

Going Off-Ramp: A Car Trip Reduction Plan for Schools

by Arthur Orsini

Morning traffic congestion at schools has become the norm all across North America. Here in Vancouver, a 1995 study showed that the number of students arriving by car had increased by 53 percent within a decade. This trend is a threat both to our air quality and to our students' health and fitness. It also poses a safety risk for those who choose to walk or cycle to school.

Over time, we have let our definition of the driving distance to school get shorter and shorter. Yet it is these short, routine, local trips to school that present the best opportunity to counter the car-driving trend. Organizing a car trip reduction program in your school can raise awareness of the health, financial and environmental benefits of more sustainable transportation choices such as walking, cycling, skating, car pooling and using public transit. It can also overcome many of the perceived barriers to these modes of transportation.

Working with student leaders in nine urban and suburban communities in the Vancouver and Victoria regions, Better Environmentally Sound Transportation is piloting an out-of-class initiative to reduce car trips to secondary schools. The primary goal of the *offramp* program is to reduce the average number of cars coming daily to these schools by at least 20 percent. To achieve this goal, we have developed three broad objectives that could be used by any school group to reduce car use among students and staff. The first is to raise awareness of transportation issues and related environmental effects. The second is to organize school-wide events such as Cycle-to-School Days or Car-free Days that encourage students and staff to try alternatives to

the car. Building on this crack in the everyone-drives-a-car attitude, the third objective is to strengthen the sustainable transportation infrastructure within the school community. Ranging from posting bus routes and schedules to installing bike shelters, the focus is on making it easier for students to use the alternatives.

Any school group can use the *offramp* framework to develop car trip reduction strategies suited to their community. The following are guidelines for planning and implementing a successful program.



B.E.S.T.

Expect Long Delays: Vancouver students prepare a window display dramatizing the problem of traffic congestion.

Planning

It is important to gauge at the outset how much time your group will be able to commit to the program during the school year. This will determine just how realistic is the planned sequence of events. While a car trip reduction program could be of any duration, most groups will need a minimum of three months for planning, implementation and evaluation. It is also helpful to brainstorm how many of the components of the program

could be handled as classroom assignments; for example, classroom activities might include tallying surveys, making posters, planning events and publicity, and writing letters. At the same time, brainstorm which local stores might donate prizes that can be given to students who switch to more sustainable means of transportation.

Surveys conducted at the beginning, middle and end of the program are vital for planning and evaluating a campaign. To assess current transportation habits and to uncover barriers to using sustainable transportation options, we have developed three different surveys. An initial school-wide survey to find out how each student and teacher got to school that day gives a snapshot of current practices. This quick, hands-up classroom poll may be used several times: to get a

baseline measurement before the program is announced to the school, to assess progress following awareness-raising events, and to evaluate the longer term results weeks after those events have ended.

Just after the first hands-up school-wide survey is conducted, an extended survey in the form of a questionnaire is given to 10 to 15 percent of the students. This questionnaire (see page 42) asks why students choose to travel the way they do and what would encourage them to walk, cycle, take public transit or join a car pool. At the same time, a third survey is prepared, in as many of the school's languages as possible, that asks parents and caregivers who pick up and drop off students to identify any concerns they have about their teenaged children switching to other modes of transportation. This last survey also helps to publicize the car trip reduction program throughout the community.

The survey responses help define the themes used to promote sustainable transportation. For example, at University Hill Secondary School in Vancouver, the first school-wide survey revealed the following split: 38 percent walked, 28 percent took public transit, 17 percent travelled alone by car, 15 percent car-pooled and only 2 percent cycled. With this information, the school's Environmental Club decided to focus their efforts on cycling. Thus they paid close attention to responses to the questions in the extended student survey that dealt with cycling. When asked "Why do you cycle to school?" the most frequent comment was "It's fast and I can make my own schedule." This led the group to create posters highlighting the independence that cycling offers young people. They featured slogans such as "Cyclists don't need to ask their parents for bus fare," "Cyclists don't wait for their parents in the morning," "Cyclists don't ask to use the car... until the weekend." Finally, as a first step in addressing the most frequently mentioned barrier to cycling — the lack of secure, sheltered bike racks at the school — another series of posters described how to lock a bicycle securely and where to find inexpensive "jalopy" bikes that are less likely to be stolen.

Implementation

Your group may wish to align the start of the program with an event such as Earth Day, Clean Air Day, Environment Week or the spring or fall equinox. Whenever you start, consider using promotional tools such as posters, bike rallies (mass rides), bike maintenance workshops, sign-ups for car pool and walking buddies, transit displays near school exits showing routes and schedules,

and prizes such as water bottles, stickers, buttons, tee-shirts and edible treats. These prizes and promotions will generate enthusiasm and help to convince students that the alternatives to driving are both practical and realistic. Even a short-term surge in bike riding, such as on a designated Cycle-to-School Day, will demonstrate how many students actually do own bikes and portray cycling as a normal activity. Depending on the support from other teachers in the



B.E.S.T.

A transportation game challenges contestants at a Youth Week rally.

school, transportation issues could also be addressed in a number of subjects through topics such as health, fitness, land use, gasoline prices, traffic safety, air quality and climate change.

Whichever sustainable transportation option becomes the focus of your car trip reduction program, it is important to remember that encouraging people to drive less requires diplomacy.

Once tabulated, the school-wide and extended survey results will indicate which form of sustainable transportation looks to be the easiest switch from car travel for your community. Promoting this transportation option will become the focus of the program. If, for instance, the goal is to increase the number of cycling commuters, attention would focus on enhancing cycling skills, providing repair workshops, mapping safe cycling routes, and securing places to lock up bikes. All of these meas-

ures will increase the profile of and commitment to cycling, boost confidence, and help to eliminate the perceived barriers to its usage.

Evaluation

The final round of surveys reveals to what extent transportation choices have changed as a result of the program and whether there is greater awareness of the effect of these choices on air quality and atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases. This sets the stage for the last phase of the program. Consider publicizing

your results in the wider community, including giving an estimate of the carbon dioxide emissions that were avoided as a result of the program. Having uncovered various barriers to more sustainable forms of transportation, consider writing letters to the municipal government requesting the installation of such amenities as additional sidewalks, crosswalks and bicycle lanes. Ask the school district to install sheltered bike racks if they are needed. Write to the local transit authority requesting bus shelters, route improvements, and schedules that coincide with the beginning and end of the school day.

Whichever sustainable transportation option becomes the focus of your car trip reduction program, it is important to remember that encouraging people to drive less requires diplomacy. Most drivers are already aware of the pollution caused by automobiles. And it is not always attitudinal barriers that keep people from using other forms of transportation; they may also have encountered physical barriers such as infrequent bus service, lack of sidewalks, or regional roads perceived as unsafe for cycling or walking. Nevertheless, you are likely to hear from colleagues and students all kinds of reasons why

they must use their cars and why the alternatives available to them are insufficient or impractical. You might want to challenge them to begin reducing their car use by eliminating one trip per week, reminding them that you are not asking them to get rid of their cars completely. It is worthwhile to remember that the car itself is not the problem we wish to address. The long-term goal is to reduce car traffic in and around the school, to encourage people to become life-long walkers, cyclists and transit-users, and to create an aware — and physically healthy — population who think twice about getting into a car for a short trip. ♻

Arthur Orsini is the off ramp coordinator at Better Environmentally Sound Transportation (B.E.S.T.) in Vancouver, British Columbia. In 2000, the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development selected the off ramp program for one of its Best Practices in Environmentally Sustainable Transport awards.

For further information or to obtain copies of the other off ramp surveys, call B.E.S.T. at (604) 669-2860 or visit www.best.bc.ca.

Student Survey



Please complete this survey about getting to school. In one of your classes, you've already been asked **HOW** you got to school, but this time we need to hear a bit about **WHY** you travel to school the way(s) that you do.

We will hold a draw on _____ at _____. Be sure you've completed and handed this in so it can be entered in the draw for prizes.

name _____ grade _____

homeroom _____



Please answer ALL of the following questions.

1. How do you usually get to school?

- walking cycling taking transit by car with another student
 by car on your own (*if you are the only student in your car, this is the one to check*)

Do you think this is an environmentally friendly way of getting school? Why or why not? _____

2. Why do you walk to school? (check as many as apply)

- It wakes me up I never walk It's good exercise
 I never walk when it's cold/raining I can walk with a friend It's free
 I like the route I take
 other _____

3. Why do you cycle to school? (check as many as apply)

- It wakes me up I never cycle It's good exercise
 I never cycle when it's cold/raining It's fast and I make my own schedule
 It's inexpensive I like the route I take
 other _____

continued on next page ➤

4. Why do you take public transit to school? (check as many as apply)

- I get time to talk with my friends on the way
- It's inexpensive
- I have a schedule and the bus is usually on time
- I never take the bus when it's cold/raining
- other _____
- I don't have to rely on my parents
- There's a bus stop near my home and the school
- I never take the bus

5. Why do you drive (or get driven) to school? (check as many as apply)

- It's fast
- Someone picks me up
- It's free (someone else is paying for car and gas)
- There are other places that I have to get to on the way (i.e., work)
- I never go by car
- other _____
- I can always find free parking
- It keeps out of the rain/cold weather
- I drive only when it's cold/raining



6. What would encourage you to walk to school? (check as many as apply)

- finding someone to walk with
- fewer cars in and around the school grounds
- other _____
- making the roads and crosswalks safer near the school

7. What would encourage you to cycle to school? (check as many as apply)

- offer bicycle 'clinics' for safety and maintenance
- safer cycling routes to school
- other _____
- secure, sheltered racks to lock my bike
- a place to hang wet rain gear (other than my locker)

8. What would encourage you to take the bus to school? (check as many as apply)

- rain shelters at the bus stop
- bus stops closer to school
- posting bus schedules and route information near the school exits
- other _____
- more frequent buses
- bus stops closer to home



9. How could we reduce the number of cars coming to school? (check as many as apply)

- encourage drivers to pick up other students on the way
- set up a carpool system to connect cars with students living nearby
- start charging for student parking/raise the parking fees
- other _____

10. If you were to take an alternative form of transportation instead of driving to school, which would it most likely be? (check only one)

- walking
- cycling
- taking transit
- joining a carpool

because _____

thanks

