



The Walking School Bus Program Model 2020-2021

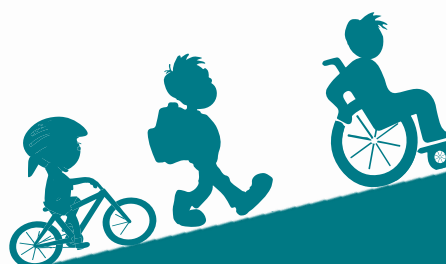




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Background

The Walking School Bus (WSB) is an impactful program within Commute Options to encourage active transportation and engage with the community. This program provides safe and reliable walking and rolling transportation to and from school along designated routes with a trained adult Leader. From 2018–2020, the WSB program was facilitated by a Walking School Bus Coordinator (WSB Coordinator) employed by Commute Options who hired and trained Walking School Bus Leaders to lead routes at twelve schools within Central Oregon school districts. Routes were established to each school in which students met at a designated location throughout the school year. Communication with families and schools was coordinated by the Walking School Bus Leaders. With this model, Leaders reached out to students via fliers, networking, communication with schools, and even skits at assemblies.

We are in a history-making moment where a global pandemic is greatly impacting our ability to engage in traditional ways. Schools have been closed since March 2020 with education opportunities available primarily through online education. Other than very limited in-person learning for special circumstances, schools are currently open in the capacity to provide meals to students through grab n' go lunch Monday through Friday, with additional meals distributed prior to weekends and breaks. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) released guidelines directing each school district to create blueprints on how to safely reopen schools in their area based on current virus levels and risk of community spread. Schools will also be required to implement a nutrition plan that includes meal pick-up for all children whether they are attending school or not. Schools are operating to meet the most basic needs of safety, nutrition, and education.

In order to offer programs to students within a school setting, extreme diligence to new public health measures is required. This report will outline goals for the WSB program, recommendations from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and ODE for schools pertaining to the WSB, best practices for Leaders to re-establish a WSB, funding opportunities, and considerations for other ways to provide safe ways for students to walk and roll during the Covid-19 pandemic (pandemic).



Benefits & Goals of the Walking School Bus Program

The WSB provides a simple yet deeply meaningful service that connects students with trained adult Leaders in order to walk and roll to and from school together. The benefits of walking to and from school are clear under normal circumstances. Moreover, in this time of global pandemic, the physical, emotional, and social benefits of a community-led, Commute Options-facilitated, WSB routes are even more crucial to the wellness of our young students. The goals of the WSB Program can be broadly categorized into three sections that correspond with its benefits for participants, both students and adults:

Physical

Benefit: The WSB is a structured physical activity that contributes to lifelong active transportation habits. It also provides an active outlet for students and caretakers who are spending more time indoors or in cars due to current safety guidelines.

Goal: Maximize the number of students walking and rolling to and from school. WSB routes will use existing Commute Options walking maps as a starting point. Community WSB routes will prioritize low-income neighborhoods at Title I schools, as well as neighborhoods lacking sidewalks or near busy roads.

Emotional

Benefit: The ongoing pandemic is a [source of collective trauma](#) for everyone alive today. Further, it is likely that for many students, attending a radically different school environment during the 2020-21 school year will be an added stressor. Walking is a form of alternating, bilateral stimulation that helps the human body to reprocess and [heal from trauma](#). The WSB creates structured, consistent opportunities to engage in alternating bilateral stimulation each day.

Goal: WSB Coordinator will provide ongoing consultation and support to participating Community Routes. WSB Coordinator will promote and facilitate a monthly drop-in roundtable discussion via Zoom and will schedule consultations with individual Community Routes as needed.



Social

Benefit: The 2020–21 school year will likely be marked by periodic tightening and loosening of physical distancing guidelines. We may see more pandemic related restrictions. Students and families can expect their social circles to be significantly smaller. With so much uncertainty, the need for robust community co-support is high. A community-led WSB can fill social needs for student participants, as well as create an atmosphere of cooperation and interdependence among families that will support further cooperation external to the program.

Goal: Create new or bolster existing community structures to encourage mutual aid during the pandemic.

Further Benefits

- Disease is [not transmitted as easily outdoors](#).
- Establish trust with caretakers and families, as well as with schools, that walking and rolling as a group can be done safely and hygienically. Be a role model for engaging with students in a positive, safe way during a pandemic.
- Decrease reliance on vehicles. Give students the opportunity to engage in active transportation.
- Provide an environment for students to build confidence and community during a very challenging and isolating time.



CDC Guidelines updated October 29, 2020

While the benefits to the WSB program promote the health and safety of communities through walking to and from school, the spread of Covid-19 has drastically changed the way schools operate. On May 19, 2020 (updated on October 29, 2020) the [Center for Disease Control](#) released guidelines for the best ways to minimize risk of virus spread and outlined three scenarios for schools to consider. The three scenarios range from virtual learning, which offers the least risk, to variations of a hybrid model (virtual and on-site learning), to the maximum risk scenario of all on-site learning as we have known it in the past. The ODE used the CDC guidelines to create their requirements for how schools will operate in the 2020-21 school year.

State Guidance for the 2020-21 School Year

Individual school districts throughout the state will be using the ODE guidance to create operating plans for area schools based on the prevalence of the virus in the community. All WSB planning will follow [Ready Schools Safe Learners 2020-21 Guidance](#), as well as conversations with school, community, and student stakeholders. The excerpts from the ODE guidance pertain to WSB activities. They are not our model per se, but will inform our model.

Effective January 1, 2021, [Governor Kate Brown announced](#) Oregon's COVID-19 Health Metrics for Returning to In-Person Instruction to be advisory rather than mandatory, allowing the decision to resume in-person instruction to be made locally, district by district, school by school. Each school in all districts is required to submit a blueprint operations plan to ODE for approval prior to reentry. Based on the decisions made at the district level, schools may begin operating in a hybrid education model. Within the hybrid education model these are some changes that schools will incorporate into their operating plans:

KEY PRINCIPLES for Reducing Potential Exposures

Quoted from ODE "Ready Schools, Safe Learners"

The mainstays of reducing exposure to the coronavirus and other respiratory pathogens are:

1. **Physical distancing** — at least six feet with other people.
2. **Hand hygiene** — frequent washing with soap and water or using hand sanitizer.
3. **Cohorts** — conducting all activities in small groups that remain together over time with minimal mixing of groups.
4. **Protective equipment** — use of face shields, face coverings, and barriers.
5. **Isolation & Quarantine** — Isolation separates sick people from people who are not sick. Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.
6. **Environmental cleaning and disinfection** — especially of high-touch surfaces.
7. **Airflow & Ventilation** — Outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities; maximize airflow in closed spaces.

Current Context of the Walking School Bus Program

We have recommendations based on the factors noted in the prior sections, as well as from our findings during the late spring and early summer. We recommend the WSB Program take the following actions to prepare for the return once the school districts determine reopening:

1. Determine focus schools based on need.
2. Establish presence in neighborhoods around target schools, during the summer.
3. Adapt WSB Model to fit each neighborhood – community model by prioritizing specific needs.
4. Develop a new model for some routes (based on funding and flexibility constraints), as presented below.

A New, Community-Led Model

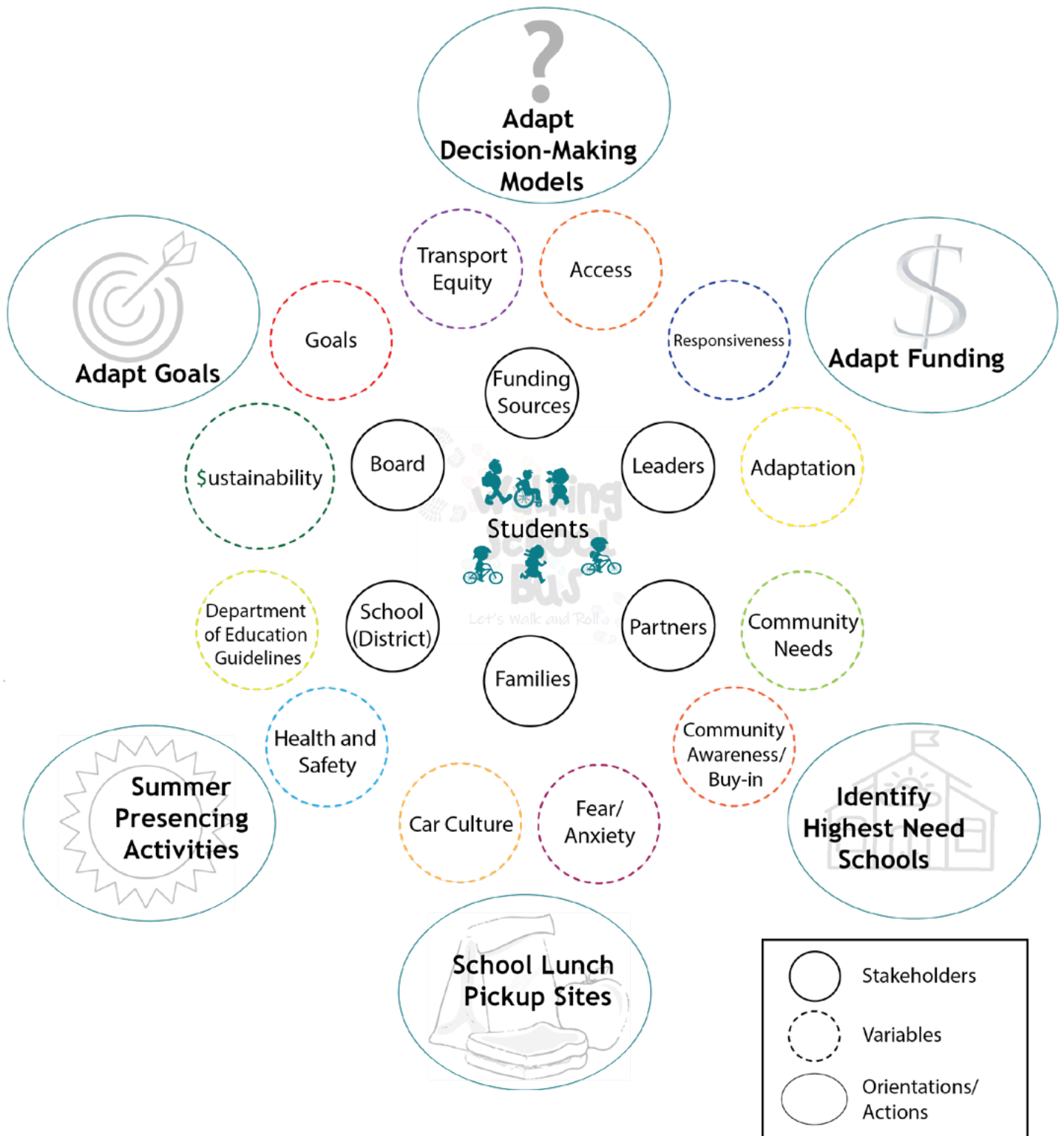
This model can be used concurrently with the regular employee-led WSB model. Our first choice is always to employ and train leaders, but this provides an additional, lower-cost alternative that can be implemented more widely.

Previously, the WSB Program has hired and trained Leaders as part-time employees. Due to funding constraints as well as the instability of the pandemic, we have determined that the current model is not feasible. While investing agency resources in employing and training Leaders has resulted in a tight community of empowered and critically aware service providers, this model is best used with a regular, fixed schedule. Given the on-going changes, it is challenging to predict the timeline for employed Leaders.

For the 2020–21 school year, the WSB Program will shift to a partial community-led model where the WSB Coordinator works directly with communities in a consulting and facilitation capacity. This will include conducting outreach and assessing interest in a potential route, providing training to community volunteers, and organizing monthly virtual meet-up events. Community WSB volunteers will be responsible for the ground-level organizing and implementation of the route (determining regular or special event walking and rolling days, scheduling Leaders to guide students, maintaining appropriate health and safety standards). Community WSB volunteers will still be required to undergo background checks and will engage in an on-boarding process with the Commute Options WSB Coordinator. For more detailed information on implementation, see the Implementation section (page 8).



Current Context of the Walking School Bus Program



A New, Community-Led Model *(continued)*

It is our opinion that a WSB Program can continue to benefit our communities, especially those with a high number of working parents/guardians and those located in neighborhoods without access to robust walking and rolling infrastructure. A WSB is a transportation equity initiative. We will strive to reach communities in Bend with the highest levels of impact from the pandemic. We will work with schools to identify which neighborhoods need additional support. Our assessment includes, but is not limited to:

- Number of working adults in the household;
- Transportation needs;
- Distance to school;
- Infrastructure to walk or roll to schools; and
- School staff's input based on prior knowledge and experiences.



Implementation

Changes to route implementation are covered in this section. Note that with a route organized and led by community volunteers, it is more challenging to ensure that these best practices are followed exactly, but this section will inform both paid and volunteer Leader training. WSB implementation involves:

- *Registration*
- *Route Schedule*
- *Health and Safety*
- *School Communication*

Registration

All participants must complete registration before joining the WSB. As part of registration clear guidelines must be signed by guardians/parents and returned to the WSB Coordinator. Guidelines must cover social distancing, procedures for the WSB, staying home when sick, and when to return after being ill. Leaders will have a brief conversation (by phone, email or in-person physically distant) with guardians/parents to make sure they understand these expectations.

Registration periods will open and close each month in an attempt to control exposure. Once schools are reopened and the WSB is offered to lead students to and from school (not a lunch program), the following will be implemented:

Cohorts

In an effort to not mix school cohorts, Leaders will work with schools to offer WSBs to certain cohorts. Specific plans on how to best offer this will be individualized to each school. This can be made possible by identifying which neighborhoods majority of the students live in and promoting a Park and Walk option.

Number of Students

Limiting the number of students participating in each WSB and avoiding new cohorts will help to avoid additional exposure risks.



Route Schedule

Student pick up and drop off schedules may be altered due staggered start times, shortened school days, and other measures to allow for smaller group size in schools.

AM Pickup

Registered participants meet at a designated meeting site. Students will be instructed on how to maintain six feet physical distancing. Leaders (employed or volunteers) engage in a morning check in with the WSB Coordinator to note arrival at the Pickup site, record number of students, and address any concerns.

AM En Route

Walking while maintaining physical distancing. Possible use of a rope, pool noodles, staggered walking buddies.

AM Drop Off

Participants will be dropped off where their cohort is designated to be dropped off.

PM Pickup

Leaders will meet their group at their cohort's designated pickup location with marked spacing.

PM En Route

Leaders will demonstrate and instruct on etiquette when passing or allowing other groups to pass.

PM Drop Off

Students can either walk/roll home directly from Drop Off location or families will be asked to pick up their student(s) at a designated time to avoid further interactions.



Health and Safety

ALL WSB ROUTES MUST BE ABLE TO SUPPORT PHYSICAL DISTANCING REQUIREMENTS. Sections of routes with narrow sidewalks, passages, and crossings must be reviewed, and routes should be adjusted accordingly.

Recommended Hygiene Measures

- Leaders wear CDC approved masks
- Hand sanitizer – pump action with shoulder holster
- Six feet social distancing at all times
- Small group size – max 5 students per adult
- Students must stay home when sick. May return to WSB after 72 hours with no symptoms
- No sharing of materials between students
- Leaders supervise play to maintain distancing
- Leaders track cohorts of students and communicate with guardians/parents in case of virus exposure

School Communication

- The WSB Coordinator will work with schools to identify routes and cohorts and determine a communication plan to the identified cohort(s).
- Schools are creating an individual blueprint for COVID-19 protocols. Commute Options will personalize the logistics for each school according to their blueprint.
- Protocol for when someone becomes ill that is involved with the WSB follows the same guidelines as schools. The families of students participating at the same time as the person who became ill will be notified.



Walk to Lunch Activities

The more Commute Options shows a presence in the community, the more ready we can be to work with the public when the time comes to start a program. With proper safety precautions, the WSB method can be applied to current structures, such as a Walk to Lunch program. Free Grab n' Go Lunch is available for pick up at most Central Oregon schools for the 2020-21 school year. Adding a Walk to Lunch program is an opportunity to encourage students and families to walk or roll to their school.

During the pandemic there has been an emphasis for safety within a vehicle. Pickup for school learning materials has followed a procedure that requires families to drive to school within a given time frame and remain in their car. Once families are in a designated pull up space, a staff member places learning packets on the hood of the vehicle for a family member to collect upon the departure of the staff member. Similarly, a reliance of safety within a vehicle has been used to celebrate children's birthdays and graduations with drive by parades and graduation ceremonies. The vehicle has turned into an isolation bubble for many during the pandemic.

Some additional ways that Commute Options could encourage students and families to use active transportation include, offering a series of Bike Fix clinics for students during the summer. Commute Options could partner with a local bike shop to allow walk-up service at school lunch sites or nearby parks. Students could ride their bikes and scooters over to the tune-up station and during the tune-up, Commute Options could distribute properly fitted bike helmets and share information about Commute Options education programs. In order to protect staff, volunteers, and participants, all event set up and operations would include proper Covid-19 safety protocols (including taped lines for physical distancing, masks, and clearly posted rules). Branded masks could be distributed to participants and staff would retain the right to deny service to anyone who fails to comply with safety requirements.

Another basic consideration for getting people out of their vehicles is opening additional routes to allow for walking and rolling to schools safer. As an example, Elk Meadow Elementary had locked gates in the schoolyard preventing safe access to the school lunch site. Students biking or walking to school lunch had to cross Brookwood Boulevard, where high speed traffic made for a dangerous crossing. From the crossing point, students used the bus lane with no sidewalk or bike lanes. Over several weeks Commute Options worked with administrators and staff. The school agreed to open the gates to allow students safer routes to lunch. With the gates open the students can now cross at the crosswalk on Brookwood Boulevard to the front of school and enter gates through school grounds to access the lunch pick up area. This success was celebrated with many air high fives from all around the neighborhood, plus a much safer summer for hundreds of students accessing school lunch.

Jewell Elementary is another school lunch site that could benefit specifically from opening their gates to allow safer walking and biking access to the lunch pick up area. There are likely many other schools worth investigating to improve walking and biking access to lunch sites. Schools will continue to provide nutrition to students whether school is in session or not, driving the demand for "Safe Routes to Lunch" as a valuable focus of the program.

Conclusion

Students need opportunities for active transportation and engagement. The WSB is an excellent way to meet those needs. The health constraints and responsibilities to ensure safety must be met with extreme diligence. In addition, the socio-emotional wellness of students and families must be supported through thoughtful planning. The responsibility of schools to provide safety is essential and relies on individuals doing their part to uphold public health. The WSB could be an example for how to provide much needed support while still meeting state and local Covid-19 safety protocols.

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