

# CASE STUDY SERIES

Profiles of *Active & Safe Routes to School* initiatives in Canada involving one or more schools at the local, regional or provincial/territorial level.

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## # 1: GREENEST CITY, CITY OF TORONTO

<i># of schools</i>	<i>Setting(s)</i>	<i>City/Town OR Region</i>	<i>Province/Territory</i>
17 (expanding)	Urban	Toronto	Ontario

### KEY WORDS

**Language(s):** English

**Problems/Solutions:** air quality, traffic congestion, traffic safety, no-idling zone, health and physical inactivity, community safety, apartment-buildings

**Partners:** public health, police, federal government, corporate sponsorship, school boards, various community organizations

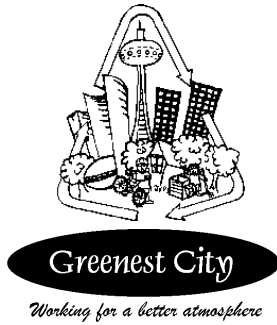
**Tools:** surveys, evaluation, Kindergarten registration for program, Greenest City Resource Manual, Greenest City A&SRTS newsletter

**Events:** No-idling Campaign, Earth Day Walking events, Walking Wednesdays, Walk a Child to School Day

**Curriculum resources:** *Blazing Trails through the Urban Jungle*

**Case study version:** September 1999

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(Greenest City's *Active and Safe Routes to School* program is currently funded by the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, the Toronto Community Foundation and the Laidlaw Foundation.)

**Partners**

Environment Canada, Action 21  
Toronto Community Foundation  
Go for Green  
The Laidlaw Foundation  
Great Lakes Health Effects Program  
Toronto Atmospheric Fund  
Toronto District School Board  
Toronto Catholic District School Board  
Toronto Public Health  
Traffic Services Division, Toronto Police  
Transportation Options  
Foodshare



**Participants**

Allenby Public School  
Annette Street Public School  
Armour Heights Public School  
Bennington Heights Public School  
Bowmore Public School  
Burrows Hall Junior Public School  
High Park Alternative School  
Howard Public School  
Humbercrest Public School  
John Wanless Public School  
Kennedy Public School  
Mary Shadd Junior Public School  
Mason Road Public School  
Maurice Cody Public School  
Rose Avenue Public School  
Three Valleys Public School  
Topcliff Public School

## Goals

- Teach children the pleasures of walking and encourage healthy, lifelong habits.
- Help children to become better acquainted with their neighbourhood.
- Increase physical activity levels of children (enhancing academic performance).
- Reduce automobile use and related traffic hazards.
- Promote safer, less-polluted communities.
- Reduce travel time for busy parents.

## Program Components (& Players)

- Walking School Bus (volunteer parents and students)
- Neighbourhood Walkabout (school administration, parents, police, school board, municipality)
- *Blazing Trails Through The Urban Jungle* (teachers through curriculum activities and students)
- No-Idling Area (school administration and the municipality)
- Walk a Child to School Day (parents, students, school staff, police, municipality, school boards)

## Background

During the spring of 1996, Greenest City—a multi-faceted project aiming to make Toronto a more livable city—negotiated with the Toronto District School Board to pilot an *Active & Safe Routes to School* (A&SRTS) program at three schools, with initial funding from the Toronto Atmospheric Fund. The Board was supportive and enthusiastic, offering assistance through their communications network, school trustees, and committees. Through these channels the first three schools joined the program.

In 1997, Greenest City started negotiations with *Go for Green*, who subsequently developed a national A&SRTS program in partnership with Greenest City and others. To develop the national Active & Safe Routes to School (A&SRTS) program and to deliver it at the local level, Go for Green works in partnership with local/regional delivery partners. Greenest City is one such partner and independently delivers its own A&SRTS program in the Greater Toronto area (and expanding), in close cooperation with the national program.

## Implementation

In the fall of 1996, Greenest City launched A&SRTS programs at Maurice Cody and John Wanless Public Schools, both in North Toronto, and at Howard Public School in West Toronto. Presentations were made at parent meetings and information displays were set up at school events where interested parents could sign up.

The first routes were established by marking the homes of interested families on a large map of the school catchment area. By November, all three schools had at least one Walking School Bus (WSB) operating and *Blazing Trails* booklets had been distributed to interested teachers. An evaluation survey was conducted in June, 1998 at Maurice Cody and John Wanless. Results

showed a slight shift in overall transportation patterns, from going by car to walking, with a 10% increase in walking to school on a regular basis.

Inspired and confident from the experience in three schools, the program has continued to expand and now includes several delivery partners. Working with public health nurses at the Scarborough office of Toronto Public Health led to a citywide partnership with Public Health (see Case Study # 6: The Scarborough Experience). A successful rural pilot at Newcastle Public School has led to a region-wide program in Durham, managed by Durham Region Health Department with partners at Durham Regional Police Service and the local school boards (see Case Study # 2: Newcastle Public School and Durham Region).



Photo 1: Balliol Street Walking School Bus, Maurice Cody School, with councilor and school trustee.

## Promotion & Communication

Networking school-to-school has been critical to success. In January 1998, Greenest City hosted a Walking School Bus focus group for representatives from all participating schools and some project partners. This productive session identified areas of common concern as well as solutions and ideas to expand and improve programs.

Greenest City also produces an A&SRTS newsletter with input from all schools and from the National program coordinated by Go for Green. The newsletter is a great way to keep everyone up-to-date and ‘connected’—strengthening their feeling of belonging to a larger, growing movement (refer to *Greenest City’s* Resource Manual for copies of A&SRTS newsletters).

A&SRTS programs in Toronto have been extensively covered in the media and interest remains high. The program has been profiled on:

- City Pulse News and Breakfast Television, City TV
- CBC Evening News (on two occasions)
- CBC Marketplace
- CBC Radio—Metro Morning
- Talk 640 radio, Energy 108, CFRB News
- CFTO News
- Vision Television—Skylight
- and in articles in *The Globe & Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *L’Express*, *Alternatives*, and many community newspapers.



## Lessons Learned

- Schools are busy places. Parents and staff don't have the time they would like to devote to the issue, so you should allow a full school year to ensure successful implementation.
- To some extent informal, unrecognized WSBs are already happening in schools, so at the start of the project it is a good idea to seek out these families. With their permission, you can create 'local heroes' and use them as role models. This is very effective in expanding the program.
- Hosting a neighbourhood walkabout at the start of the program is essential to identify safety hazards for pedestrians and to work to create solutions. Parents respond positively to this process and feel confident that safety is being addressed in an official and systematic manner.
- The program works best when it has a 'home' in the school. Often this is under a safety, traffic, or environment committee, but sometimes a special WSB committee is formed by the parent council.
- Ongoing promotion within the school is *key* to the success, especially for the WSB component. Regular 'WSB Updates' in the school newsletter sent home to parents are very helpful.
- WSB promotions at school events held throughout the year are very effective. These include kindergarten registration, curriculum nights, safety fairs, and PTA meetings.
- There is a perception among many parents/caregivers that participating in a WSB involves lots of organization and time. These individuals need to know that experienced participants find a modest investment of time at the beginning leads to an *ongoing* time savings for parents and caregivers once the program is up and running.
- Every school and community is unique. It is important to be sensitive to individual needs such as language diversity, peculiar safety issues, and socio-economic situations.

## Building on the Experience

Variety is a hallmark of the WSB program. There are WSBs involving as few as two families and as many as sixteen. One 'bus' hikes to school through a segment of untouched forest on Wilson Avenue south of Highway 401. One group of students in grades 4 to 6 organized their own bus with a primary goal of *no adults*. Some buses allow bikes and in-line skates. There are buses that have theme days – like wearing their clothes backwards! There are Chinese-speaking buses and apartment-building buses. Each bus is unique, reflecting the diversity of local communities, and it is this uniqueness that makes the program fun. Involvement in the A&SRTS program has empowered some schools to embark on broader traffic-safety issues and form committees involving the entire community.

At Maurice Cody Public School the success of *Walk a Child to School Day* in September 1998 led to "Walking Wednesdays"—the first Wednesday of each month is Walk to School Day. Participation during the 1998/1999 school year averaged at about 60% for the school. Classes are recognized for their efforts with the monthly "Golden and Silver Shoe Award". At the end of the school year awards are handed out to the classes with the highest sustained participation. During the 1999/2000 school year, Maurice Cody is promoting a weekly Walk to School Day. Other schools have been inspired by Maurice Cody's example and many now hold monthly Walk to School events.



With support from the Toronto Community Foundation, the program is expanding into more culturally-diverse communities. An example of this is Topcliff Public School in the Jane/Finch



area. Many residents live in high-rise apartment buildings, and safety in their community takes on a whole new twist. The baseline survey of families with children in kindergarten through Grade 2 showed that although 41% of respondents indicated traffic danger as their major concern, 30% were also concerned about abduction, 16% with harassment, and 11% with the safety of young children while travelling *alone* in their apartment elevators. Language is a further challenge for Topcliff with Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tamil being prevalent.

Photo 2 : Topcliff Public School held a Walk to School Day event in January 1999 to promote their Walking School Bus program. Despite the chilly winter conditions, over 85% of the school population walked to school!

## Do Something About It

Call *Go for Green* toll free at 1-888-UB-ACTIV (822-2848)  
or visit our Web site at [www.goforgreen.ca](http://www.goforgreen.ca)