

Walking and Wheeling on Wednesdays to School

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1. Background

School generated motorised trips contribute significantly to week day traffic congestion, and to parking congestion at the school gate, which has safety implications for school pupils.

Chaos at the school gate is an international phenomenon. It is considered “good parenting” to drive children to and from school. In the past most urban children either walked or cycled to school, but for the current generation of children the norm has become travelling with parents or caregivers in a motor vehicle. A study undertaken in Scotland¹ discovered that there were a large number of reasons for parents to choose to drive their children to school, including time pressures, cost of alternative transport modes, concerns about dangers (stranger danger and concern about their children’s ability to negotiate complex and congested traffic situations), increasing affluence leading to increasing car ownership and the opportunity for children to attend schools located further away from their place of residence, and an increasing number of solo parent households and households where both parents work and are therefore not available to accompany their children to and from school on foot.

Besides reducing traffic congestion on school days and parking congestion at the school gate, walking or cycling to school is considered to have health benefits in that physical activity improves children’s level of fitness, and subsequent ability to concentrate at school and learn, addresses some of the issues around obesity, and reduces pollution from cars around schools. Children who walk to their local schools are exposed to considerably less vehicle emissions than children who travel by car across town to school. They are also less likely to be involved in a crash.

By walking to school, adult supervised younger children begin to learn essential road safety skills by experiencing actual street conditions.² They discover where the safest crossing points are and what they need to check for before stepping out onto the roadway. Older children who cycle to school learn many of the road rules and skills they will be required to know and adhere to later in life as drivers. Surveys have shown that the modes most preferred by children for travelling to school are cycling, scooting and walking in that order.³

Initially the Christchurch City Council thought that establishing networks of walking school buses in local primary schools would address this issue. However, it was discovered that to establish and sustain long term, walking school buses would require

¹ Granville, S., Laird, A., Barber, M., and Rait, F., *Why Do Parents Drive their Children to School?*, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit, 2002

² *Traffic Safety Education Action Plan Victoria 2002-2007*, Vic Roads, p. 4

³ See Waimairi School Travel Plan, <http://www.waimairi.school.nz/starnet/media/TravelPlan.pdf>
A survey of the pupils of Westburn School (for the Westburn School Travel Plan) produced a similar result.

more Council staff support than was available.⁴ Consequently in Christchurch walking school buses tend to have a life expectancy of about one year, depend on a diminishing pool of parent volunteers to supervise, do not involve the majority of children, who continue to travel to and from school by car, and tend to work best in higher decile areas. Walking school buses continue to be established in Christchurch, and continue to be considered important, but are no longer seen as the sole solution to the school run issue. It is expected that most children will be able to graduate from being a member of a walking school bus to walking independently with friends, depending on the road environment at crossing points.

Since 1999 many Christchurch primary schools had been participating in annual “walk to school days”. These days were popular but ineffective for inspiring a shift in modes of travel to and from school. It was decided to invite schools participating in the annual Walk to School Day to extend this to a weekly walk to school day throughout the fourth term of 2004. This was an adaptation of the Walk on Wednesdays programmes that were being established overseas. Only five schools took up the challenge in 2004. However since then the programme has grown to include over thirty schools with combined roles of over 11,000 children. Since 2007 it has run in both the spring and summer terms. Cycling and scooting have been added to the mix of active travel modes and the name of the programme changed to Walk or Wheel Wednesday Class Challenge to reflect this. Schools from all decile areas (from lowest to highest) participate, with an overall average of 79% of children in participating schools walking, scooting or cycling to school during the period of the challenge. At least two Christchurch schools now run their own walk or wheel challenge all year long.

2. Reasons for Success

a. The Competitive Element

This is not a competition between schools, but rather a competition within schools. Because schools don't compete against each other, low decile schools don't feel disadvantaged and are therefore more willing to take part.

Classes within a participating school compete against each other for a class prize for achieving the highest percentage of active travellers to school during the period of the challenge. Hence it is called the Walk or Wheel Class Challenge. The prize is something that every class member can benefit from, such as a class outing. It is recognised that some children, for example special needs children, are simply unable to walk to school and should not be excluded from the fun if they belong to a winning class.

b. Recognition of Extraordinary Effort

There are some classes who have achieved 100% participation 100% of the time. To recognise extra effort special prizes are awarded to such classes, such as a class set of hydroslide passes at the Queen Elizabeth II aquatic centre. Some schools

⁴ Ussher, S., *A Ticket to a Sustainable Future for the Walking School Bus Programme: An Evaluation of the Long-Term Durability of the Initiative Within the Christchurch Context*, unpublished thesis, University of Canterbury, 2004

have had more than one class achieve this level of participation. Each has received a special award.

c. Addresses Parents' Issues

To participate in the programme children are not required to walk all the way from home to school. The 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey⁵ states that 67% of parents and caregivers whose children did not usually use active transport to and from school gave “we live too far from school” as the reason for their children being driven to school. A further 12% said “it takes too long/there is not enough time”. To address distance and time issues, children are not required to walk, scoot or cycle the entire distance from home to school, but are only asked to travel the last ten minutes of their to school journey by some active form of transport. For very young children, who take small steps and walk slowly, this might mean only two or three blocks, whereas for older children this might be most of the journey from home. Parents can choose to park and walk with their children, or they can drop their children off where they consider the rest of the journey relatively safe, if they believe their children capable of independent travel. By giving families the option of walking the last ten minutes of their to-school journey, out of zone families aren't excluded from the programme. Schools report the pleasure of having foot traffic generated chaos at the school gate, not vehicular chaos. On Wednesdays during the challenge immediately outside the school gate becomes a considerably safer environment for children.

d. Peer Pressure

Classmates put quite intense pressure on one another to participate so their class can win the prize, and in turn children put pressure on parents to allow them to walk to school on Wednesdays during the eight weeks of the challenge. Periodically stories reach the Council like that of the mother who, not being well enough to walk with her children to school on a particular Wednesday, told them she intended to drive them to school that morning. They were so upset she had to hurriedly hire a babysitter to walk with them instead.

e. Ease of Administration

“I felt the programme was very worthwhile and positive. Schools get asked to support a huge number of campaigns and worthy projects. This was one that fitted well with our planned programme for the year, was meaningful, easy to operate and worthwhile for both the children and community,” was how one principal responded when asked to comment on the Walk or Wheel Wednesday Campaign.

Teachers have very busy work loads, so care has been taken to keep the time and effort they have to expend on the Walk or Wheel Wednesday Class Challenge to a minimum. Every class gets a wall chart on which to record each pupil's involvement. There is a space for the teacher's name as well. Classes whose teachers also walk ten minutes to school do appreciably better than classes whose

⁵ *A Portrait of Health – Key Results of the 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey*, “Active Transport to School”, published June 2008, [http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nfs/pagesmh/7601/\\$File/transport-to-school-ch2.pdf](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nfs/pagesmh/7601/$File/transport-to-school-ch2.pdf)

teachers aren't participatory. At the end of each week totals are recorded on a tear off section at the bottom of the chart. The school returns the tear off sections of all their wall charts to the Council at the end of the Challenge. The Council determines from these which class is the winning one (and sends them their prize) and also obtains accurate participation data. Apart from recording who has walked, scooted or cycled each Wednesday morning, schools are not required to do any data collection themselves. Even so, some teachers felt being asked to record each child's involvement was an imposition. One teacher noted on their survey form that it was too much work for teachers to mark off the charts and bag tags - the travel cards which that year were given to each child. One needs to keep in mind that not everybody will be equally enthusiastic, and so the easier a programme is to administer by teachers the greater their support is likely to be.

f. Good Communications

Clear communications is essential for success, both for the schools on how to run the programme and for the parents and caregivers about what is being asked of them and their children. An A5 size flyer is sent home with every child just before the challenge begins. Communication overload is a factor in our lives, so communications need to cover the essentials without being too wordy. The flyers tell parents succinctly (a) how the programme works, (b) what's in it for their children, (c) how their children can be involved even if they can't walk the entire distance from home, and (d) when the challenge starts.

g. Incentives

To keep alive enthusiasm throughout the challenge small, inexpensive incentives are periodically given to children. These have included bag tags given out on the first Wednesday, and on which subsequent participation was to be recorded, and a badge two thirds through the Challenge. The main incentive is, of course, the class prize that the children are aiming for. However, as most children won't belong to the winning class, small incentives acknowledge individual effort.

h. Having Fun

Children are encouraged to experience walking to school as a fun activity. The Christchurch City Council's pantomime zebra, created for promoting safety at pedestrian crossings, has become a popular mascot for the Walk or Wheel Class Challenge, who has appeared at pedestrian crossings outside participating schools and encouraged the children to "keep it up". His image has also appeared on incentives such as stickers, and on the certificate that all the children who have participated get at the end of the challenge.

3. The Results

What impact has the Walk or Wheel Wednesday Class Challenge had on Christchurch schools and the wider Christchurch community?

Teachers have been surveyed after each challenge and have consistently assessed the challenge positively. In 2007, 99% of teachers said that they thought the challenge

was fun and 97% that it had been a success. 91% of teachers said they had undertaken supporting classroom activities, such as integrating the challenge into their keeping safe and healthy programme, or linking it to the Road Sense programme, and using it for a statistics project. Teachers reported an increased interest in establishing walking school buses among parents.

Some of the comments teachers made on their survey forms were:

- “We do so many extra activities in schools these days we cannot do justice to them all. Pleasing to note that this one almost ran itself with the help of a few classroom monitors.”
- “We had kids making the effort to walk who normally would have travelled by the car. Kids enjoyed it as did the supervising teachers.”
- “My new entrants are always keen to tell me as soon as they get to school that they have walked from home or have walked a couple of blocks with a parent and love to watch me record it on the wall chart.”

Public recognition of the Walk or Wheel Wednesday Class Challenge is high. In a telephone survey of 400 Christchurch residents undertaken in June 2008, 45% of respondents said that they knew about the Walk or Wheel Wednesday programme for promoting walking and cycling to school. 25% of respondents reported having participated in the programme; 39% of whom believe their children will now walk or wheel to school more often as a result of the campaign. 91% of the respondents said they believed it valuable to promote walking and cycling to school on Wednesdays.

4. The Future

While the Walk or Wheel Class Challenge has had a positive impact upon Christchurch school communities, challenges clearly remain. These include how to grow the programme to encompass every Christchurch primary school without blowing out the budget; and how to take this programme from being a once a week activity during two terms a year, to a once a week activity every term throughout the year, and then from being just once a week to every day of the week. As a way to refresh and expand the Walk or Wheel Wednesday Class Challenge in order to achieve some of these goals, the Christchurch City Council will be supporting Land Transport’s Feet First Every Week programme in 2009 in association with the Feet First Walk to School Week.

