

WALKING SCHOOL BUS AND BIKE TRAIN GUIDE



Congestion, air pollution, and lack of physical inactivity are all major issues facing schools throughout Massachusetts. A **walking school bus (WSB)** or **bike train (BT)** is an effective and fun way for a school to engage its students in active transportation. This guide will provide a brief overview of starting a WSB or BT at your school, the associated benefit of WSBs and BTs, and the potential funding sources to get a WSB or BT started. It also includes sample resources for reference.

What is a Walking School Bus/ Bike Train?

A WSB is introduced at individual schools with the goal of encouraging students and parents/guardians to walk to school. It can be led by teachers, caretakers, or other community leaders with different adult chaperones taking turns or one person leading the WSB each time. The common components of a WSB are a leader, a predetermined route, and designated meet up points or stops. Schools can organize a WSB that meets once a week or coordinate a customized schedule. Frequently, schools have multiple WSB routes that start from different locations within a one-mile walking distance of the school.

A BT is similar to a WSB, except that students ride bicycles, scooters, or similar wheeled devices that support commuting to school from farther distances. Generally, a BT requires a lower student to adult chaperone ratio (e.g., 2 adults per 6 students aged 7 to 9 rather than 1 adult per 6 students aged 7 to 9) in addition to extra planning and training to ensure that participating students are completely comfortable with their modes.



Safe Routes to School is Here to Help

The Massachusetts Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program is here to provide your school with the support and guidance needed to start a WSB and/or BT. SRTS provides free resources, including:

- **Safety trainings and items** to increase pedestrian and bicyclist visibility
- **WSB kits** with spray chalk to mark WSB paths and reflective vests for WSB leaders
- **Parent/guardian travel surveys** to gauge how students travel to and from school
- **Residential maps** to support the development of WSB/BT routes
- **Free helmets** through an established partnership with [Project KidSafe¹](#)



¹ <https://www.bwglaw.com/project-kidsafe.html>

Why Participate in a Walking School Bus/Bike Train?



Benefits for students and families:

- **Improved health:** Participants are more physically active during the day.
- **Reduced transportation costs:** Walking/biking is much less expensive than driving.
- **More community interaction:** Adults and students alike build friendships over time.
- **Improved road safety skills:** Participants practice smart walking/biking in supervised groups.
- **Better habits:** Those who enjoy regular walking/biking are inspired to do more of it.
- **Experience the outdoors:** Walking/biking gives a different perspective than riding in a vehicle.
- **Academic performance:** Studies show that physical activity on the way to school can increase attentiveness and learning.
- **Gained independence:** Walking/biking to school affords older students the chance to develop smart decision-making capabilities, especially by interacting with the built environment.



Benefits for schools:

- **Reduced traffic:** Walking/biking can reduce the volume of school-related congestion during arrival and dismissal times.
- **Improved air quality:** Walking/biking instead of driving improves local air quality.
- **Reduced absenteeism and tardiness:** Walking/biking to school in chaperoned groups helps students to arrive alert and on time, resulting in fewer disciplinary issues.



Benefits for communities:

- **Visible outdoor activity:** Seeing more people walking/biking in the community often encourages others to try the same, thereby slowly normalizing the behavior.
- **Increased use of walking/biking infrastructure:** More walking/biking leads to the exposure of any infrastructural deficiencies. Numerous WSBs/BTs have been leveraged to show where and why infrastructure improvements are needed.
- **Increased "eyes on the street":** More people walking and biking can help reduce crime. This concept was first introduced in Jane Jacob's "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" in 1961 and has been extensively studied since.





Start a Walking School Bus/Bike Train



There are several important factors to consider when starting a WSB/BT. This section explores key administrative structure and staffing, recommended adult supervision, program promotion, participation, incentives, and, finally, data collection and evaluation.

Credit: News10ABC/Justina Latimer

Administrative structure and staffing: In order to develop a sustainable WSB/BT, it is essential to have an effective administrative structure in place to operate the program. More than one person² must be responsible for program oversight to ensure continuation and sustainability during times of staff and volunteer turnover.

Most WSB/BT teams consist of volunteers and staff members, including:

- **Adult chaperones:** Parents/guardians are an invaluable resource for providing the necessary supervision as well as to act as program champions.
- **School Staff:** Teachers and administrators can help with program operations as well as required safety training. One common approach by schools is to roll WSB/BT responsibilities into existing staff positions (e.g., school nurses, physical education teachers, paraprofessionals, crossing guards, and school resource officers).

Recommended adult supervision: For adequate adult supervision, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend:

- One adult per three students aged 4 to 6.
- One adult for six children for older elementary students aged 7 to 9.
- Fewer adults may be necessary for students aged 10 and older.

As previously stated, adult supervision needs may be higher for a BT than for a WSB.

School officials must provide all WSB/BT information to participating students' parents/guardians to ensure WSB/BT safety and accuracy, including specific meeting location protocol.



² The SRTS Program understands that some school contracts may not allow for flexibility in assigning this responsibility.

Program promotion: Promoting the WSB/BT can be a way to invite students and their families to join or to recognize participating groups. Ideas for promotion include:



In-school

- Article in the school newsletter
- Flyers to parents/guardians during arrival and dismissal times
- E-blast to parents/guardians
- Feature on the school website
- Posters on school notice boards
- Take-home information for students
- Schoolwide PSA announcements



Community

- Advertisement support from the local Transportation Management Association, Metropolitan Planning Organization, local bicycle/pedestrian committee, or other municipal agencies
- Neighborhood association meetings
- Local news article
- Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, and Extended Day programs

Participation and volunteer incentives³ are an important way to encourage and sustain volunteer participation in WSBs/BTs:

- Stipends, typically ranging from \$250 to \$500, provide a payout to regular volunteers at the end of each semester. Such an incentive can help with recruitment and retainment of WSB/BT chaperones.
- Gift cards and/or SRTS branded items can be offered as additional tokens of appreciation.
- Salary increases for existing staff members (e.g., crossing guard or school nurse) who take on the added responsibility of leading a WSB/BT.
- Schedule changes to support a WSB/BT (e.g., start the school day earlier and then allow participating staff members to leave earlier).
- Community service requirements can often be fulfilled by volunteering to support the WSB/BT.

Data collection and evaluation are critical to measuring the ongoing results of the WSB/BT programs. The following steps are designed to collect necessary evidentiary support:

- Conduct before and after program counts by mode for quantitative records of success. Before and after counts must be conducted at a similar time of year and in similar outdoor conditions to mitigate any influences due to weather, temperature, or hours of darkness. Late spring (after Daylight Savings starts) or early fall (before Daylight Savings ends) are practical times of the year to conduct these counts.
- During the program, ask students, staff, and parents/guardians what they enjoy about it and what can be improved. Operational changes in time or location of the WSB/BT can be easily adjusted to support ongoing participation.
- During a WSB/BT, ask participants to take photos to document the journey. This fun activity can be used to create a visual story of the program. Additionally, students can draw posters of their WSB/BT experiences.

³ These examples assume that school contracts permit changes in salary or schedule and/or could be changed in the future to accommodate participation in WSBs and Bike Trains.

Choose a Route

Follow these initial steps to identify local walking or biking routes:

1 Draw a 1/2-mile radius around the school for a WSB and a 2-mile radius for a BT.

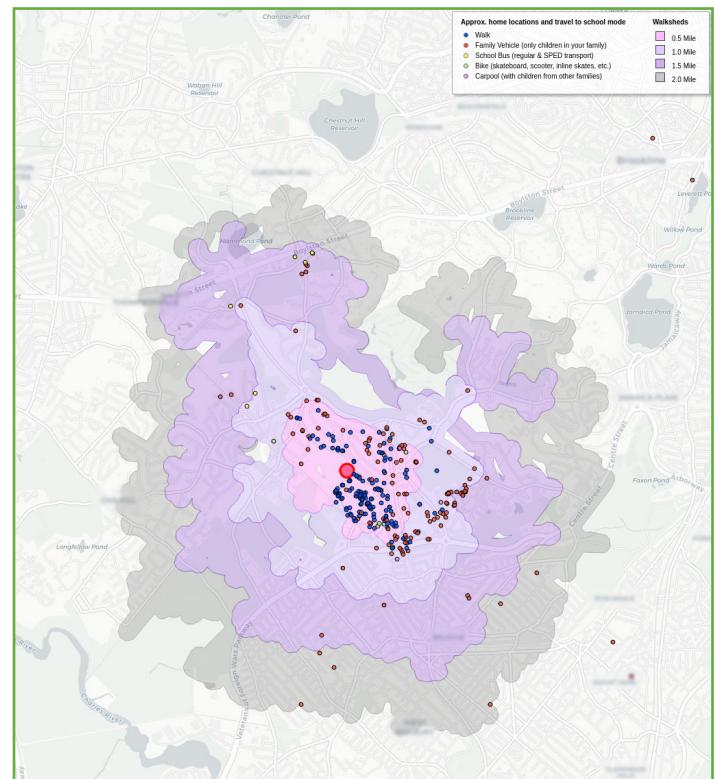
These are the distances most comfortable for people walking and biking in a group. Use local resources to map out potential neighborhood routes to school prioritizing quieter streets with sidewalks, park paths, and other public spaces with ample protection from motorized traffic. Make sure the walking and biking routes can be safely navigated by a group of people. The SRTS team can assist your school in creating these maps.

2 Collect parent/guardian travel surveys to gain data about how students travel to and from school.

The SRTS travel survey is available for free at <https://masaferoutessurvey.org/>. This survey is offered in nine languages, online or paper format, and provides a report of school travel behavior. Work with your SRTS Outreach Coordinator to conduct a survey at your school. The survey results offer valuable information for mapping out potential WSB/BT routes. If it is determined that stopping at each individual home location is not an option, finding mutually acceptable meeting locations for groups to congregate while waiting for the WSB/BT should be explored.

3 Conduct walk assessments of all trial routes

to gauge safety and appropriate access to the school entrances in accordance with the school's arrival and dismissal plan.



Example of a survey map with a watershed produced by the SRTS survey tool. This can be used to identify WSB/BT routes that will connect the highest concentrations of student residences to school within the appropriate distance radius.



Example of a WSB path created based on survey responses for students who live within ½ mile of school.

Funding

One of the most important elements of a sustainable WSB/BT is a secured long term funding stream. Based on existing WSB/BT programs, the following funding sources are most common:

- **Schools** may include funding for WSB/BT programs as part of their goals to increase the number of students who walk and bike to school. In instances where the WSB/BT leader is a school attendance counselor or paraprofessional, the WSB/BT leadership responsibilities are often included in the total salary budgeted for that position. If this is the applied method of funding, all such responsibilities must be called out in the job description of the school staff member. Schools that are eligible for Title I funding can explore opportunities to start and maintain a WSB/BT. "Title I, Part A of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides supplemental resources to local school districts to help provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps."⁴
- **Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs)** may include a health and fitness committee and may be able to provide a WSB/BT coordinator. Alternatively, PTAs may organize fundraisers to secure funding for a coordinator.
- **Police Departments** may provide staffing for a WSB/BT within their municipalities. They may also support WSB/BT leaders via crossing guard funds.
- **Town or city governments** may offer local funding options for physical activity programs at schools.
- **Local Transportation Management Associations (TMAs)**— non-profit organizations with goals to reduce traffic congestion, improve air quality, and promote non-single occupant vehicle travel—may offer incentives and resources to encourage student active transportation programs.

- **Foundations** have potential funding streams to support WSB/BT programs. Generally, all funding requires an application process in order to secure funds. These grant processes are often competitive, and as such, funding is not guaranteed. Specifically:

- **Health Foundations** offer grant application opportunities that encourage student active transportation. Local health foundations include The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, the MetroWest Health Foundation, and many Community Health Networks throughout Massachusetts.
- **Education Foundations** offer grant opportunities for stipend funding. A short list of community education foundations in Massachusetts includes:
 - Northampton Education Foundation
 - Salem Education Foundation
 - Worcester Educational Development Foundation
 - The Lynch Foundation
 - The Nellie Maw Education Foundation
 - Newton Schools Foundation
- **Local Foundations or Trusts** such as the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts may offer grant funding opportunities for WSB/BT programs.
- **National Foundations** such as the United Health Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Convergence Partnership, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation may have grant opportunities for WSB/BT programs. While national foundation grants award larger amounts of money, however, they remain significantly more competitive.

- **Other non-profits** such as active transportation non-profits occasionally run programs or offer funding for WSB/BT programs.
- **Federal funding** may have some limitations (e.g., use of federal funds is not allowed for purchasing gift card incentives). However, opportunities may still exist through Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) or other federal funding streams.

Note that grant funding requires robust data collection and evaluation in accordance with grant guidelines to ensure the long-term sustainability of the program.

⁴<http://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2019/305/>



Overcoming Common Obstacles

Creating a sustainable WSB/BT is not without setbacks. The following list includes often encountered problems as well as tips for how to overcome them.

- **Union contracts for teachers** can restrict the number of hours a teacher can work, thereby potentially impacting the number of hours a teacher can spend on the WSB/BT. Splitting the workload between multiple teachers as well as non-teaching staff can mitigate this issue.
- **Lack of staffing** to support a WSB/BT at the school can be resolved by connecting with local bike or walk advocates to see if their network includes potential volunteers.
- **Lack of clear policy** at a school can be resolved by checking whether the school district has a WSB/BT policy that can be adopted.
- **Concerned parents/guardians (public safety)** can gain confidence in the WSB/BT safety by allowing students to receive adequate training prior to participating in the program. Additionally, the school should share materials from all trainings as well as up-to-date WSB/BT details to assure parents/guardians that any potential issues have been mitigated.
- **Poor bicycling/walking infrastructure** must be addressed via a safety assessment of the selected routes to gauge safety. If the route is deemed unsuitable, the issues can be raised with the local municipality.
- **Bright/reflective attire** must be worn by students to ensure visibility. Furthermore, students should be educated to use blinking lights and/or visible/reflective gear.
- **Helmets** must be worn by all students and adult volunteers participating in a BT. It's the law that "[a]ny person 16 years of age or younger operating a bicycle or being carried as a passenger on a bicycle on a public way, bicycle path or on any other public right-of-way shall wear a helmet."
- **Liability (Insurance)** needs to be clearly understood as WSB/BT routes operate outside of school grounds. Some schools can be covered by the municipality's liability insurance, whereas other schools ask parents/guardians to sign permission slips, similar to those used for field trips or sports events.
- As is the standard for all Massachusetts school volunteers, **CORI (criminal record checks)⁵** must be requested for all WSB/BT leaders.

⁵ <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXIV/Chapter85/Section11B>

National Case Study

Commute Options, a Transportation Management Association (TMA) in Bend, Oregon, organizes and executes WSB and BT programs in schools throughout the city. Currently, they are operational in six schools, and their website shows each school's walking route, days of operation, and meeting locations and times. Commute Options has a member of staff dedicated to organizing the WSB or BT programs, including registering school leaders and volunteers.

The program is funded by the City of Bend and the Central Oregon Health Council's Cardiovascular Disease and Diabetes Prevention Workgroup.



Elk Meadow Elementary Walking School Bus

- Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, before and after school
- Meet at the Pavilion at Wildflower Park, Departs at 7:25AM



An example of the WSB map and meeting details.

Local Examples

County	Public School Type	Route Type	Travel Direction	Route Length	Compensation	Start Date	Adult Leader
Barnstable	Elementary School	WSB	To School	1.3 miles	Unpaid-volunteer time	2017	Principal
Barnstable	Elementary School	Bike Train	To School	2.2 miles	Unpaid-volunteer time	2015	School Staff
Barnstable	Middle School	Bike Train	To School	3 miles	Unpaid-volunteer time	2015	School Staff
Hampden	Elementary School	WSB	To School	0.6 miles	Paid position through PD/ Unpaid-volunteer time	2016	Police/Principal
Hampshire	Elementary School	WSB	Both	~1 mile	Unpaid	2019	Parent Volunteer
Middlesex	Elementary School	WSB	To School	Varies (0.25-.5 miles)	Unpaid-volunteer time	2018	Principal
Middlesex	Elementary School	WSB	To School/ Sometimes Both	Varies (0.25-.5 miles)	Unpaid	2018	Parent Volunteer
Middlesex	Elementary School	WSBs	To School	Varies (0.25-.5 miles)	Unpaid	2018	Parent Volunteer
Middlesex	Elementary School	WSB	Both	Varies (0.25-1.5 miles)	Unpaid	2019	Parent Volunteer
Middlesex	Middle School	WSB	Both	Varies (0.25-1.5 miles)	Unpaid	2019	Parent Volunteer
Middlesex	Elementary School	WSB	To School	0.3 miles	Unpaid	2018	Parent Volunteer
Suffolk	Elementary & Middle School	WSB	To School	Varies (0.25-.5 miles)	Unpaid	2017	Parent Volunteer
Worcester	Elementary School	WSB	To School	0.5 miles	Unpaid-volunteer time	2018	School Staff/ Volunteers
Worcester	Elementary School	WSB	To School	0.3 miles	Unpaid-volunteer time	2017	School Nurse
Worcester	Elementary School	WSB	To School	~1 mile	Unpaid-volunteer time	2018	School Nurse

Additional Resources Available

- Sample timeline for WSB/BT development
- Sample permission slip
- Sample ground rules
- Sample sign up form

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR WALKING SCHOOL BUSES AND BIKE TRAINS



Sample timeline for WSB/BT development:

- **Reach out to the Principal** or other decision maker(s) at your school to outline the benefits of a WSB/BT program to the school and gain commitment to the program.
- **Introduce the WSB/BT idea** to school staff and parents/guardians.
- **Develop a list** of dedicated volunteers.
- **Develop the walking/biking routes.**
- **Determine the number of adults** required for supervision.
- **Create a map of all the walking/biking routes** with formal stops.
- **Assign volunteers** to the routes.
- **Disseminate informational flyers** about the routes to caretakers during school dismissal. Try to target families that live near the WSB/BT routes.
- **Show commitment to the route start date and time.** It is important that staff walk the designated routes, as planned, regardless of the number of students. Consistency is key to growing WSB/BT participation.
- **Seek collaboration** with organizations and agencies, including senior centers and college campuses for volunteer recruitment and local businesses for donated supplies (e.g., umbrellas, gloves, scarves, etc.).

SAMPLE PERMISSION SLIP

Name of Student:

Grade:

Name of Teacher:

Walking School

Bus Route:

My child is going to participate in the Walking School Bus/Bike Train Program run by CORI-checked volunteers.

I understand that the school staff, instructors/teachers, parents/guardians, students, and community volunteers working with the program will not be held liable for anything that happens while leading a walking school bus or bike train.

I understand that I am responsible for the safe transportation of my child to a designated "route stop." I will not leave my child at a "route stop" until they are safely handed off to a leader.

I have read and will encourage my child to follow the listed Ground Rules for the program.

I understand that I am welcome to walk along with my child if I so choose.

In case of emergency, I can be reached at:

Should I be unreachable for any reason, please contact:

1

at

2

at

Parent/Guardian: (please print)

Signature

Date

Program runs daily, rain or shine. See Ground Rules for details.

This is a sample to provide basic guidance for a permission slip.
This is not a legal document. Please consult with school district
officials for additional guidance on preparing a permission slip.

SAMPLE GROUND RULES

There are 5 simple guidelines that each participant must follow in order to ensure safety of all participants as well as participant satisfaction.

1 Be committed.

The goal of this initiative is to affect a sustainable, permanent change in our community. We are looking for participants who want to make a long term commitment to their well-being, fitness, and the environment. Parents/guardians are encouraged to join their children in the walk whenever feasible.

2 Be on time.

To ensure the timely arrival of students at the school, the WSB will wait at each route stop for no longer than five minutes. It is always a good idea to arrive a bit early. We know it happens, but if you are running late, please make alternative transportation arrangements for your child.

3 Be safe.

For safety purposes, we will not allow scooters, bikes, or any other toy or vehicle that enables any child to move at a significantly faster pace than the group is walking. Also, parents/guardians who choose to drop their children off at a designated "route stop" must ensure their child is safely handed off to one of the leaders before leaving the area.

4 Exhibit good behavior.

Dangerous or inappropriate behavior, including use of profanity, disrespectful language, pushing, running into the street, or separating from the group will not be tolerated. Parents/guardians will be contacted after the first instance of such behavior. A second instance of such behavior will end the child's participation in this program.

5 Use your best judgment.

Massachusetts is known for variable and sometimes unpredictable weather conditions. It is difficult for the group leader to coordinate with all of the participants every time there is the possibility of adverse weather. In general, the group will not walk if it is below 32 degrees, downpouring, lightning, or if it is storming with severe snow and/or ice conditions. Also, if school is delayed or canceled, the group will not walk. Make alternative arrangements when there is a possibility that a Walking School Bus is canceled on any one day.



SAMPLE SIGN UP FORM FOR A WSB/BT

SIGNUP!

School Name:

For more information about the study, please contact Dr. John Smith at (555) 123-4567 or via email at john.smith@researchinstitute.org.

WSB/BT Name:

For more information about the study, please contact the study team at 1-800-258-4929 or visit www.cancer.gov.



Streets currently included in the route are _____.

(STREET NAMES and/or INTERSECTIONS)

If you live nearby, please join us! Add your information below and we will contact you.