

Walking School Bus

By: Alex and Claire

When we first applied for the Generation Green Youth Un-Conference, we thought that we were just going to learn about the environment. Little did we know we would be joining a youth movement to help drive change!

On November 22nd, we attended the conference. It was incredible to see how many other students were there, finding out how to make a difference in their community. The number of things we learned that day was amazing, and we covered all of it in one day. From the panel to the workshop, it was all about learning how we could have an impact in our communities. It inspired us to identify an environmental issue in our community that we could change.

We go to a local public school in a residential neighborhood. With four schools nearby, every morning and afternoon the area is overwhelmed with cars as parents rush to get children to and from school. The traffic has been an ongoing problem with the police becoming involved to monitor and address it. We thought that by providing a walking school bus at our school we could reduce carbon emissions, promote community, develop student confidence and independence, encourage outdoor exercise, and improve academic success as studies have shown that the exercise children get by walking to school increases their ability to concentrate which leads to better learning.

Our first step was to pitch the idea to our school's principal. We presented to her what we had learned during the conference on November 22nd and the positive impact a walking school bus could have on the environment and our school community. In the discussion, we talked about how we wanted to have routes, stops, and stop times, just like a traditional school bus. We explained how we would not only be improving the environment, but also encouraging exercise that would likely improve academic success. Our principal loved the idea and we agreed to evaluate the interest of three routes based on traffic patterns near the school.

We sent out a schoolwide survey with the stops and routes we thought would have the most participation to learn about interest and volunteer availability. From the survey we also had questions and feedback that we used to improve our plan for routes and stops. With that established, we timed the routes and made stop schedules for each of them calculating backwards to arrive at school five minutes before the first bell.

Our biggest challenge was getting parent volunteers. Parents were enthusiastic about the walking school bus and many indicated on the survey that they were willing to volunteer, but when we sent out the volunteer sign up our numbers were low. After meeting with our principal several times to try to come up with creative solutions, we decided to allow teams of student leaders in grades 6 to 8 to be route captains. The captains have bright yellow vests so that they can be easily identified. We had meetings with the captains to discuss safety and have set up a group

chat where we can share what we have learned and help solve problems if needed. We have four weekly parent volunteers and nine student captains. Parents have signed up for recurrent days and each week and confirm student captains sign up weekly.

Our last step was promoting the walking school bus and building interest and enthusiasm in the school community so that we could get it going. We created explanations and updates that our principal included in her weekly newsletter over several weeks and emails specific to the walking school bus. Once we got it started, our principal and school trustee promoted it on social media and our school website.

After months of planning, revising, recruiting and promoting, our walking school bus has been a huge success! Students, parents and teachers are all talking about how wonderful it is to see the reduction in traffic around the school, the sense of community it is developing and the benefits of kids getting more exercise. There is a lot of excitement as the three routes arrive at the school within minutes of each other. It is fun to hear all the chatter, laughter, and a bit of fun competition as the bus captains compete to see who can get their bus to arrive at school first.

Each day, the route captains logged the families participating and the stop that they joined. Using that information, we were able to estimate the number of cars off the road and the distance they would have driven for our report.

Measuring the morning routes, we learned that we reduce 5794.817g of CO₂ emissions each way (11589.634g round trip). As we add the afternoons, we estimate that over the school year we will have reduced 4230216.4g of CO₂ emissions although, we believe that the numbers will be even higher based as more people have asked about it. We already have over 30 students walking routes between 1 km to 1.5km.

Soon we'll be expanding the walking school bus to the afternoons. We will continue to recruit and add parent volunteers and student route captains. To make the walking school bus at our school sustainable, we will continue to develop and grow the program over the next two years making it a part of the culture of our school community. A key part of this is recruiting and training student leaders in grade 6-8 each year so that the project has leadership even after we graduate. There is already interest in adding more routes and stops so that we can have more participation next year.

Our estimate was about 10 students, or 5 to 7 families, per route to begin with. We based that on the number of school families that we knew lived near the routes that we could recruit to participate.

We are incredibly proud of the impact our school's Walking School Bus is having on our environment and community! Not only did we decrease traffic around the school, but we also reduced our CO₂ emissions. The older students have an amazing leadership opportunity and we

are improving our school community as students are developing friendships with kids from other grades. We are planning to expand the walking school bus at our school and think that our project can be replicated at other schools. After hearing how much fun his sister had participating in ours, we have already had a student from another school ask how he can start one at his school nearby school. This is a program that we believe will have a lasting impact on our community and the environment and will inspire other schools to do the same!

We want to thank all of the people who ran the workshops, MC'ed and organized this amazing event. We especially want to thank Alana and Afreen from the Halton Environmental Network for all of the help they gave us and the time they donated, including running the webinars and always responding to our emails and questions.