



Active School Travel
Transport scolaire actif
CANADA

14 April 2021

Andy Fillmore, M.P.
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities
Via email: Andy.Fillmore@parl.gc.ca

RE: National Active Transportation Strategy & Fund

Dear Mr. Fillmore,

Active School Travel Canada commends you and Minister McKenna for your recent announcement of a National Active Transportation Strategy as well as a dedicated Active Transportation Infrastructure Fund. As representatives of active school travel professionals across the country, we appreciate having the opportunity to share our insights and recommendations on how these important initiatives can further the cause of children's mobility, safety, health, and active school transportation in Canada.

Who we are

Active School Travel Canada (AST Canada) is an all-volunteer working group of over 60 professionals from across Canada who work in the realm of Active and Safe Routes to School, [School Travel Planning](#), Transportation and Community Planning, and School Transportation. Our members are drawn from the non-profit, public, and private sectors. Our purpose is to build the capacity, expertise, and knowledge of group members, and advance active school travel (AST) initiatives across Canada by fostering networking, information sharing, and collaboration.

Active School Travel in Canada: overview

a. The issue

- Over the last few decades, the percentage of Canadian children regularly walking or cycling to and from school has fallen from an average of 75% in the 1980s to just 25% today. The bulk of this decline has been the result of a shift towards children being driven to school by parents and caregivers. This has produced school zones that are increasingly congested, polluted, and dangerous for all road users.
- In most urban centres, this “school run” is a significant contributor to rush hour traffic volumes (most studies show 20-30% of morning peak period traffic are parents and caregivers driving children to school), increases in fine particulate matter emissions, as well as GHG emissions.
- While AST rates have remained higher among many BIPOC communities, these children and families must often contend with routes to school that are much more hostile for those on foot or bicycle thanks to generations of car centric street design.

b. The response

- Canada's first Active & Safe Routes to School (ASRTS) pilot project was launched in Toronto in 1995. Over the next decade limited ASRTS initiatives spread to some other communities in ON, NS, QC, MB, and BC. These programs largely focused on **Education & Encouragement initiatives**.

- In 2007-09 the new [Canadian School Travel Planning \(STP\) model](#) was piloted at 12 schools in 4 provinces. School Travel Planning involves a more comprehensive approach using five E's: **Education, Encouragement, Engineering, Enforcement, and Evaluation.**
- In 2010-12 the STP model was further refined during a national pilot project funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada. STP projects were implemented in at least one community in every province and territory across the country.

c. Present situation

- Active School Travel and School Travel Planning programming in Canada is a limited patchwork that reaches a tiny fraction of the country's +15,000 elementary and secondary school communities. Currently there is no programming occurring at all in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and all three territories.
- Funding for both infrastructure and programming is extremely limited, short-term, and unstable.
- There is no national coordination, funding, or data collection at present.

Active School Travel: international comparison

United States

- Since 2005 the federal government has provided more than \$1.5 billion in support of state and local level "Safe Routes to School" infrastructure and programming.
- Investment priorities have included improving infrastructure, developing and implementing School Travel Plans, as well as improving accessibility and inclusion.
- The national [Safe Routes Partnership](#) provides a variety of resources, research, and other supports to state and local SRTS programs and practitioners.

United Kingdom

- In early 2000's the Departments of Transport and Education collaborated to develop and launch the School Travel Planning model and a related active school travel infrastructure fund.
- The Modeshift STARS program in England has been very successful, with 19,000 schools participating in the program since inception, and 2,500 schools moving through the full certification process. There are 140 different types of initiatives that can be implemented through this program, and post intervention data collection has shown a 9% reduction in car use, and an increase in walking of about 2.4%.
- 96% of schools in England have completed School Travel Plans, and national level AST data is collected on an annual basis.

Our Recommendations:

- **Ensure an equal voice for child and youth mobility:** Currently the needs and perspectives of children and youth are mostly shut out of discussions and decisions regarding transportation planning and design, active transportation policy, and infrastructure investments. Youth engagement should be included as part of the National Strategy as well as projects funded through the National AT fund. Children are important road users, and should be included in all discussions that will impact their ability to move about their communities.
- **Strengthen national coordination:** As an all-volunteer working group, AST Canada lacks the capacity to properly engage and convene AST stakeholders across the country, share information and resources from the various programs operating in different communities, or to undertake and

disseminate research. Establishing a small, professional coordinating body would be an important step towards improving the current patchwork approach of programs and initiatives. This could be funded on a cost-sharing basis with provincial or municipal governments, as well as other health promotion and road safety partners. A potential model is the [U.S. Safe Routes Partnership](#) and an innovative STP certification program and database tool exists in the Waterloo region of Ontario that could be adapted for national use with some funding.

- **Infrastructure that supports Active School Travel:** Targeted investments that prioritize making routes to school and school zones safer and more convenient for children who walk and wheel are urgently needed. This means the construction of connected networks of sidewalks, pathways and cycling lanes serving schools, safety improvements to existing facilities, and community wayfinding. [School Streets](#) and other youth-friendly street design projects are currently being piloted in several Ontario municipalities as well Victoria, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, and they have so far proven very successful. At a minimum, evaluation criteria for the Active Transportation Fund should give priority to Active School Travel supportive projects, or optimally a specific percentage of the AT Fund should be designated for infrastructure and programming that directly supports active journeys to school. This fund would be a national needs based infrastructure grants program for all schools within the Fund, and would support schools, their relevant local governments and local communities to collaborate in the development of active environments adjacent to all schools that prioritise pedestrians and cyclists.
- **Programming that supports Active School Travel:** While [AST research](#) has shown that engineering improvements (such as improving intersections and adding sidewalks) are associated with walking or biking rates going up by *3.3 percent per year*, and that education and encouragement programs were also associated with walking and biking going up by *1 percent per year*, schools that **combined engineering improvements with education and encouragement** could potentially see increases in walking or biking of up *to 43 percent over 5 years*. For maximum impact, it is critical that infrastructure changes are accompanied by programming that encourages and educates utilization. Rebuilding a culture of walking and wheeling to school can not be achieved through infrastructure alone, and it is critical that we help shift attitudes and behaviours, as well as equip children, youth and parents with the knowledge, skills and confidence that they need to walk and wheel to school.
- **Traffic calming in and around school zones:** Traffic volumes as well as increases in vehicle sizes and speeds pose a serious safety hazard to all vulnerable road users, and children in particular. This needs to be addressed with investments that focus on improving the safety of school zones, major routes to school, and the surrounding residential areas where children and families are likely to be present. These targeted investments could include traffic calming infrastructure, the design and construction of complete streets, the creation of pedestrianized and traffic-free areas, and the reallocation of existing road space.
- **Improved data collection:** Currently the federal government (Statistics Canada) only captures and reports data on active transportation as it pertains to the journey to work (commuting), and walking/cycling are counted only if they represent the longest portion of that journey. Collection and reporting must be broadened to capture journeys to and from school (including multi-modal trips), seasonal variations in AST rates, transportation mode data in smaller geographic areas (including rural communities and reserves), and more diverse data characteristics including gender, age, immigrant status, and visible minorities.

- **Vehicle design:** SUVs and light trucks are a rapidly growing percentage of all vehicles on Canada's roads, and most are becoming larger and more dangerous. Children and youth are especially vulnerable due to their shorter stature, and the strategy should identify the need for Transport Canada to develop policies and strategies that address this worrisome trend.
- **Commit to dialogue with provinces & municipalities:** Increasing rates of active school travel will also require more supportive land use and transportation planning policies that prioritize walking/cycling connectivity, as well as supportive facilities in existing and planned communities. While provinces and municipalities have key responsibilities in this area, the strategy should include a clear commitment to begin a dialogue with these other levels of government in order to build collaboration and further support for active school travel (as well as walking and cycling more generally.) A starting point for this conversation could be the [2018 report on active transportation](#) authored by the Council of Ministers Responsible for Transportation and Highway Safety ([COMT](#)). In its role as co-chair of the Council, the federal government should re-examine these recommendations, and work to develop policy guidelines that effectively integrate active transportation into the national and provincial/territorial transportations systems.
- **Equity & Diversity:** There is growing recognition that not all communities have benefitted equally from past AST and STP initiatives. It is important that we not only focus on mode share, but also on road safety as there are many schools (particularly in urban areas) that may have high walk/bike to school mode share due to low rates of vehicle ownership, but these residents may still face hostile and dangerous streets on the school journey. Equity efforts in the realm of AST should include engaging meaningfully with communities of colour through partnerships with trusted community leaders, celebrating diversity in the community, developing program elements that include children living with disabilities, and addressing concerns around personal safety, housing affordability, homelessness, and immigration.

We are looking forward to working with you and your team to ensure that Canada joins the ranks of other developed nations including the United States, Finland, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand in creating and operating a nationally funded Active School Travel program. We are excited to see these efforts increase the numbers of children and families able to engage in healthy and sustainable school travel, and ultimately improve the health, well-being, and safety of Canadians across the country in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

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