

OREGON SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
WALKING SCHOOL BUS TOOLKIT



Oregon Department of Transportation
Safe Routes to School



ALTA · COMMUTE OPTIONS · CYCLE OREGON · THE STREET TRUST

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the participation of the following individuals and organizations in the development of this Walking School Bus toolkit.

COMMUTE OPTIONS

Emily Dougan

ALTA PLANNING + DESIGN

Hannah Day-Kapell

Nora Stoelting

Alex Rau

Steve Hernandez

OREGON SAFE ROUTE TO SCHOOL

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) advances students' options to bike, walk, and roll to school by supporting safety-oriented programs and infrastructure.

Do you have more questions about Bike Buses or Safe Routes to School (SRTS) in Oregon? Contact the Oregon Department of Transportation's SRTS Technical Assistance Providers Team at: www.oregonsaferoutes.org

Contents

Introduction	4
.....	
Building Support	7
.....	
Find Your Route	10
.....	
Suggested Materials	12
.....	
Safety	13
.....	
Example Programs	15
.....	
Appendix A: Sample Permission Slip	16
.....	

Introduction

What Is a Walking School Bus?

A Walking School Bus (WSB) is an organized group of students living in the same neighborhood who form a walking group to travel to or from school together. Often led by a paid staff member or volunteer, a WSB walks together to school along a set route, picking up and dropping off other students on their way.

The concept of a WSB is similar to a traditional school bus, where multiple passengers travel together under the supervision of one or more adults.

The frequency of WSBs varies based on the needs of the community. Some run daily, while others run once per week or month, or in conjunction with a Walk+Roll event. Whatever the frequency, WSBs are a beneficial tool for communities to get students actively walking together to school.



Photo credit: Megan Ramey



Photo credit: Megan Ramey



Photo credit: Megan Ramey

Toolkit Objectives

This toolkit is intended to support households, Safe Routes to School Coordinators, teachers, and anyone interested in forming a walking school bus in their community.

This toolkit includes:



THE BENEFITS OF WALKING SCHOOL BUSES



GUIDANCE AROUND SAFETY AND LIABILITY CONCERNS



TOOLS FOR MAKING SAFE AND COMFORTABLE ROUTES



EXAMPLE PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES FOR LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION



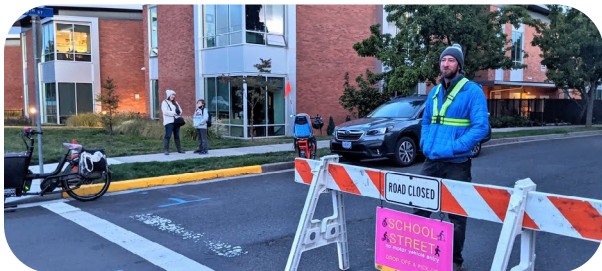
TECHNIQUES FOR BUILDING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Walking School Bus Benefits

Just one generation ago, rates of walking, biking, and taking the bus were much higher than today. There are many reasons for the increase in single use vehicles to get to school including perceptions of safety, lack of safe infrastructure, lack of community around walking collectively, and perceived convenience of driving. Now, there is opportunity for increasing use of active transportation to get to school.

Walking to school has important social, emotional, and community building benefits. Walking to school is an early step in developing a student's sense of independence, can help them gain social skills, such as working with others and navigating bullying. Additionally, community-school relationships can flourish when students are out in the morning.

WSBs can engage community members in transportation safety and infrastructure improvements. When households regularly walk to school they interact with their neighborhood. This community participation can lead to traffic and safety improvements through communication with local transportation officials. In Bend, Oregon, one WSB group was able to advocate for improved sidewalk infrastructure between their neighborhood and school.



Additional benefits Include:



ENVIRONMENTAL

More students walking short distances to schools reduces traffic and harmful CO2 emissions around school entrances.



PHYSICAL

WSBs provide an opportunity for students to start and end their days with moderate exercise and socialization with peers.



SAFETY

WSBs are also an opportunity to educate students on pedestrian safety skills, helping them to feel more confident walking or rolling to the places they'd like to go.



EQUITABLE

WSBs are a low cost, low lift method of student transportation. Few physical materials are needed, aside from proper clothing depending on the time of year. While some programs (see Example Programs section) do hire paid staff leaders to run their WSB routes, they can also be run with actively engaged volunteers.





Photo credit: Megan Ramey

Building Support

Identifying Partners

STUDENTS

can participate and celebrate the trip to school. Walking School Buses are most popular for elementary and middle school students.

PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

can volunteer as route leaders or in another support role and encourage their student to participate.

PTA, SCHOOL STAFF, AND FACULTY

can get involved as route leaders, or support volunteers and build enthusiasm.

SCHOOLS

can build support by posting information about how to get involved and by hosting meetings to organize programs. In highly formalized and developed walking school bus programs, the school can help with routing and funding activities.

REGIONAL SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL HUBS

can provide technical support and connect with other area partners.

Outreach to School Community

Get the word out to your school community to get students and their families excited about joining the WSB.



Designate a point person to communicate with schools, families, and community members. For some communities, a SRTS coordinator, or school staff person, may be able to communicate with students and households as part of their job duties, while in other communities a motivated caregiver volunteer can spread the word.



Talk with local businesses about sponsoring your WSBs. In addition to being great meeting points, some local businesses like grocery stores or cafes may be willing to give out goodies like hot chocolate to WSB participants.



Plan a regular route in your school community. The route can start by running just one day a week, or even once a month, and continue to grow as enthusiasm builds.



Communicate routes with schools and school families. Ask schools to advertise your WSB routes in their newsletters, on their websites, and other social media outlets. Ask to participate in open house events or family nights so that you can talk to schools about WSBs and build excitement around participating. This is also a great way to find volunteers!



Provide incentives to celebrate students who participate in WSBs. Give out free incentives like reflective keychains, stickers, and more. These can be ordered for free here.



Organize Park and Walk events and locations so students who live too far – such as in rural communities – can still participate!



Finding Route Leaders

Ideally, each walking school bus should have two adults, one at the front of the group and one at the back. Having two adults ensures if one is sick or cannot make it there is a backup leader. But many school communities struggle to find and retain adult volunteers. Finding and sustaining volunteer efforts can be challenging, but many programs across the state have had success finding volunteers, with some programs being able to pay staff.

Here are some recommendations for finding leaders for your WSB:

- Parents and guardians make wonderful volunteers. Table at school functions or attend PTA meetings to encourage parents and guardians to volunteer.
- Some schools may allow staff to supplement hours to lead WSB routes before and after school. Talk with your school's administration about their policies around allowing staff to work supplemental hours.
- Find out if you have a SRTS Coordinator in your area who can staff a WSB.
- If there is a local high school nearby, consider partnering to see if students can gain volunteer hours for leading a WSB for younger students.
- As Safe Routes to School grows throughout the state, so does the support for local efforts. Some MPOs, cities, and counties are beginning to allocate budget for SRTS programming. Commute Options in Central Oregon recently received a grant from the City of Bend to grow

SRTS programming and offer paid leader positions for WSBs. Talk with your local officials about funding.

- Consider creating a system to cycle volunteers.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ROUTE LEADERS

- Walk with the student and act as leader of the walking school bus.
- Coordinate supporting volunteers on the route if necessary, and provide leadership about walking information, timing, and safety.
- Supervise students walking the route until the group arrives at school.
- Teach and model safe walking behavior.
- Respond to incidents and alert parents of participants, when necessary.
- Help create a fun atmosphere that is welcoming for all students.



Find Your Route

Route Considerations

Choosing an appropriate route is key to the success of a WSB. The route should prioritize safety, accessibility, and convenience for participants and achieve the program goals.

The process for determining a catchment area – that is, the geographical area your walking school bus should serve – is similar to determining a traditional school bus catchment area. If you are forming a walking school bus program to alleviate pressure on school buses, replicating existing school bus stops can be a good starting point. Research your school’s existing catchment area or areas and identify where students reside in relation to the catchment area. Identify clusters of student housing such as neighborhoods, apartment communities, and consider how these students are already traveling to school.

Streets with low motorized traffic volumes and speeds, designed to give pedestrian and local travel priority, are some of the best roadways to accommodate a walking school bus. Look for streets with well-connected sidewalks. Avoid crossing major roadways and roadways in poor condition whenever possible.

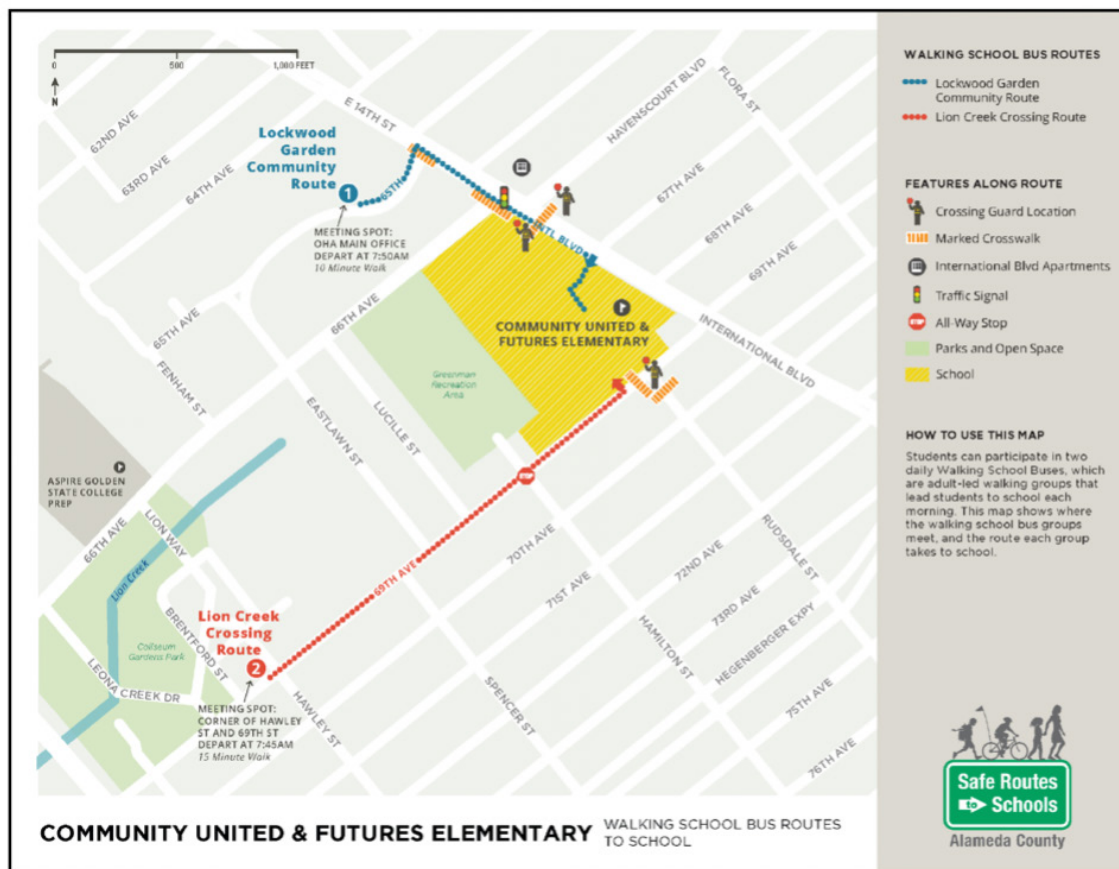
Three-quarters of a mile to one mile from school is a good rule of thumb for a walking route length depending on quality of local infrastructure. Consider the geographical features, traffic conditions, and potential hazards along the route. Routes should be continuous and provide students with direct access to the school entrance. It will likely take about 30 minutes for a walking school bus to walk a mile.

Defining a well-planned and safe route will attract more participants and instill confidence in parents and caregivers!

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR ROUTE DESIGN:

- Focus on the “Walk Zone”: Focus on students residing within the 1-mile “walk zone” who lack access to school bus services when initiating your WSBs.
- Collaborate with School Administration: Consult with school administration to understand neighborhood demographics and start routes in or near those areas.
- Tailor to WSB to the Group: Tailor walking groups based on the age of the students, considering their walking and rolling capabilities.
- Examine Infrastructure: Conduct an inventory of the walking and rolling infrastructure along the proposed route, ensuring continuous sidewalks, curb ramps, crosswalks, and proper signage.

Sample Walking School Bus Route Map



Advertising Your Route

Before creating a map for your WSB, it can be helpful to provide guidance on walking times and establish estimated meet-up points. This essential information can then be incorporated into your map. You don't necessarily need access to GIS or design software; Google Maps can serve as a practical tool to identify walking routes and visually communicate them to participants and families.

Start by determining the estimated walking time for your route and use this information to establish meet-up points along the way. Once these details are clarified, you can set the route on Google Maps, take a screenshot, and use it in

your initial communications. This straightforward approach can be highly effective in conveying the basic route information.

Following this, consider creating a more detailed flyer or map using user-friendly tools like Canva. These tools make it easy to design eye-catching materials that not only showcase your walking route but also include vital details like walking times and designated meet-up points. By providing this comprehensive information upfront, you enhance the effectiveness of your promotional materials and encourage greater participation in your WSB.

Suggested Materials

Physical Materials

One of the many benefits to WSBs is that they are relatively low cost. However, some basic materials are recommended below:

- High visibility vests for WSB leaders
- First aid kits ([see here for recommendations](#))
- Stop signs for crossing streets.

Hubs leads may be able to help you with creating a WSB kit. Please reach out to Info@OregonSafeRoutes.Org to connect with your Hub lead and learn about WSB starter kit options.

Educational Materials

WSBs present an opportunity to engage students in pedestrian safety and teach them about the world around them. The Jump Start Pedestrian Safety Education Drill Guide has basic lessons around safe crossing that could be easily integrated into your WSB. ODOT SRTS also provides seasonally themed bingo cards in which students can mark off what they see on their walks, or activities to win local prizes.



Photo credit: Megan Ramey

Safety

Liability Concerns

Whenever students are walking or rolling near shared roadways, there is always a concern for safety. However, it is important to know that to date, no child has been seriously injured or killed in a SRTS program. [In this webinar](#), Kori Johnson with the Safe Routes Partnership explains liability and what you can do to ensure your programming is safe and fun.

Provide a permission and release forms for students participating in your WSB. An example form can be found in the appendix.

The largest barrier towards implementing safe routes to school is fear of liability. Oftentimes, fear of liability may stop a program before it gets off the ground. Perception of liability and liability are often different. The school is responsible to take reasonable care for the student's safety but the student and all of us assume a reasonable amount of built-in risk every day. Be responsible and have a clear plan.

Students do fall. First ensure the child is unhurt. Many small falls are startling but do not require medical attention. If the student requires immediate medical attention, contact the school nurse and in emergencies call 911. Apologize for the student getting injured under your care. If possible, help the student gain the walking skills they were lacking that caused the accident. With young people, small accidents do still happen! Having a first aid kit on hand to address any bumps and bruises that happen is advised.

Pedestrian Safety Education

WSBs are also an opportunity for students to practice pedestrian safety. When starting your WSB routes, use the first few weeks to teach students some principles of [the Jump Start Pedestrian Safety curriculum](#), including the pedestrian crossing rhyme and steps to crossing the street. As students become more familiar with these practices, encourage them to continue implementing them on their walks to and from school.

If you are interested in receiving a full training on Pedestrian Safety contact Info@OregonSafeRoutes.Org



Photo credit: Megan Ramey



Photo credit: Megan Ramey

Preparing For the Unexpected

WHAT IF A STUDENT IS LATE?

If the student is late before school, it is the parent's responsibility to get the student to school. In order to ensure students arrive on campus on-time, Walking School Buses cannot wait for students who may be running behind. The family is responsible for getting the student to or from school if they are late.

WHAT IF THERE IS AN EMERGENCY?

Alert parents in the event of an emergency. If there is a life-threatening emergency or someone is in danger, dial 9-1-1.

WHAT IF UNEXPECTED STUDENTS SHOW UP?

Establish a procedure for when unexpected students want to join the Walking School Bus. It may be unrealistic to expect all students have a signed parental consent form with them in order to participate, but you may ask the family to provide one in the future.

WHAT IF IT'S RAINING, TOO COLD, OR TOO HOT?

Encourage students to wear weather appropriate clothing and shoes.

WHAT IF THE ROUTE LEADER IS SICK?

Establish a procedure for communicating if the Route Leader needs to cancel. Identify an alternate route leader or a single point of contact who can alert families.

WHAT IF A STUDENT MISBEHAVES?

Establish a procedure for when a student misbehaves. For example, if a student behaves in an unsafe manner in traffic or does not listen to the directions of the adults, they may be given a warning, and their family will be informed. If the student acts in a way that creates a persistent danger to themselves or other students, the student will not be allowed to continue participating in the Walking School Bus.

Example Programs

Beaverton School District

Beaverton SD has one of the longest established Walking School Bus programs in the state, running for over 13 years with an average of 300 students participating per week. The program typically works with 12 schools and is staffed by parents and teacher volunteers. One of the program schools recruits a 5th grade leadership team, where older students help younger students with the WSB each year. These students also make promotional videos and hand out prizes on Walk+Roll to School Days.

This program is partially funded by the Metro Mini Grant Program, which has helped increase [parent interest in the program](#). If you are interested in learning more about this program, please contact Leah Biado-Luis at Leah_Biado-Luis@beaverton.k12.or.us.

Commute Options

In 2021, Commute Options (serving Bend-La Pine School District in Central Oregon) received an ODOT SRTS Innovation Grant to reimagine their WSB program. With this grant and additional funding from the Central Oregon Health Council, Commute Options was able to hire part time WSB leaders to help lead routes. Route leaders not only lead the routes but provide pedestrian safety education and themed lessons.

Outreach to find leaders and students to participate has been targeted primarily to low-income housing complexes, where need to safe transportation options is often highest. The program was meant to address rate of absenteeism from participating housing complexes.

If you would like to learn more about the Commute Options WSB program, please contact Whitney Bennett at whitney@commuteoptions.org.



Photo credit: Megan Ramey

Appendix A: Sample Permission Slip

[Your School Name]
[Address]
[City, State, Zip Code]
[Date]

PERMISSION SLIP FOR WALKING SCHOOL BUS PROGRAM

Dear Parent/Caregiver,

We are excited to introduce our new Walking School Bus Program at [Your School Name]. This program aims to promote active transportation, encourage a healthy lifestyle, and provide a fun and safe way for students to commute to school by walking in a group setting.

We understand the importance of safety and have taken measures to ensure a secure walking experience for all participants. We kindly request your permission for your child, [Student's Full Name], to take part in our Walking School Bus Program. Please read and complete the following permission slip:

Walking School Bus Program Details:

Program Start Date:	[Start Date]
Program End Date:	[End Date]
Schedule:	[Days and Times]
Meeting Point:	[Designated Meeting Point]
Meeting Point Time:	[Designated Meeting Time]
Return Time:	[Approximate Return Time]
Program Coordinator:	[Coordinator's Name and Contact Information]
Emergency Contact Number during Program Hours:	[Emergency Contact Number]

Permission and Assumption of Risk: I, as the parent/legal guardian of [Student's Full Name], give permission for them to participate in the Walking School Bus Program. I understand that this program involves walking on public streets and may include potential risks inherent to outdoor activities.

I assume all risks associated with my child's participation in this program, and I confirm that [Student's Full Name] is capable of participating in the activities.

Safety Agreement: I also agree to ensure that my child follows all safety guidelines provided by the school and program coordinators during the Walking School Bus Program.

Medical Information: In case of any medical emergency, I authorize the school staff and program coordinators to seek immediate medical attention for my child. I will promptly inform the school of any medical conditions or allergies that may require special attention during the program.

Transportation Release: I understand that my child will be commuting to and from school by walking as part of the Walking School Bus Program. I release the school and program coordinators from any liability arising from the student's participation in the program.

Please sign and return this permission slip to [School Office/Teacher Name] by [Due Date].

Thank you for your support in making our Walking School Bus Program a safe and enjoyable experience for all participants. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Parent/Guardian]

[Contact Information]

PERMISSION SLIP - WALKING SCHOOL BUS PROGRAM

I, [Parent/Guardian's Full Name], give permission for my child, [Student's Full Name], to participate in the Walking School Bus Program at [Your School Name]. I have read and understand the details of the program and agree to the terms outlined in this permission slip.

Signature:

Date:



Oregon Department of Transportation
Safe Routes to School



ALTA - COMMUTE OPTIONS - CYCLE OREGON - THE STREET TRUST