

# Iowa Walking School Bus Guide



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### About the Iowans Fit For Life

Iowans Fit for Life is a CDC-funded program administered by the Iowa Department of Public Health. Through partner organizations we work to change the environment to:

- Improving options for physical activity through walking and biking.
- Making healthy food affordable and accessible

The Iowans Fit for Life Partnership provides tools and resources to improve Iowans nutrition and physical activity and decrease obesity in six targeted areas: Increasing physical activity, fruit and vegetable intake, and breastfeeding while reducing the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages, energy dense foods, and television viewing.

### About the Iowa Bicycle Coalition

The Iowa Bicycle Coalition is an exciting organization working to promote Iowa cycling as safe and enjoyable recreation and transportation. The 501(c)(3) non-profit group was launched by bicycling advocates from across Iowa and will unite the voices of road riders, mountain bikers, recreation riders, commuters, and anyone else who prefers a bicycle for recreation and transportation.

The Coalition is bringing change to how kids get to and from school with the Safe Routes To School Program. Coalition staff provide training and support to schools statewide on encouragement and education programs that help increase bicycling and walking.





PHOTO: Nick Sobocinski

## Introduction

Kids who walk or ride a bicycle to school have been dropping at alarming numbers. According to the Centers of Disease Control, 42% of kids walked or bicycled to school in 1969. In 2009, 15% of kids walked or bicycled to school. At the same time, childhood obesity rates have been rising with Iowa's obesity rate rising over 28% of the population.

A walking school bus is a program that can encourage more kids to walk and bicycle to school by coordinating the trip to school as a group and using adult supervision.

A walking school bus is much like it's mechanized counterpart. Instead of being driven, children walk to school as a group with adult supervision. Common elements of walking school bus programs include: an adult supervisor, a group of children, a safe walkway to school, and a pickup/dropoff time.

Walking School Bus Programs can be formal programs coordinated by the school or community or they may be

informal program run by parents or neighbors. A community champion for the walking school bus program is essential for any model used. The champion is a person who gets behind the program and makes sure it is implemented.

This guide is intended to help the community, school, or neighborhood get a walking school bus program started, consider safety issues, and sustain the program for years to come.

# How to Build a Walking School Bus Program

There are a few steps to follow when you create a walking school bus program. As with any program, careful planning can yield great results. Before you begin, consider if traffic conditions make it unsafe to walk. A walking school bus program should not begin until the problems have been addressed. An exception is if there are children that are already walking and must do so even though conditions are unsafe. In this case, the adult supervision provided by a walking school bus can be a way to make it less dangerous.

## Policies and Procedures

A perfect starting point is with the policies and procedures of your walking school bus program. Establishing roles for volunteers, details of the program, and contingency plans for weather and emergencies can help build your program. Partners and volunteers will want to know what is expected, so having clear policies in advance of starting your program will help. The Iowa Bicycle Coalition has templates available for your program to modify and adopt.

## Recruit Volunteers and Partners

Begin with the walking school bus coordinator and steering committee. These people will lead the program and make strategic decisions of the program's behalf. If possible, invite parents with children of all age ranges for program sustainability.

Next, seek out walking school bus drivers. These could be key volunteers able to lead walking school bus routes on a regular basis. Drivers could be parents, neighbors, or senior citizens. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend 1 adult for every 6 children. One adult can walk with more kids who are over 10 years of age. For 4-6 year olds, 1 adult for every 3 children is advised.

Finally, recruit community and school partners. Your partners could include city officials, streets department, law enforcement, school administration, school transportation officials, and any other community safety organizations.

### Tip: Develop a Contact List

Create a spreadsheet with contact information. Include:

- Program Coordinator & Steering Committee
- School Officials
- Drivers and Volunteers
- Parents of Participants

## Background Checks

Performing a background check of volunteers when they apply to participate could save you from problems down the road. Many schools have a system in place to perform background checks. In Iowa you can use the Single Contact Repository (SING) sponsored by the State Department of Administrative Services / Information Technology Enterprise. SING allows registered users to perform background checks from a single web screen.

## Training

Volunteers should have training documented before participating in the Walking School Bus program.

Training Tips for Walking School Bus Drivers:

- Student safety is the NUMBER ONE priority.
- Be on time and stick to the published schedule.
- Visually scan (left-right-left) at every intersection and driveway.
- Only enter the roadway if a 150 foot gap exists at unsignalized intersections.
- Use a fresh phase at traffic lights with pedestrian signals to assure adequate time to cross.
- Keep students together as a group.
- Routes, procedures, and policies may be adjusted if the immediate safety of the students is at risk. Other situations that could amend routes, procedures, and policies require approval of the walking school bus coordinator.
- Students participating must be registered with the walking school bus program.
- Adhere to the cancellation and severe weather policies.
- Have fun!

## Recruit Participants

Once you have your policies and volunteers in place, it is time to start recruiting participants. Some schools have used their "Back to School" open house to recruit participants. Others have used backpack mail, letters to parents, and social media to get the word out. The Iowa Safe Routes to School program has sample letters and permission forms that programs may copy and use.



## Plan Routes/Schedule

Walking school bus routes and crossings need to be planned very carefully. Traffic and personal safety need to be considered.

Ask the following questions when evaluating your routes:

- Do you have room to walk?
- Are there sidewalks and paths?
- Is there too much traffic?
- Is it easy to cross the street?
- Do drivers behave well?
- Do they yield to walkers?
- Do they speed?
- Does the environment feel safe?
- Are there loose dogs?
- Is there criminal activity?

You can use a variety of tools to map your routes. One of the easiest to use is Google Maps. The online tool allows you to draw lines on existing road maps of your community. The maps can be printed, shared, or published online.

**Tip: Walk and time the route in advance of your kickoff day.**

## Provide Training for Students

Training can help students understand walking school bus safety. Before the walking school bus program begins, be sure to provide safety training for the students.

Teach children to:

1. Always look for cars for yourself.
2. Follow the driver and stay on the designated route.
3. Walk along the street safely.
4. Look left-right-left when crossing the street.
5. Obey traffic signs and signals.
6. No horseplay on the walking school bus.
7. Be on time.

## Kick Off

When you are ready, you can start your walking school bus. You may consider holding a Walk to School Day to help test your event. Be sure to constantly evaluate the success and difficulties of the Walking School Bus Program.

International Walk to School Day is the first Wednesday in October. This is an excellent time to kick-off a walking school bus.

PHOTO: Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative



# Models of Walking School Buses

## Informal Walking School Bus

An informal walking school bus program is usually limited to a few students who walk a similar route to school. This may involve several families from the same neighborhood. There usually isn't published times or routes. The Walking School Bus driver could be the same parent everyday or multiple parents who switch days to accompany the students to school. Informal walking school bus models can be very effective. There aren't costs associated with this model and it can be launched quickly.

## Formal Walking School Bus

A formal walking school bus is more organized than an informal model. Official routes are established with designated stops and arrival times. A coordinator is in charge of making decisions about the program. Volunteers are scheduled to lead the walking school bus. Lists of participants are updated with absences and permission slips are on file. There may be costs associated with a formal walking school bus program. There is more volunteer time associated with this system.

## Program Size and Scope

Walking school bus program models can also be defined by the size and scope of the program. There are programs that serve neighborhoods, single schools, and school districts.

## Neighborhood

A neighborhood walking school bus is limited to a single route. It is usually informal, but not necessarily. A neighborhood walking school bus route could be a way to test the program and see if it will work.

## Single School

A walking program that serves a single school exists within the school boundary. There are often multiple routes to the school, so a higher level of coordination and more volunteers are required. Since there are more options, there are usually more students participating.

## School District

A School district-wide walking school bus covers multiple routes to serve multiple schools. This type of program takes a lot of coordination, multiple volunteers, and has a high level of participants. It is recommended that paid staff help coordinate the scheduling and decision making for the walking school bus program.

PHOTO: Cerro Gordo County Health Department





# Sustainability

Walking school programs can be exciting, but careful planning needs to take place to avoid problems. A keen eye should be placed on program sustainability and keeping the program alive for years ahead. Programs that become popular can put strain on volunteers, so a wide array of partners should be sought out. Programs that depend on parents of one age set of students can run into problems when the kids grow older or change schools. The following are tips to help your program be sustainable.

## TIP #1: Start small

It is better for a program to start small and grow, than to start big. Each program will have unique circumstances and personalities that make the walking school bus successful. It is better to learn what works and what doesn't work on a smaller scale and implement those changes as the program grows.

## TIP #2: Try a one-day, walk to school day event

You can learn a lot by planning a one-day event. As planned routes become traveled, circumstances may arise that could be corrected before the next event. A daily walking school bus does not allow the opportunity to stop and re-configure your program.

Some schools hold a Walking Wednesday. Each Wednesday, students are encouraged to walk to school. This event could be a trial run for walking school bus routes.

## TIP #3: Create procedures

Successful program create their own handbook. Sets of rules become easier to follow if everyone knows about them before they start the program. Cancellation policies are clear and do not leave students in jeopardy. Student enrollment is clearly documented. Having a policy handbook is worth the effort for a walking school bus program.

### Policies to consider:

- Inclement Weather/Cancellation
- Late Student/Late Bus
- Emergencies/Traffic Signal Malfunction
- Disruptive Student Notification
- Background Checks/Volunteers
- Route Changes

## TIP #4: Document along the way

The walking school bus provides supervision of students. On rare occasions, issues will arise. Having careful documentation of policies and procedures will help. Attendance records, feedback and loop closures, and decisions to change policies should be recorded. It is becoming easier to record these changes and store them online to allow transfer of information between program leaders.

## TIP #5: Connect with motivated parents

Every program needs a champion or group of champions. Identifying that person in your community that wants to make the walking school bus a reality is important. A dedicated volunteer can motivate others and create momentum.

## TIP #6: Build strong community support

Recruiting a broad base of partners will help the success of your walking school bus program. Involving city officials, school officials, and other civic groups could give your program a boost in support. Reach out and find ways to get other groups involved in your program.

PHOTO: Cerro Gordo County Health Department



# Bicycle Trains

A bicycle train is very similar to a walking school bus, but instead of walking, the students ride bicycles. This can be a fun, peer-supported, adult-supervised way to get to school. Students get excited about riding bikes.

A bicycle train has some limitations that make it different from a walking school bus. The first thing to keep in mind that students riding bicycles need to be aware of surrounding traffic much differently than walkers. Walkers can stop in a step, but bicycles take time and distance to come to a stop. In addition, younger students may not have the experience or cognitive ability to judge traffic situations.

Some schools may have bicycle policies that a bicycle train organizer should pay attention to, such as bicycling on campus or congested walking areas on school property.

## TIP #1: Keep it small

One adult volunteer cannot manage as many bicyclists as they can walkers. Keep your bicycle train limited in size. One adult for every three to six children is recommended.

PHOTO: Mason City Safe Routes to School

## TIP #2: Watch the traffic

Bicycle train routes may be different than walking school bus routes. Sidewalks may not be appropriate for bicycling in some areas. Left turns are more hazardous than right turns. Be aware of driveways and other obstacles.



PHOTO: Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative

## TIP #3: Train students for safety

Bicycling requires a special knowledge about rules of the road and bicycling handling skills. Be sure your students have had adequate training before they join your program.





# Evaluation

A successful walking school bus should be under constant evaluation. Traffic patterns, construction, and students are always changing and your program should be prepared to embrace those changes.

## Emergencies

Student safety should always be the top priority. Routes, procedures, and policies may be adjusted by walking school bus drivers if the immediate safety of the students is at risk. Other situations that could amend routes, procedures, and policies should require the approval of the walking school bus coordinator.

Anytime a route, procedure, or policy is adjusted it is important for the walking school bus coordinator and the steering committee to know. Create a procedure to allow notification of emergency situations. Once program leaders are notified, they can take steps to make permanent changes or evaluate the situation for recurrence.

## Feedback and Loop Closure

Create a feedback system for parents, students, and volunteers to register their feedback. Website forms, email, or paper forms are all appropriate forms of communication. When a feedback notice is received, note the date and forward to appropriate leaders.

Sometimes you will be able to act on the feedback and sometimes you will not be able to act. Be sure to document how the feedback loop is closed. Return the loop closure action to the person that left the feedback and alert any other affected parties.

## Coordinator and Steering Committee

Every program should have a coordinator that can make decisions on behalf of the program and receive feedback. Programs should also have a steering committee that is able to help the coordinator with decisions and distribute information. Some decisions can be made directly by the coordinator (e.g. weather cancellation) and some may not (e.g. route changes). Use your policy handbook to define the role of the walking school bus coordinator.

## Program Evaluation

School breaks and vacations are excellent times to schedule periodic evaluations of a walking school bus program. Be sure to evaluate policies, procedures, and personnel. Don't just rely upon people within your program for evaluation, but seek the opinions of community leaders, law enforcement, and school officials. Compile the program feedback and make changes as needed.

PHOTO: Cerro Gordo County Health Department



# Iowa Success Stories

## North Liberty

150 students participating  
Walking School Bus on Wednesdays  
Single School Model  
Four routes  
Volunteers would rotate  
Began with a successful walk to school day  
Used open house to recruit participants and volunteers.  
Published a handbook. Received funding from local bank to purchase t-shirts and supplies.  
School secretary keeps attendance lists.

## Atlantic

200 students participating  
Program runs daily  
4 school districts/areas served  
2 volunteers are stations per route with up to 4 routes per community  
Used the high school sports teams as volunteers - created excitement among students  
Used a pre-meeting for volunteers to give them directions  
Each route had a backpack which contained a safety vest, first aid kit, prizes, and other supplies.

## Northeast Iowa (Decorah, Postville, New Hampton, Riceville)

Decorah 5 buses with up to 75 students  
New Hampton 1 bus with 5 students  
Postville 2 buses with 15 students  
Riceville - community walk to school day with 100 students  
Supervision is from parents, grandparents, and seniors from the students neighborhoods.  
Used Retired Senior Volunteer Program to recruit volunteers  
The program brings the neighborhood together and lets them organize programs independently.

## Manly

Informal program is run by community minister on Wednesdays  
15 students  
Minister and wife meets students at school and walks to afterschool program at church

## Mason City

80 students enrolled in program  
7 routes to 4 schools  
Runs only during mornings and only during warmer months.  
Volunteers include seniors, young adults without families, and parents.  
Families saw a need, schools are located in neighborhoods, but not many kids were walking. Adult supervision has helped.

## Spencer

100 students participating  
Single School  
Program runs daily  
This program is staffed with teach associates and YMCA staff. It was important to the community to have a staffed program rather than volunteer.  
Created a video to introduce the concept to community.  
Community has a Tiger Trail - paw prints painted on the sidewalk in different colors that students follow to and from school

PHOTO: Mark Wyatt





# Resources

- **Iowa Safe Routes to School, Iowa Bicycle Coalition**  
<http://www.iowasaferoutes.org>
- **iWALK, Iowa Department of Public Health**  
<http://www.i-walk.org/>
- **Iowa Department of Transportation, Safe Routes to School**  
<http://www.iowadot.gov/saferoutes/>
- **Walking Works for Schools, Iowa Department of Education**  
[http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_download&gid=12416&Itemid=4303](http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=12416&Itemid=4303)
- **Center for Transportation Reserach and Education, School Zone Safety Handbook**  
<http://www.ctre.iastate.edu/research/detail.cfm?projectID=-735299352>
- **Walk Bike To School, National Center for Safe Routes to School**  
<http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/>
- **National Center for Safe Routes to School**  
<http://saferoutesinfo.org>
- **Safe Routes to School National Partnership**  
<http://www.saferoutespartnership.org>
- **League of American Bicyclists**  
<http://www.bikeleague.org>
- **National Center for Bicycling and Walking**  
<http://www.bikewalk.org>
- **Safe Routes Walking School Bus**  
[http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/walking\\_school\\_bus/index.cfm](http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/walking_school_bus/index.cfm)
- **Starting a Walking School Bus, Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center**  
<http://www.walkingschoolbus.org>
- **Kids Walk-to-School guide, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/resources.htm>
- **Walking School Bus: Guidelines for organizers, Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center**  
<http://www.walkingschoolbus.org/organizers.pdf>
- **Walking School Bus: Guidelines for talking to children about pedestrian safety, Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center**  
<http://www.walkingschoolbus.org/safety.pdf>
- **Pedestrian and bicyclist safety education programs**  
<http://www.walktoschool.org>
- **Volunteers and Liability Document**  
<http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/volunteers-and-liability-federal-volunteer-protection-act>



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