



# Creating Safe Routes for Active School Transportation

This document describes the important role that School Crossing Guards have in supporting Active School Transportation (AST) and summarizes the key programs and initiatives being implemented in school communities across Ontario to promote AST.

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[www.otc.org](http://www.otc.org)

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## Active School Transportation

Active School Transportation (AST)—walking, cycling or scootering for the school journey—is an important source of daily physical activity for children and is associated with better physical and mental health, greater academic achievement and less stress.

When more children and families use AST rather than drive to school, it reduces traffic congestion and air pollution on local roads and helps create neighbourhoods that are safer and more enjoyable for children, and people of all ages, to walk and cycle (e.g., seniors).

### How do School Crossing Guards support Active School Transportation?

The role of the School Crossing Guard (SCG) is to direct and supervise the movement of people across a public road by creating necessary gaps in vehicular traffic to provide safe passage at a designated school crossing location. A municipality determines whether or not an SCG should be provided at a specific location, by utilizing the warrant methodologies defined in the Ontario Traffic Council's [School Crossing Guard Guide](#). The Guide recommends a thorough site inspection of the local context and the application of the appropriate warrant process in order to evaluate the need for an SCG.

Several studies have confirmed that SCG programs can increase the number of children using AST:

- The presence of an SCG was related to 14% more walking to school.<sup>1</sup>
- Children were more than two times more likely to engage in active transportation when SCGs are employed.<sup>2</sup>

### Why is this?

The impact of an SCG on walking rates goes beyond enabling children to get across a road that they might otherwise struggle to navigate. One of the reasons that children don't walk to school is their parents' concerns about traffic safety.<sup>3</sup> The presence of an SCG helps address those concerns and give parents the confidence to let their child walk to and from school.

Section 176 of the Highway Traffic Act (HTA) sets out the rules for the operation of school crossings, including penalty fines of up to \$500 for drivers who fail to stop for a crossing guard (current as of January 2017—refer to the original statutes for updates): *".....the driver of any vehicle or street car approaching the school crossing guard shall stop before reaching the crossing and shall remain stopped until all persons, including the school crossing guard, have cleared the roadway and it is safe to proceed."*

By providing highly visible supervision at crossing locations, an SCG also helps to raise general awareness of the presence of school children and school zones. The neighbourhood feels more appealing for walking by enhancing the overall traffic safety within a school zone.

Research has shown that poor driving behaviours are observed less at schools with SCGs.<sup>4</sup> Evidence from regional and municipal transportation departments in Ontario also indicates good safety performance of SCG-controlled pedestrian crossings in terms of low numbers of pedestrian-vehicle collisions.

SCGs can also support social cohesion in neighbourhoods and help to build a sense of community due to the daily presence of a familiar friendly face and the reassurance of there being a person who is there to help students and their families each school day.



*A School Crossing Guard at work in the Region of Peel*

School Crossing Guards have an important role to play in the programs and initiatives being implemented in school communities across Ontario to promote Active School Travel, including:

### **Active and Safe Routes to School Program**

The Active and Safe Routes to School (ASRTS) program has existed in Canada since 1996. ASRTS initiatives promote the use of active transportation for the school journey, through educating school communities about the benefits, and encouraging walking and cycling through special events and activities.

### **School Travel Planning**

School Travel Planning (STP) is a process that applies the principles of transportation demand management to the school journey. It brings together local stakeholders to identify barriers to active travel in a school community and develop and implement an action plan to address those barriers using education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement and evaluation

measures. An STP committee is established early in the process, involving municipal and school board staff among others, to assess conditions at the school and this should include consultation with any existing SCGs. The STP committee then works to identify opportunities to improve accessibility and traffic safety, for example by adding an SCG.

### **School Travel Trends**

The proportion of children who regularly walk to school has been in steady decline over the past three decades in Canada. The 2016 ParticipACTION Report Card<sup>5</sup> gave a Grade D for Active Transportation for the ninth successive year, with only 25% of 5 to 17 year-olds reporting using active modes of travel for the school journey. One of the key recommendations to improve Active Transportation from ParticipACTION is to **employ more crossing guards**. Many school communities are working to reverse this trend of declining active transportation and rising use of motor vehicles for the school journey.

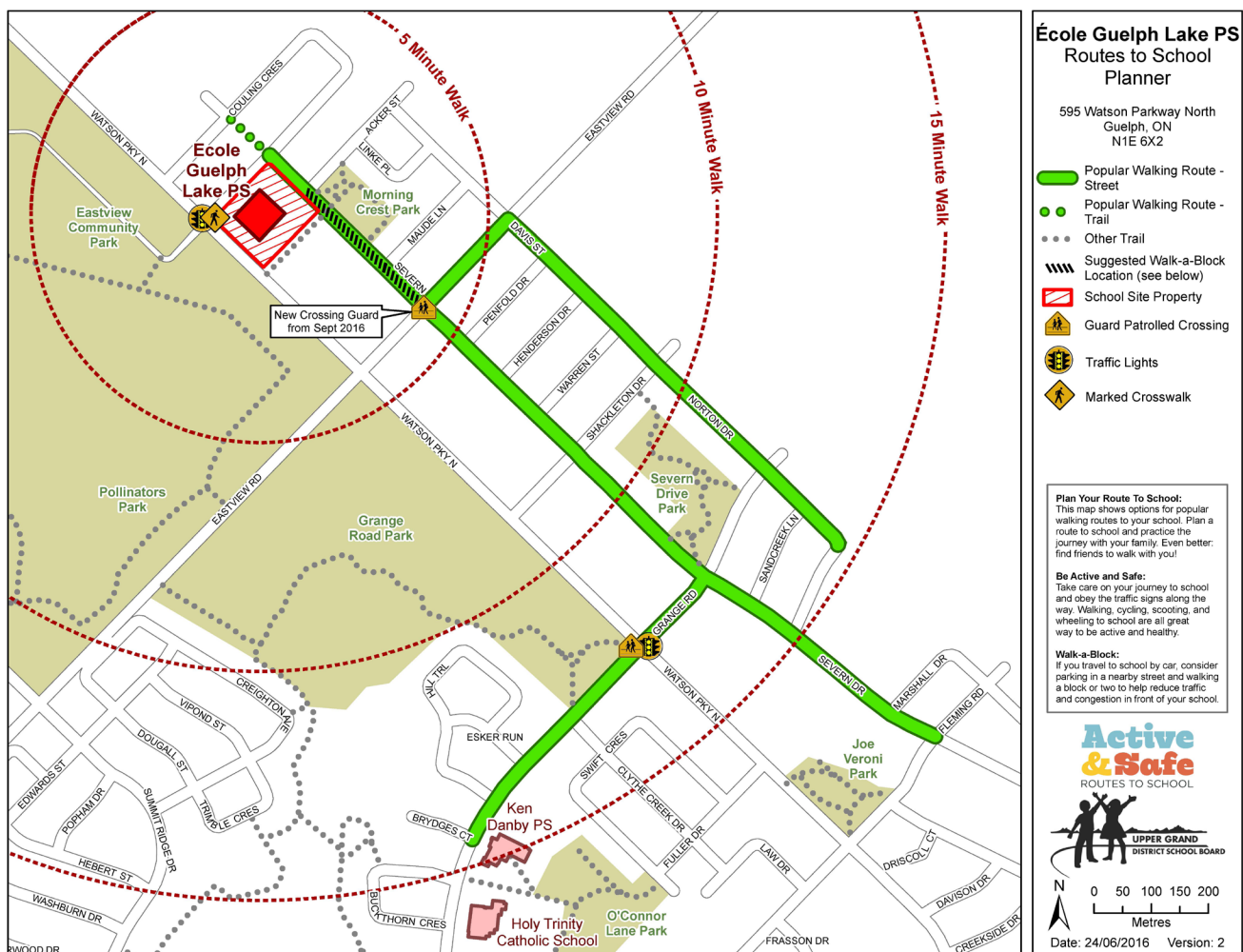
## Routes to School Mapping

The creation of a 'Routes to School' map is an effective tool to help families plan their active journey to/from school. The map should identify popular walking routes and highlight key features in the neighbourhood that support active travel modes, such as the locations of SCGs. Providing this information on a map can help direct more people to locations where SCGs exist, helping to maximize utilization of an SCG position.

A map can also help introduce some walking activity to families that drive to school, by identifying suitable locations for student drop-off away from the school which promote walking a 'block-or-two', and make use of SCGs.

The example below of a 'Routes to School' map was created by the Upper Grand District School Board for École Guelph Lake Public School, with input from the City of Guelph's Adult School Crossing Guard Program Coordinator.

The map was produced prior to the opening of the new school, in order to promote walking and cycling from the outset and encourage students and parents/guardians to use a new school crossing guard being provided by the City of Guelph.





## The Walking School Bus

A Walking School Bus (WSB) is simply a group of children walking together under the supervision of one or more leaders or “drivers” following a prescribed route and schedule. It offers a safe, dependable, healthy and green way for children to get to school instead of being driven in a car.

First introduced in Australia in the early 1990s, a WSB can be a very effective element of any ASRTS or STP program because it addresses barriers to active school travel, including:

- Parental attitudes—child is too young to walk alone, concerns about bullying or stranger danger, lack of time to walk with their child;
- Built environment—lack of, or gaps in, sidewalk/pathway networks, uncontrolled intersections;
- Traffic volume and/or speed—walking in groups makes children more visible to drivers, helps calm traffic in school zones.

### How does it relate to an SCG program?

A WSB reinforces the safety objective of an SCG program and extends its scope by ensuring adult supervision for child pedestrians along the entire route to school versus a specific intersection. By reducing the number of children being driven to school in private vehicles, it can also help lower traffic volume at crossings where SCGs have been assigned.

### Levels of Service

WSB service levels vary according to the specific needs and capacity of local schools and communities. It can:

- operate in the morning only (to school), afternoon only (from school) or both;
- serve a single stop (i.e., pick up children from one meeting point), multiple stops (i.e., pick up children at various locations along the route) or go door-to-door;
- be offered on a daily or weekly basis and seasonally or year round.

## WSB Models

### *Informal/Parent-Supported*

Traditionally many WSBs have been organized and led by parents or other volunteers. While this informal model offers some advantages, it comes with significant limitations. They include:

- Lack of sustainability—inconsistent or short-lived service due to volunteer turnover and retention problems.
- Preaching to the converted—primarily attracts children who already walk to school instead of supporting a mode shift from driving.
- Lack of coordination & support—schools struggle to manage a WSB due to time and resource constraints.
- Risk management—principals may be hesitant to promote a WSB due to liability concerns and lack of direction from school boards.

### *Formal/Community-Supported*

In recent years more formal, community-supported WSB programs have emerged to address these barriers. In this model a municipality, school board, school transportation authority and/or other stakeholder partner with schools to launch and support the WSB. This can include: promotion and marketing; route and schedule planning; recruiting, training and managing WSB leaders; insurance coverage; and evaluation (e.g., parent satisfaction, mode shifts).

## WSB Case Study: North Bay & Wellesley, ON

**Model type:** Formal/Community-Supported

**Number of routes:** 3 (Fall 2016)

**Lead:** [Canadian Cancer Society \(CCS\)](#)

**Partners:** North Bay & Parry Sound District Health Unit, Near North District School Board, Region of Waterloo Public Health, Waterloo Region District School Board

**Funding:** Public Health Agency of Canada

Launched in Quebec in 2010, the CCS “Trottibus” Walking School Bus expanded into Ontario in October 2016. WSBs have been introduced at two schools in North Bay and one in Wellesley on a pilot basis with plans to launch a full program in the near future. CCS provides support including school-level needs assessment and committee training; a toolkit including promotional materials, registration forms, route planning guidance and volunteer recruitment information; and training for WSB leaders. The WSBs are volunteer-led and operate in the morning only.



A 'Trottibus' WSB pilot in Wellesley (Source: Canadian Cancer Society)



## WSB Case Study: Ottawa

**Model type:** Formal/Community-Supported

**Number of routes:** 13 routes (Fall 2016)

**Lead:** [Ottawa Student Transportation Authority](#)

**Partners:** Ottawa Safety Council, Green Communities Canada, Ottawa Public Health

**Funding:** Ottawa Student Transportation Authority

Begun as a pilot project in 2014, the Ottawa Walking School Bus Program is the first in Canada to use paid leaders similar to SCGs. It is funded by the Ottawa Student Transportation Authority (OSTA) which also determines which schools can participate, establishes routes and schedules, and maintains an on-line registration system. The leaders are recruited, trained and managed by the Ottawa Safety Council which also delivers a large SCG program on behalf of the City of Ottawa. Green Communities Canada and Ottawa Public Health promote the program and identify candidate schools. The WSBs operate every school day in the morning. Approximately 50% of the students registered were previously driven to school.



*The Ottawa WSB program in action (Source: OSTA)*



### WSB Checklist

The following are some key steps to consider when establishing a formal WSB in your community:

1. Identify schools with a demonstrated interest in promoting active transportation, such as involvement in a local ASRTS or STP initiative.
2. Identify potential program partners such as municipal transportation planning and/or transportation demand management (TDM); public health unit; school boards; school transportation consortium; local non-governmental organizations that support SCG or active transportation initiatives.
3. Determine the level of service.
4. Assign roles and responsibilities for:
  - Funding
  - Planning and coordination
  - School liaison and support
  - Route identification
  - Promotion and marketing
  - Student recruitment and registration
  - Leader recruitment, training and management
  - Evaluation and monitoring
  - Risk management/insurance

## References

- 1 [Rothman L, To T, Builing R, Macarthur C, Howard A. Influence of social and built environment features on children's walking to school: an observational study. Prev. Med., 2014;60:10-15.](#)
- 2 [Larouche et al. A cross-sectional examination of socio-demographic and school-level correlates of children's school travel mode in Ottawa, Canada. BMC Public Health 2014, 14:497.](#)
- 3 [Metrolinx Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area School Travel Household Attitudinal Study Report 2011.](#)
- 4 [Rothman L, Howard A, Buliung R, Macarthur C, Macpherson A. Dangerous car drop-off behaviours and child pedestrian-motor vehicle collisions: an observational study. Traffic. Inj. Prev., 2016, DOI: 10.1080/15389588.2015.1116041.](#)
- 5 [2016 The ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth.](#)

**For examples, resources and further information please visit:** <http://saferoutestoschool.ca>