



# AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION PROGRAMS IN ALBERTA SCHOOLS

Summary  
Report

June 2010

## Introduction

In 2009, the Alberta Centre for Active Living received funding from the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation to complete a project entitled “An Environmental Scan of Active Transportation Programs in Alberta Schools.”

There were two parts to this project:

- First, an electronic survey was sent to school principals in Alberta, assessing the number and types of active transportation programs and initiatives taking place in each school.
- Second, a series of focus groups were held with key stakeholders to examine the barriers and facilitators (supports) to active transportation to and from Alberta schools.

## Background

Regular physical activity contributes to healthy lifestyles among children and youth. Currently, only 12% of children and youth are meeting the recommended guideline of 90 minutes of physical activity a day, as suggested in Canada’s Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2010).

One type of physical activity that can help young people meet the recommended guideline is active transportation to and from school.

In Canada, between 1986 and 2006, walking to school declined from 53% to 42% for ages 11 to 13, and from 39% to 31% for ages 14 to 15 (Buling, Mitra, & Faulkner, 2009).



## Summary of the Research Process

A working partnership between the Alberta Centre for Active Living and Safe Healthy Active People Everywhere (SHAPE) was created for this project.

A provincial advisory committee was assembled and met on three occasions. The committee included representatives from several geographic regions and from various sectors, including education, transportation, police, physical activity, and research.

The committee provided guidance in the development of the survey questions and played a vital role in gathering focus group participants from across Alberta.



Part 1:

- Ethical approval for the survey was received from the University of Alberta in July 2009.
- The survey was sent out to all Alberta schools in October 2009.
- The data from the survey was used to provide an environmental scan of active transportation in schools and develop the focus group interview questions.

Part 2:

- Ethical approval for the focus groups was received from the University of Alberta in February 2010.
- Focus groups were conducted in three different regions of Alberta.



# Part 1: Survey of Alberta Schools

The electronic survey was sent out to 1,758 schools across Alberta, addressed to the school principal or a designate, with the following results:

- 520 schools opened the survey;
- 87 partially completed the survey; and
- 397 completed the survey.

Of these responses (partially or fully completed surveys), 86% were completed by the school principal, 8% by the assistant principal and 6% by other school employees.

The respondents were asked about their awareness of active transportation initiatives, their participation in these initiatives, and who was involved in helping with the active transportation initiatives in their school. Please see Figures 1 and 2.

According to these results, the schools were aware of some of the initiatives publicized by SHAPE, such as the International Walk to School Day and Alberta's Winter Walk Day, but they did not necessarily implement them.

Figure 1  
Awareness and Participation in Active Transportation Initiatives

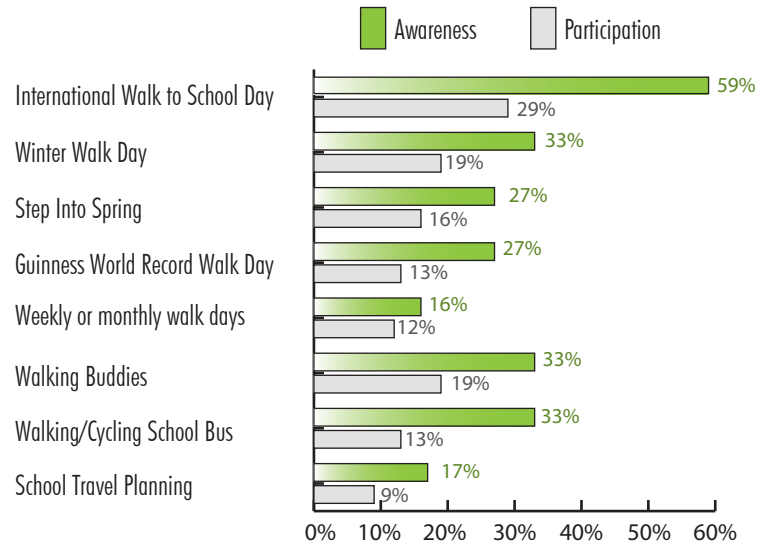
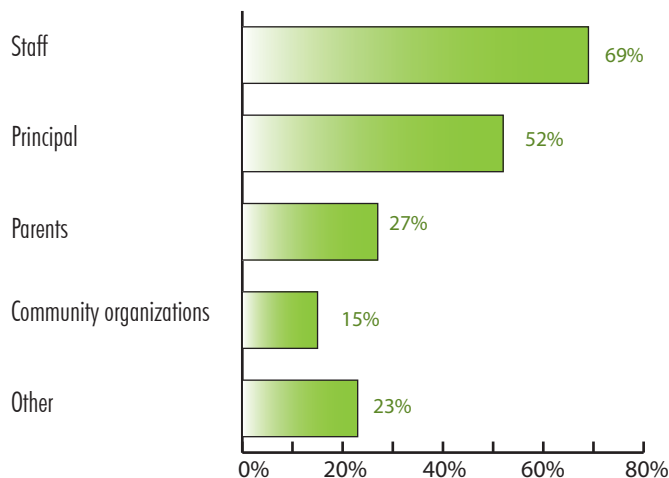


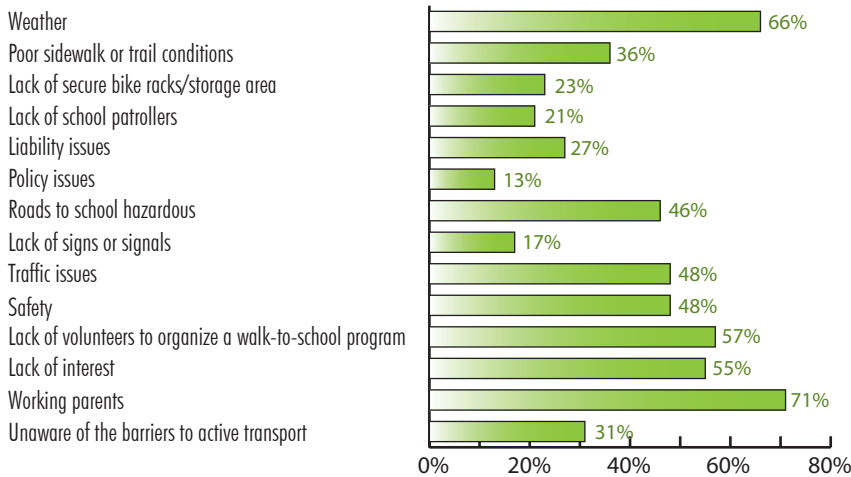
Figure 2  
Who is Helping with Active Transportation Initiatives at Your School?



*We found that awareness of programs does not necessarily result in program participation. Participation rates were very low for all initiatives, with the exception of International Walk to School Day which had a moderate level of participation.*

Next, the respondents were asked about the barriers and facilitators to active transportation, and what types of resources could assist the school in the promotion of active transportation. Please see Figures 3 to 5.

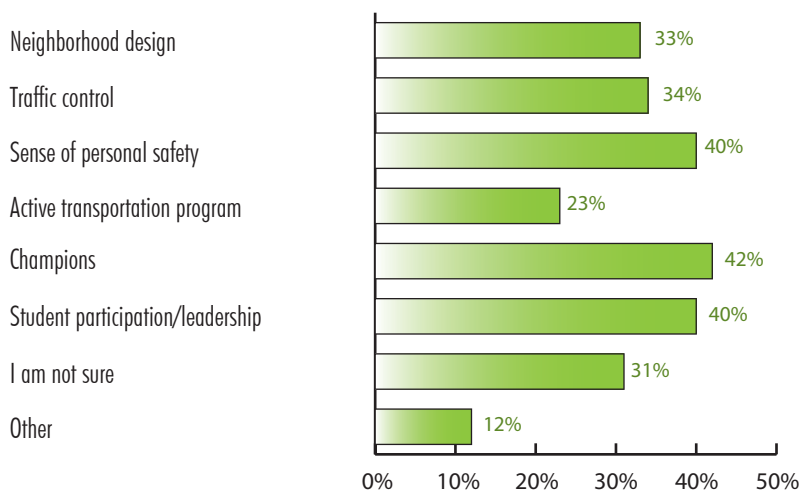
**Figure 3**  
**Barriers to Students Using Active Transportation to get To and From School**



*The top barriers to active transportation to and from schools included:*

- working parents;
- weather;
- lack of volunteers to organize a walk to school program; and
- lack of interest.

**Figure 4**  
**Facilitators to Students Using Active Transportation to get To and From School**

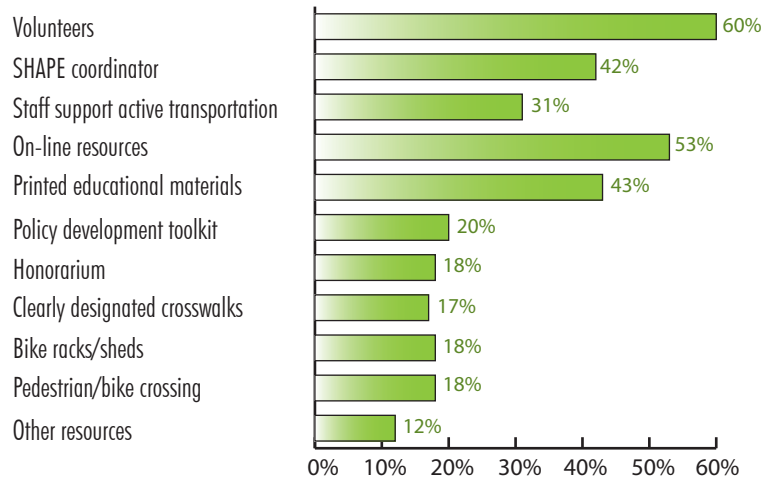


*The factors that were suggested to support active transportation included:*

- a sense of personal safety;
- student participation and leadership; and
- champions.



Figure 5  
Resources that Would Assist in the Promotion of Active Transportation at Schools

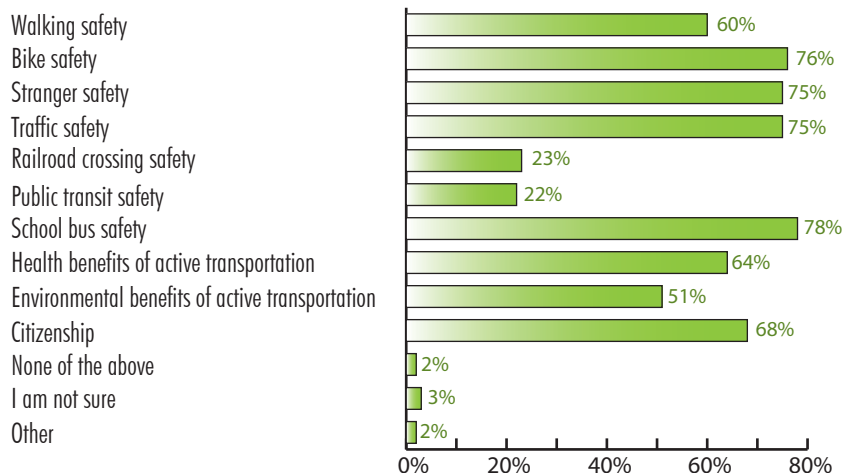


The most commonly cited resources that would assist schools included:

- volunteers;
- SHAPE coordinators;
- online resources; and
- printed educational materials.

Next, respondents were asked if information that supports active transportation is part of the curriculum. In addition, they were asked if they were aware of any policies or regulations concerning active transportation in their school district.

Figure 6  
Information that is Included in the School Curriculum



Eighty-six percent of the respondents were not aware of any local school district policies or regulations concerning active transport.

## Part 1 Conclusion

General findings from the survey:

- Most schools are aware of active transportation programs and initiatives but schools generally do not implement them.
- Having a physical activity coordinator, volunteer, or staff member in the school to act as a champion for active transportation initiatives would be helpful.

## Part 2: Focus Groups with Key Stakeholders

Focus groups with key stakeholders from a variety of sectors were hosted in three locations: south, north and central Alberta.

The purpose of the focus groups was to discuss the barriers and facilitators to active transportation to and from Alberta schools, as well as to learn about successful programs or initiatives that schools and communities have been involved with.

Participants included a wide range of stakeholders, including:

- Be Fit For Life coordinators,
- active and alternative transportation coordinators,
- health promoters,
- healthy school facilitators,
- transit services representatives,
- an outdoor leadership coordinator,
- peace and police officers,
- traffic engineers,
- community development coordinators,
- Alberta Motor Association school safety patrol coordinators,
- a city councillor's assistant,
- urban planners,
- Ever Active Schools staff,
- a transportation manager for schools,
- a Walkable City program coordinator, and
- a traffic safety coordinator.

The following is a summary of what we heard.

### Current Active Transportation Activities

- Identification of safe walking routes to school
- Promotion of resources and initiatives available from the SHAPE website
- Testing of programs and pilot programs that encourage people to drive less
- Challenging neighbourhoods to reduce their carbon footprint
- Developing maps of safe routes for walking to popular destinations
- Increasing the coverage and regularity of public transportation services
- Awarding schools for practicing safe traffic procedures
- Contributing active transportation resources to the Ever Active Schools website
- Educating schools and students about traffic safety
- Reducing speeds in school neighborhoods
- Promoting and participating in International Walk to School Day and Alberta Winter Walk Day
- Petitioning to get crosswalk lights
- Starting regional coalitions that advocate for traffic safety
- Promoting and implementing the Eyes and Ears program
- Educating school crossing guards and providing incentives



# Barriers and Facilitators to the Use of Active Transportation

## 1) Need a leader or champion

- “I think the other thing is that we all sit around waiting for these champions to appear instead of developing the champions...”

## 2) Community culture

- “When it comes to schools, the parents want to drive right to the door or as close as they can. They’ll double park or they’ll block driveways or intersections, as opposed to [using] an alternative parking spot from which they can walk [to school].”
- “... [before school] the kids meet at the local store... and walk to school [together]... it’s getting kids more physically active, it’s reducing congestion... it’s getting kids to know their community and so on...”

## 3) Not viable to walk to school

- “My kids go to a French immersion school. There’s no way they’re walking seven kilometres from home to school every day. That’s not going to happen. So you know, seven kilometres just isn’t feasible, right?”
- “... or things like some kids drag their hockey bag to school twice a week. And I don’t know that you take hockey bags on city transit.”

## 4) Perceived safety

- “There’s also that stranger danger fear that, you know, ‘if I drop them right off at the door and I watch them right there then I can see’... and sometimes they forget about the danger they’re putting other students in, as far as that massive congestion in front of the front door.”

## 5) Natural environment/ weather

- “In the summertime or in the spring you’ll see a lot of bikes parked at the school. So there is a form of active transportation once the weather changes... [with] more kids walking and cycling. But as soon as the first snow comes, it basically stops.”

## 6) Built environment/ neighbourhood design

- “... the new communities, they build them quickly, they move in quickly, and the roadways are not necessarily developed at the same pace. Therefore, it’s not safe for the children to walk... because they can’t take any shortcuts... to walk along the road really increases their walk distance.”
- “... [walking/biking trails] are planned aesthetically... people just want to use them as a safe way to get from point A to point B.”

## 7) Tag onto provincial initiatives / sustainability

- “... we often would partner up with that challenge (a Walk to School day) and do ours with them. But this year they decided not to have those campaigns anymore. So I think provincially that’s too bad because those were things that people could attach on to... not only would you get the resources or ideas of what to do, it would kind of move you forward. Now with that stopping, some other programs will probably stop as well.”



## 8) Conflicting rules / policies

- “They (school administration) didn’t allow kids to have skateboards at school. So that means you can’t even ride it to school...”
- “Or there’s not a good, safe place to lock up bikes... parents aren’t going to let them ride that nice bike to school ‘cause it’s going to get ripped off, and it will...”

## 9) Understanding the benefits of active transportation

- “It teaches them to walk... they’re walking as a group. It reduces the congestion, right? It’s a good healthy living idea... those are,

you know, some solutions, as opposed to just parking in front. [For example] the first day of school at one of the schools here in town... the parents pulled up quite a way around the corner, parked, and let the kids out. The kids walked as opposed to parking right in front of the school and letting the kids out. So I mean, I think it’s [about] education as opposed to legislation.”

## 10) Communication/ education

- “But you know what’s also interesting is, it’s going to be kids who are educating parents again... ‘cause look at how schools are recycling now... and now I see a lot more parents recycling.”

## 11) Lack of interest

- “The kids are the driving force in this, too. I mean... it’s almost a culture of inactivity now for the kids. And they will tell mom, ‘no, drive me to school... no — no, drive me to school.’ And it’s amazing how many parents cave into that... [saying] ‘yeah, okay I’ll drive you to school’... even though it may only be three blocks.”
- “Well, we tried three or four years ago to get the walking school bus going here. And it fell flat on its face, pretty much. The only [people] that showed up for the talk were those of us who were involved in active transportation. So. it was a very good talk, but no schools, teachers or parents came for it.”

## 12) Whose role is it?

- “... and the teachers don’t see it as a role, and neither is it their role to get the kids walking to school. It’s the parents’ role.”
- “I think it, in my experience, has to do with more community partners... we had a Safety City as an organization and they were doing all kinds of safety training, [like] roadway training for kids riding bikes and stuff. So, the NGOs and stuff [have a role to play], ‘cause the schools are busy, we’re busy, everybody is busy... but having partnerships probably will help a lot.”

## Solutions and Ideas from the Focus Groups

### What can kids do?

- Teach their parents about the benefits of active transportation that they learn in school.

### What can parents do?

- Be a role model; use active transportation to go to work and do errands.
- Make the walk to school a way of educating your child about their neighbourhood.
- Volunteer as an active transportation champion at your child's school, or support walk to and from school initiatives.
- Use pedometers; have children walk with their parents to different places from their house and mark the number of steps they took.

### What can schools do?

- Give recognition to the kids that use active transportation.
- Fit active transportation into the curriculum.
- Arrange drop off zones for buses and vehicles a short distance away from the school. This allows children to safely walk to school together as a group.
- Invite local celebrities to promote walking and/or to walk with the kids.

### What can physical activity advocates do?

- Promote active transportation modes as a viable means of getting to and from school and around the community.
- Encourage local celebrities to promote active transportation.
- Develop and organize province-wide active transportation challenges for schools.
- Educate people about the benefits of active transportation and the higher costs associated with driving kids to school, e.g., fuel costs, carbon footprint and health risks associated with less activity.

### Helpful Links:

Alberta Block Parents Association  
[www.albertablockparent.ca](http://www.albertablockparent.ca)

Alberta Centre for Active Living  
[www.centre4activeliving.ca](http://www.centre4activeliving.ca)

Alberta Motor Association: [www.ama.ab.ca/cps/rde/xchg/ama/web/advocacy\\_safety\\_AMASchoolSafetyPatrol-9046.htm](http://www.ama.ab.ca/cps/rde/xchg/ama/web/advocacy_safety_AMASchoolSafetyPatrol-9046.htm)

EverActive Schools  
[www.everactive.org](http://www.everactive.org)

International Walk to School Day  
[www.iwalktoschool.org](http://www.iwalktoschool.org)

Safe Healthy Active People Everywhere  
Alberta: [www.shapeab.com](http://www.shapeab.com)

Traffic Safety in Alberta  
[www.saferoads.com/safety/kids.html](http://www.saferoads.com/safety/kids.html)

### Acknowledgements

SHAPE (Safe Healthy Active People Everywhere) is an Alberta-wide, non-profit organization that promotes the Active & Safe Routes to Schools programs throughout Alberta.

For more information about SHAPE, visit [www.shapeab.com](http://www.shapeab.com).

The Alberta Centre for Active Living is a leading source of research and information on physical activity for practitioners, organizations, decision-makers and communities. The Centre is funded by the Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks & Wildlife Foundation.

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