

The “Walking School Bus”: taking the next step

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In Lecco, northern Italy, public school personnel are assigned to assist school children in a daily "piedibus". In Newton we call it a "walking school bus". Children are given incentives to participate, with fare cards that are punched each day and prizes awarded for participation. The routes have names; a favorite route in Lecco, through the local cemetery, is called the "mortobus". It's fun, it is significantly reducing the number of short car trips in the town, and it reinforces the children's environmental ethic.

Most of Newton's children live within walking or biking distance of school. Until recent years, it was almost unheard of to be driven to school (except in a bus). It's easy to forget that. Today it has become commonplace to drive children short distances to school, mostly for convenience. When you add up all those unnecessary short car trips at all the schools, plus all that idling outside the schools, you have a big environmental issue. Those trips are contributing significantly to Newton's carbon emissions, with serious public health consequences. And there are other health consequences, because limiting children's activity promotes obesity. There are now studies indicating that the "driving to school habit" even promotes lifetime car dependence in children.

The walking school bus idea is slowly gaining acceptance in several Newton elementary schools, but environmental and public health issues require not only incentives for desirable behavior but also disincentives for undesirable behavior. While we encourage walking and biking to school, let's also discourage driving to school.

Our schools could restrict access to automobiles within a certain radius of the school buildings. This would not eliminate the practice of driving kids to school, but it would change the perception that being driven to school is the norm. By raising the bar, it would encourage parents to discuss the issue with their children in a new way. This rule would immediately eliminate the health risks created by idling cars at school. It would send a message of support to the hundreds of children who are already expending the effort to walk and bike to school. There will be good reasons to make exceptions to the rule at times, but being expected to walk a block or so is not punishment for healthy children; it is exactly what we need to be helping them to do.

When heavy backpacks are the rationale used to justify being dropped off at the schoolhouse door, principals should work with teachers to ensure that children are not required to carry an unreasonable load. Transporting books - even short distances - should never be a physical burden for children. Heavy packs compromise posture and strain neck and back muscles.

Schools have a responsibility to encourage healthy behavior of all kinds. In recent years, some Newton principals have banned bicycling to school due to safety concerns. This is exactly the wrong message. Bicycling to school is healthy and should be encouraged, not forbidden, by school authorities. Of course, bicycle safety requires supervision, good signage and instruction, and these are high priority issues for Bike Newton, the Newton Bicycle & Pedestrian Task Force and the Newton Police Department.

The hospitals in the Longwood Medical Area recently made the entire area - outdoors as well as indoors - completely smoke free. People can no longer be seen standing outside of hospitals subjecting passersby to "passive smoking". Newton's schools could take an analogous approach and work to keep cars from lining up in front of schools twice a day, subjecting all children to tailpipe emissions and teaching them to be car dependent. Instead, schools should be encouraging — celebrating — the installation of new bike racks, a safer view of the street, more active children and fresher air.