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 Agreement4.
• 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sidewalks</th>
<th>Volunteers</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>WSB Coordinator</th>
<th>Outreach and Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sidewalks were identified as one of the most basic resources required for the WSB program.</td>
<td>Volunteers, and the ability to mobilize them quickly, were both vital resources.</td>
<td>BCM and school administration support was “invaluable”.</td>
<td>Personal characteristics for success were the ability to be organized, flexible, and enthusiastic.</td>
<td>Recruiting participants: “Good outreach is critical.” – Implementer</td>
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Facilitators and Barriers

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Community Support</th>
<th>Language Differences</th>
<th>School Support</th>
<th>Weather</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The community provided volunteers and resources (e.g. incentives) for WSB implementation.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>School leadership, faculty, and staff awareness were important to the program’s implementation, particularly the assistant principal.</td>
<td>Weather Poor weather can negatively impact participation in the WSB. Winter weather is a particular challenge for this school.</td>
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Recruitment

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Awareness</th>
<th>Confusion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students and parents learned of the WSB from other families or by seeing other students participating.</td>
<td>Parents thought “Walking School Bus” referred to the regular yellow school bus.</td>
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Student Impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge and Attitudes</th>
<th>Absenteeism and Tardiness</th>
<th>Social and Community Integration</th>
<th>Knowledge of the Physical Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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 bused on a bus and feeling really anxious …” – Implementer</td>
<td>WSB participants had a statistically significant lower absentee rate than the school average.</td>
<td>Participation in the WSB helped new students—mostly immigrants—with integrating into the community.</td>
<td>Participants were not scared of getting lost on the way to school when they took the WSB.</td>
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<tr>
<td>WSB participants had a lower tardiness rate than the school average.</td>
<td>Participation in the WSB helped new students—mostly immigrants—with integrating into the community.</td>
<td>Parents liked that the WSB gave their children an opportunity to socialize with American and other immigrant children.</td>
<td>“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.” – Implementer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

REFERENCES

1. The State Public Health Actions to Prevention and Control Diabetes, Heart Disease, Obesity and Associated Risk Factors and Promote School Health – FQA – OP13-1305.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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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?

1. The State Public Health Actions to Prevention and Control Diabetes, Heart Disease, Obesity and Associated Risk Factors and Promote School Health – FQA – OP13-1305.