GREEN ACTION CENTRE - ACTIVE AND SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Active and Safe Routes to School encourages active modes of transportation, such as walking and cycling, to school and throughout the community spaces that children go. A program of the Green Action Centre, it has been working with school communities around Manitoba since 2002.

Active and Safe Routes to School Program is flexible and can be tailored to meet the specific needs of any school and community. Program components include neighbourhood walkabouts, transportation surveys, walking clubs, walking/cycling school buses for children with adult supervision, the creation of anti-idling zones, as well as active transportation events including Clean Air Day (June), and International Walk to School Month (October).

In addition, program staff work with school communities and municipalities to train facilitators in the development of comprehensive School Travel Plans. School Travel Planning is an international best practice that brings together multiple community stakeholders to identify and resolve barriers to walking and biking to school.

Benefits achieved through Active and Safe Routes to School include:

- Ensuring regular physical activity for children and parents
- Safer, calmer streets around schools and neighbourhoods
- Cleaner air and a cleaner environment
- Education for sustainable development and environmental awareness

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Work hard but don't take things too seriously!
- Invest your time and efforts maintaining relationships with other groups that support your work.
- Recognize that you do not have to, and likely cannot, do it all - build connections and accept help!
- Be clear about your expectations of partners and volunteers.

SOME CHALLENGES

While the program concepts are typically an "easy sell", this does not guarantee action. Although schools may experience transportation challenges and agree that children need to be outside and active, they may not be in a position to invest in the program at that point in time.

The recruitment of School Travel Planning Facilitators can be challenging in communities without buy-in from the municipality, health authority or school administration. They may not give a person time during work hours to participate in the training or take on the role of School Travel Planning Facilitator.

Thank you to Jackie Avent, Coordinator of Active and Safe Routes to School for sharing her experiences and lessons learned. For more information about Green Action Centre and this initiative, please visit: http://www.greenactioncentre.ca/

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A challenge being considered by program staff is how to make active transportation to school the social norm again. This can be a difficult topic to address as many parents think driving their children to and from school is the safest option.

There is also the challenge of trying to allocate funding for land use and transportation planning directed toward priorities for children and youth. Until transportation issues for children and youth are given the same weight and priority as automobile infrastructure, sustainability will be an ongoing challenge. Something like a Safe Kids Infrastructure Program (SKIP Fund), which would allocate federal and municipal transportation dollars towards infrastructure improvements around schools that have School Travel Plans would be ideal.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**Hard to engage people and groups will become more invested and involved when it is the right time for them.** It is important to meet them where they are. If you learn about their perspective and what they are interested in, there is often common ground for connection and collaboration. Fluidity, patience and being open to what is possible instead of forcing things in a direction they are not ready to go in is vitally important. Remember that you cannot force others to be at a certain place in their thinking and ability, but you can still provide material that is informative and useful.

**Follow through on commitments and be honest if you cannot meet certain objectives or commitments.** Everyone is busy so be clear about expectations and if deadlines are coming up, make sure volunteers and partners are reminded far enough in advance. Ask collaborators if they need help in meeting timelines and provide support.

Investing time with other group efforts ultimately comes around to support your work. One organization does not have to "do it all" and partnerships with or supported by other groups already out in the community build both capacity and momentum. Having people hear about your project from other organizations they may already support, trust and respect can bolster the position and importance of your own project in the community. Avent has found that often many seemingly different groups are actually all working toward the same goal, even if the strategies are different.

**To make the best use of your time and resources, build connections.** Avent has learned that she does not always have to be the middle person streaming information between two others. Remember - we can go further when we all work together!