

US children are embracing the walking school bus

May 26 2014, by Jennifer Mcdermott



In May 20, 2014 photo, eight-year-old Divya Dahal walks home from school with a group of grade school children escorted by Allyson Trenteseaux, a Walking School Bus program manager, center right, in Providence, R.I. The program is seen as a way to get kids active, fight childhood obesity and improve absenteeism, which can be higher among students who live too close to school to qualify for a bus ride. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Growing numbers of children across the U.S. are climbing aboard the walking school bus. It starts with an adult volunteer, who goes house to

house picking up children. The group then walks to school together—and back home in the afternoons.

Walking school buses are catching on in school districts from California to Massachusetts because they are seen as a way to fight childhood obesity, improve attendance rates and ensure that kids get to school safely.

Children like them because they are fun.

A group of school children held hands as they walked home one afternoon in Providence, capital of eastern Rhode Island state. When they reached a busy intersection, an adult accompanying them prodded, "What's the rule?"

"Behind the line!" they said in unison, as they stepped back from the edge of the curb and waited for the walk signal.

Shortly after, the group stopped in front of 8-year-old Jaiden Guzman's house. He said goodbye to his friends and raced to his front door. His mother waved and the rest of the walking school bus continued on its way.

In 2012, about 30 percent of students living within a mile (less than 2 kilometers) of school walked there in the morning and 35 percent walked home in the afternoon, according to the National Center for Safe Routes to School. Those numbers have increased by about 6 percentage points since 2007.

Organizers in Providence are also motivated by high rates of chronic absenteeism. Thirty-seven percent of Providence students missed 10 percent or more of the 2010-11 school year.



In this May 20, 2014 photo, Allyson Trenteseaux, a Walking School Bus program manager, second from left, escorts eight-year-old Divya Dahal, left, and 10-year-old Ferlando Louis, front right, as the children are walked home from school, in Providence, R.I. The Walking School Bus program is seen as a way to get kids active, fight childhood obesity and improve absenteeism, which can be higher among students who live too close to school to qualify for a bus ride. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

The nonprofit agency Family Service of Rhode Island targeted Mary E. Fogarty Elementary School for its first walking school bus in 2012 because it's located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Children who live within a mile of school don't qualify for the bus.

On the route in Providence, the program's manager, Allyson Trenteseaux, and another volunteer recently led Jaiden and seven other children through busy intersections and around broken glass littering the

sidewalks.

On the walks, Trenteseaux said, she mends relationships among the kids, builds relationships and intervenes when there are problems. During the winter, a walk leader noticed some of the children were wearing slippers and bought them all boots.

Last year, 11 of the 14 students who participated and completed a survey attended school more often. The program now has a waiting list, and Family Service plans to expand into more schools next year.

Many programs across the country are funded by the federal Safe Routes to School program, which pays for infrastructure improvements and initiatives to enable children to walk and bike to school.

Robert Johnson, of the Missouri-based PedNet Coalition, a nonprofit that advocates for transit alternatives, said the success of the programs reflects a growing interest in getting kids more active.

Johnson said he is working with 15 school districts in Kansas on what may become the largest walking school bus project in the United States.

"Every parent is looking for ways to make their child a little healthier, and walking to school is one," he said.

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