

Lessons Learned from the Implementation of a Walking School Bus Program in Urban Maine

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INTRODUCTION

- This project was funded by the US CDC State Public Health Actions 1305 Cooperative Agreement¹.
- Maine's state health department partnered with a community agency (Bicycle Coalition of Maine – BCM) and a local school to implement a Walking School Bus (WSB) pilot in an urban Maine town.
- A WSB is a group of students walking to school under the supervision of one or more adults. It is a structured route with meeting points similar to a regular school bus. For the pilot, the WSB was only offered in the morning.
- The goal of the WSB program was to increase the number of youth engaged in safe, structured physical activity who reach the goal of 60 minutes of daily physical activity.
- During the 2014-2015 academic year, the pilot school was provided:
 - Funding to hire a school-based WSB coordinator
 - Technical assistance (e.g. site visits, conference calls)
 - Incentives for student participation (e.g. stickers)
- The majority of students at the school were from immigrant / refugee families; received free / reduced school lunch; and tended to be highly transient between schools.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

- What were the key activities and/or resources critical to the success of the WSB?
- What were the major facilitators and barriers in adopting the WSB and how were the barriers overcome?
- What was the impact of the WSB on participating students and their parents?

METHODS

- The stakeholder-led evaluation design targeted multiple audiences and stakeholders including: WSB coordinator, BCM consultant, school administrators, participating youth, and parents of participating youth.
- A mixed-methods evaluation design was used to gather, analyze, and triangulate the data post-implementation of the WSB.
- Data collection methods included: interviews, focus groups, and school-based data (e.g. attendance, tardiness, academic achievement).

RESULTS

Key Activities and Resources to Successful Implementation

Sidewalks	Sidewalks were identified as one of the most basic resources required for the WSB program.
Volunteers	Volunteers, and the ability to mobilize them quickly, were both vital resources.
Support	BCM and school administration support was "invaluable".
WSB Coordinator	Personal characteristics for success were the ability to be organized, flexible, and enthusiastic.
Outreach and Communication	Recruiting participants: "Good outreach is critical." — <i>Implementer</i> Setting expectations: "Every kid that joins the Walking School Bus gives me a contract. Because basically I just want to spell everything out so that there's no blurry lines with parents." — <i>Implementer</i>

Recruitment

Awareness	Confusion
Students and parents learned of the WSB from other families or by seeing other students participating.	Parents thought "Walking School Bus" referred to the regular yellow school bus.

Student Impact

Knowledge and Attitudes	"The kids really, really love walking and I hear every day how much different it is for them to experience transitioning to a school day in a kind of safe, quiet environment versus being sardined on a bus and feeling really anxious . . ." — <i>Implementer</i>
Absenteeism and Tardiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WSB participants had a statistically significant lower absentee rate than the school average. WSB participants had a lower tardiness rate than the school average.
Social and Community Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in the WSB helped new students—mostly immigrants—with integrating into the community. Parents liked that the WSB gave their children an opportunity to socialize with American and other immigrant children.
Knowledge of the Physical Environment	Participants were not scared of getting lost on the way to school when they took the WSB. "I love hearing the things they start to notice about their communities when they are walking through the same neighborhood every day; it's much different than driving through it." — <i>Implementer</i>

Facilitators and Barriers

Facilitators	Barriers
Community Support The community provided volunteers and resources (e.g. incentives) for WSB implementation.	Language Differences English was not the first language of many of the families. All WSB materials were produced in English and distributed with telephone numbers for translators, per regular school practice.
School Support School leadership, faculty, and staff awareness were important to the program's implementation, particularly the assistant principal.	Weather Poor weather can negatively impact participation in the WSB. Winter weather is a particular challenge for this school.
WSB Program Integrated into School Having the WSB program within the school facilitated a team-based approach, as well as communication between parents, the WSB coordinator, and other school staff.	Competing Transportation Methods One of the WSB routes was served by a school bus. Students also had the option of walking to school, just not as part of the WSB program, or arriving via private vehicle.
Safety The real and perceived safety of children was an important facilitator of the WSB. Knowing that their children would be safe with the WSB, facilitated parents' permission for their children to participate in the program.	School Hiring Procedures An unanticipated barrier was the significant time required for the school to work through the process of hiring the WSB coordinator.
Parental Trust For the WSB to be successful, parents had to be assured of the credibility of the volunteers. Background checks were completed on volunteers.	Recruiting Volunteers Many parents of WSB participants were not able to volunteer with the program, due to jobs or home responsibilities (e.g. childcare).

REFERENCES

- The State Public Health Actions to Prevention and Control Diabetes, Heart Disease, Obesity and Associated Risk Factors and Promote School Health – FOA – DP13-1305.

CONCLUSIONS

Lessons Learned

- Lessons learned for other schools and communities starting their own programs to consider, include:
- The WSB is resource-intensive.
 - Upfront planning and promotions pay-off.
 - Start with one route and add more once you have capacity.
 - Offer the WSB in the morning and afternoon.
 - Parent buy-in is critical and requires frequent communication.
 - Clear communication is vital.
 - Flexibility is necessary.

Summary

- Key activities and resources for the WSB program were identified as facilities, people, technical assistance, and good communication.
- WSB participants had statistically significant lower absenteeism and tardiness rates than the school average.
- Parents viewed the WSB positively and would recommend it to other families.
- The WSB volunteers' attitude towards the participating children and their parents helped the families integrate into their new communities.
- The WSB positively impacted youth and their parents.



CONTACT INFORMATION

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