community. When implemented correctly, a Walking School Bus allows families and the school to come together for the health and safety of their children to determine how to make walking to school an accessible form of transportation. Through my research I have learned that supporting the growth of a walking program must be a collaborative effort that gives schools the tools they need to develop the program themselves. Changing habits at the scale of a community is not a one-and-done intervention, but one that requires patience, two-way communication, and appropriate support.

With these things considered together with the findings from my research, I have developed a list of recommendations for the Seattle Department of Transportation on how to most effectively approach Walking School Bus support. These recommendations stem from two conditions that I have found essential in the development of Walking School Buses: (1) the need for a school-wide understanding of the value of active transportation, and (2) access to information and resources about how to start a Walking School Bus.

THE NEED FOR A SCHOOL-WIDE UNDERSTANDING OF THE VALUE OF ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

One of the main factors that have prevented Walking School Buses in Seattle from being successful is a lack of internal motivation to keep it going. This does not imply that families are deterred from the idea of having their children walk to school, but that accurate information about school traffic safety and the opportunity of alternative mobility is not fully realized. A Walking School Bus is a program that runs on participation and enthusiasm—it requires a school community that believes in walking to school. With this statement comes the recognition that every school is different and an appreciation for walking will be unique to each community. Below are a few strategies that I found to be effective toward achieving this goal.

- **Providing resources for teachers to involve conversations around active transportation in the classroom.** In addition to the large initiatives such as in-school bicycle education

and video projects, which SDOT is already moving forward with, smaller education materials intended for the classroom would be helpful. This could include lesson plans, posters, games, class activities that look at neighborhood maps, field trip walks, and any number of similar resources.

- **Contextually appropriate outreach to families.** Educating families about the opportunity of active transportation can help parents become aware of mobility options other than a car. It's important to recognize that schools are at different baselines in terms of the strength of their school community in general, which affects how to effectively communicate with parents.
 - In schools where family-school relationships are strong and parent social networks revolve around the school, education materials about active transportation can be disseminated at the school. Presenting at PTA meetings, holding walking audits, posting in school newsletters, and disseminating other education materials at the school is an effective way to reach parents.
 - At schools with weaker school communities where parent involvement is low and school-family communication could be better, reaching families will require a more informed outreach process. Figuring out where the sense of community is in the neighborhood and in what context families naturally congregate are important insights to learn how to have meaningful conversations with families.
- **Partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) that are already located in schools.** Most Title I schools in Seattle have in-school organizations such as tutoring centers, community health clinics, family engagement groups, and others who are already communicating with families on a daily basis. Looking for partnerships with organizations like these to collaborate over reaching families and communicating values around active transportation could be helpful. Working with these organizations to hold activities such as parent yoga or tai-chi classes, or walks through the neighborhood would be good ways to build community at the school around the value of physical activity and walking. (see examples of CBOs in the *Capacity* section)

ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND RESOURCES ABOUT HOW TO START A WALKING SCHOOL BUS

Once a school community is gaining momentum toward establishing an appreciation around walking to school and is aware about traffic safety around their school, a Walking School Bus program has a platform of support to work off of. With a school and family population that

understands the value of walking to school, creating a Walking School Bus should not be too difficult. That being said, creating an organizing way for students to walking to school in an involved process. To reduce the workload, SDOT can provide resources to set schools up for success.

- **A Walking School Bus coordinator.** Having someone who is trusted, motivated, and knowledgeable about the needs of the school is essential. Having school support for a Walking School Bus will make the coordinator's job a lot easier, but there is still planning to be done to keep it functional. At schools with the capacity, a parent or a teacher/school staff member who feels inclined could take on this role. At other schools that don't have the same internal resources, providing a stipend for the position of a coordinator could make the position more feasible and would communicate that the responsibility is something of value. No matter what, this person should be someone who already has trust within the community and is knowledgeable about the school.
- **Providing information about what a Walking School Bus is, how it works, and strategies for success.** Although it is important to allow a Walking School Bus to grow in a way that best suits the school community, information about the opportunity of a Walking School Bus and common steps used to establish it would make it more appealing to start one. This resource could look like a webpage and/or a booklet for the school that explains how a Walking School Bus could benefit a school and how to do it. Making this resource as accessible as possible, advertising about the potential of a Walking School Bus, and making it a concept that people are comfortable with is important.
- **Partnering with school-based organizations to help lead a Walking School Bus program.** Similar to the partnerships recommended above to help engage families effectively in active transportation education, these in-school organizations could also make up for lack of parent resources. Getting families excited about walking to school is still an essential element to developing an appreciation for a Walking School Bus, but a parent doesn't have to be directly involved to make it successful. Organizations such as Americorp and neighborhood health centers (see *Capacity* section for more examples) already have an invested interest in supporting the health and well-being of students at the school. Using these resources to lead Walking School Bus routes, engage with families, and even coordinate the program could be an excellent option for schools that need extra support.

Conclusion

I believe that walk to school has an underappreciated potential to improve quality of life across Seattle, and that SDOT can spearhead this opportunity. A Walking School Bus is not going to eliminate our traffic congested freeways or make your bus come on time, but it is a step toward a more resilient system of mobility that celebrates the ability of our own two feet. A school community is a wonderful place to reach the minds of our youngest generation to help establish an appreciation for walking as viable mode of transportation. A walking program not only has the potential to influence healthy habits but also to rally families, students, and the school staff around a movement to learn from each other to support the community.

A Walking School Bus is one among many ways to promote active transportation habits among students. This report outlines best practices for the Walking School Bus, should SDOT chose to pursue this strategy. I am hopeful that regardless of the method, walking to school can become a tradition in Seattle schools that acts as an example for sustainability, equity, and health as our city continues to adapt to a rapidly changing urban environment.

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