

# Exploring parental perceptions of a walking school bus in northern Ontario

D. Atrooshi, BPHE<sup>1</sup>, B.G. Bruner, PhD<sup>2</sup>, N. Parker, MPH<sup>3</sup>, R.E. Lee, PhD<sup>4</sup>, L. Lévesque, PhD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Kinesiology & Health Studies, Queen's University, <sup>2</sup>Schulich School of Education, Nipissing University, <sup>3</sup>Department of Health and Human Performance, University of Houston, <sup>4</sup>College of Nursing and Health Innovation, Arizona State University

## BACKGROUND

- Currently, only 26% of Canadian children and youth use active modes of transportation to and from school (1).
- Increased vehicle dependency results in a loss of independence, road-based skills, social interaction and physical activity (PA) (2).
- The decline in walking to school may reflect increased parental concern about child safety and security (3).
- In order to increase active transportation to school (ATS), methods such as a walking-school bus (WSB) have been proposed as a safe, active way to travel to school (4).
- While we have an understanding of parent decision making in larger urban centres (5), little is known about what influences parent decision making in regards to child WSB participation in other contexts.

## PURPOSE

- To explore parental perceptions of a WSB and to describe and explore barriers and facilitators relative to a WSB in a northern context.



North Bay – Aerial view

## METHODS

### Setting

- Three elementary schools located in two communities in northeastern Ontario, Canada (populations 54,000 and 5,800).

### Participants and Procedures

- Parents of elementary school students (N=16) participated in semi-structured interviews guided by a social marketing approach.

### Data Analysis

- Inductive and deductive analyses were used to identify emerging themes (6).
- A second deductive analysis was conducted to further identify barriers and facilitators to a WSB.



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## RESULTS

### Demographics

- 66% of respondents lived > 3.0 km from school, 23% between 1.6 and 3.0 km, and 11% < 1.6km.
- 44% of parents report their children take the bus, 31% were driven to school.

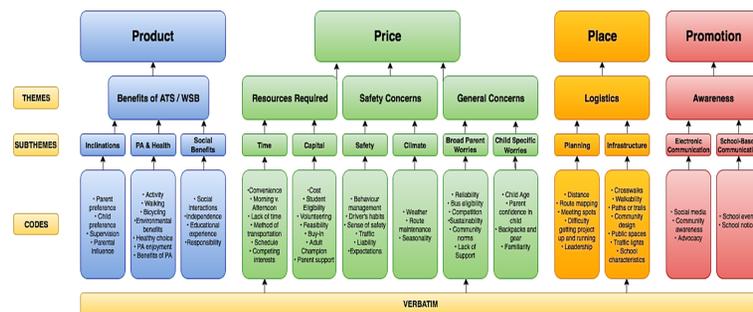


Figure 1. Codes, subthemes, and themes organized according to the 4 Ps

School A	School B	School C
<b>Facilitators</b>		
<p><b>Opportunity for PA</b></p> <p>"Well I think there's a whole bunch of advantages, not just being physically active but teaching your kids that they don't necessarily need to take a vehicle everywhere" (P1)</p> <p><b>Social Opportunity</b></p> <p>"I love the fact that she would be able to walk with some of her friends to school" (P2)</p> <p><b>Social Media / Paper Notices</b></p> <p>"I think, well social media really. Like the school has a website, the school has a Facebook page, the school sends out paper notices" (P3)</p> <p><b>Adult Supervision</b></p> <p>"I love that even if myself or my husband were unable to walk her that day that she would still be able to walk while being supervised by an adult" (P2)</p> <p><b>Sidewalks</b></p> <p>"There'd have to be a sidewalk. High St. has a sidewalk part of the way but not all the way. O'Brien and Jane St. both have sidewalks I guess that's probably the better route." (P4)</p>	<p><b>Opportunity for PA</b></p> <p>"Just the exercise and being outside and walking to school with friends in a positive environment" (P4)</p> <p><b>Social Opportunity</b></p> <p>"More engagement in the community because they would get to know people that they wouldn't necessarily talk to" (P1)</p> <p><b>Social Media / Paper Notices</b></p> <p>"Facebook absolutely is a huge one I think. There's a lot of groups that parents could share that information on" (P2)</p> <p><b>Adult Supervision</b></p> <p>"The activity level, and that it is supervised" (P1)</p>	<p><b>Opportunity for PA</b></p> <p>"Activity for the kids, getting them moving, getting some of that energy out before they start their school day and have to sit at their desks for a long period of time" (P2)</p> <p><b>Social Opportunity</b></p> <p>"Fresh air, and the social aspect of being with their peers in a group like that" (P2)</p> <p><b>Social Media / Paper Notices</b></p> <p>"Probably the school's Facebook site or anything that comes home in the backpack" (P4)</p> <p><b>Adult Supervision</b></p> <p>"Starting the day with exercise, again the small groups, social activity, you know walking with adult supervision to monitor behaviour is a positive thing" (P5)</p>
<b>Barriers</b>		
<p><b>Lack of reliability</b></p> <p>"Probably fear of the unknown, are the volunteers going to show up, you know what I mean?" (P3)</p> <p><b>Extreme weather conditions</b></p> <p>"On like days when it's the snow, like in North Bay we get lots of snow we get really cold. Do you send them out, like what's the temperature range for that, what's going to happen if they don't?" (P1)</p> <p><b>Lack of convenience</b></p> <p>"If it's less convenient than the school bus arrangement then I'm not likely to do it because, you know we've got busy lives, two parents working in two different places and we've gotta get to our work in the morning so it has to be convenient" (P4)</p>	<p><b>Lack of reliability</b></p> <p>"I think you have to have committed volunteers and there also has to be a school if somebody can't be there" (P4)</p> <p><b>Extreme weather conditions</b></p> <p>"My daughter is my concern, so when it's -25 or colder that's when we drive and that's it" (P2)</p> <p><b>Lack of sidewalks</b></p> <p>"The other thing is like, I think in the back of my mind there are no sidewalks, there are absolutely no sidewalks where we live" (P1)</p>	<p><b>Lack of reliability</b></p> <p>"It's gonna be something that's going to be 100% reliable, and if people have doubts about that they may not use it and then it's not gonna go anywhere" (P1)</p> <p><b>Extreme weather conditions</b></p> <p>"It depends on what time they're going by the house and weather, if it's -30 I'm not gonna let the kids walk to school" (P4)</p> <p><b>Lack of sidewalks</b></p> <p>"The route from our house to the school, there's no sidewalks for a majority of the way" (P3)</p>

Figure 2. Parental perceptions of barriers and facilitators to a walking school bus

### Benefits of a WSB

- "I love the idea, I guess. Activity for the kids, getting them moving, getting some of that energy out before they start their school day and have to sit at their desks for a long period of time." (SCF2)
- "Probably some good conversations, they can walk to school happy together." (SCF5)
- "I think that it is a good way to make sure that our kids are safe walking on their own until they are old enough to be able to do it completely by themselves." (SCF1)

### Parent Concerns

- "I'm a little fearful with volunteer adults leading the group, like what if someone doesn't show up for their volunteer work that day." (SAF1)
- "I guess timing, it depends on what time they're going by the house and weather, if it's -30 C I'm not gonna let the kids walk to school." (SCF4)
- "Like, on my side of the school, there's not much room at all for that kind of traffic. So if you have people walking, you know an adult, and maybe two kids wide behind them. It could be a bit of a concern, a bit of an issue." (SCF1)

### Logistics

- "Other than just our situation of our distance, but say we lived closer absolutely he'd be doing it." (SAF3)
- "The other thing is like, I think in the back of my mind there are no sidewalks. There are absolutely no sidewalks where we live." (SBF1)

### Awareness

- "I'm not sure, I guess some kind of like get active initiatives." (SCF2)
- "I think, social media really. Like the school has a website, the school has a Facebook page, the school sends out school wide emails all the time." (SAF3)
- "Possibly creating a Facebook account. Like a Facebook site or something about the walking school bus." (SAM1)

## CONCLUSIONS

- The findings suggest that parental concerns regarding a WSB are similar to those of parents in more urban settings.
- Parents had strong concerns related to a lack of sidewalks and extreme amounts of snow experienced in northern Ontario.
- In order to diminish car dependence and encourage WSB uptake, messages that allay parent perceived barriers should be favoured.
- Findings from this study have been used to develop a messaging strategy to promote the WSB at participating schools.



## IMPLICATIONS

- Promoting the WSB as a safe, reliable method of transportation might most appeal to parents.
- A WSB is an easy, enjoyable way to engage in PA and an excellent opportunity to foster positive social interactions with other children living nearby.
- Promoting awareness of the WSB through both electronic and paper platforms may have the greatest reach.
- A WSB may be a way to teach children how to safely walk to school in a supervised manner until they are old enough to walk alone.



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