



Active & Safe

Routes to School

Ontario Evaluation: Summary Report

July 2008

Conducted by:



Commissioned by:



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ONTARIO EVALUATION: SUMMARY REPORT

Conducted by Informa,
Commissioned by Green Communities Canada



Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Executive Overview | 1 |
| Detailed Findings | 9 |
| Appendices | 47 |

Acronym Dictionary

- ASRTS** = Active and Safe Routes to School
GCC = Green Communities Canada
PSA = Public Service Announcement

Active and Safe Routes to School Ontario Evaluation: Summary Report
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Executive Overview

What is Active and Safe Routes to School?

Green Communities Canada's Active & Safe Routes to School is a comprehensive community-based initiative that taps into the increasingly urgent demand for safe, walkable neighbourhoods. Active & Safe Routes to School promotes the use of active and efficient transportation for the daily trip to school, addressing health and traffic safety issues while taking action on air pollution and climate change. For more details, visit www.saferoutestoschool.ca.

STUDY BACKGROUND

The Active and Safe Routes to School (ASRTS) program has become a feature in many schools in Ontario and across Canada. It started over ten years ago in 1996, and during that time has gathered support from many sectors beyond educational institutions to encompass Community Partners (school boards, health departments, municipal transportation staff, police, politicians, parents and volunteers). The time was right to conduct an evaluation of ASRTS. So, Green Communities Canada, the organization that oversees ASRTS in Ontario hired Informa Market Research Co. Ltd. (Informa) to conduct the evaluation. This report summarizes the findings of that evaluation.

AIMS

This evaluation study was designed to answer the following key questions:

- What have schools and partners achieved? How do they measure it? Establish benchmarks to use for future evaluations.
- Identify what works and what are the barriers.
- Assess benefits and impacts of these achievements. For instance, are Educators and parents linking the program with key factors: child traffic injuries/fatalities, traffic congestion at school, etc.? What impact, if any, is ASRTS having on local objectives?
- What do the schools and partners want to accomplish in the future – one, five and ten years on?
- What will be needed from Green Communities Canada to achieve local objectives – one, five and ten years on?
- What sustainability elements are needed?
- Who is responsible? Who does what? Are partners willing and able to assume more responsibility for organizing and implementing their own local program? What role should schools play?
- Implementation details related to funding, human resources, promotion, lobbying when needed.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT: TWO SAMPLE SEGMENTS

Prior to designing the two survey questionnaires, one for Community Partners and one for Educators, that were used to gather data from both sample segments, Informa conducted six in-depth telephone interviews among Community Partners. This phase helped provide guidance in creating a list of key topics from the

Executive Overview

Two Different Perspectives: Educators vs. Community Partners

The ASRTS program coordinates the efforts of multiple stakeholders in the community to increase the number of children using active transportation to get to and from school. GCC recognized that different stakeholders would have different perspectives on the program so this evaluation examined feedback from two different groups: Educators, e.g. a representative from participating schools, and Community Partners, e.g. Public Health, Environmental Organizations.

perspective of the respondent groups and also provided insights that assisted in interpreting the survey data.

Green Communities Canada's ASRTS program currently has 32 community-based initiatives across Ontario. The goal was to conduct structured telephone interviews with the key person (Community Partner) in each of these communities. In addition to the Community Partner telephone survey, an online survey was made available to Educators in these 32 communities, to gather information about the program from a school's perspective. An online survey format was selected for the Educators because teachers are very difficult to get in touch with by phone during normal business hours—it was hoped that an electronic survey they could complete at their leisure would be more effective. See Appendix 1 for the Community Partner Interview and Appendix 2 for the Educator Online Questionnaire.

The Community Partner survey was conducted by telephone using a structured questionnaire administered by a trained, professional interviewer. This questionnaire was developed by Informa in tandem with Green Communities Canada. The questionnaire was similar to that used for the Educators online survey, with additional topics that were best suited to being explored in the context of a telephone interview. The length of the interviews with Community Partners varied considerably; some of the respondents were prepared to devote considerable time to providing in-depth feedback. The fieldwork was conducted in February and March 2008.

Informa was successful at collecting data from 28 of the 32 communities—28 Community Partners participated and 36 Educators completed the online survey.* A list of the communities that took part in the interviews can be found in Appendix 3.

*There are about 4,000 primary schools and approximately 700 secondary schools in Ontario. The ASRTS program materials are sent to every school in the province. It is estimated that over 3,000 Ontario schools have participated in at least one ASRTS activity over the past 7 years. ASRTS has a database of over 1,200 school email addresses. Each of these 1,200 schools were invited to participate in the online questionnaire. The response rate was very low, with only 36 Educators completing the online survey. There are several reasons for the small sampling of Educators including:

- the length and complexity of detail required to complete the online questionnaire;
- the time of year during which the survey was conducted; and
- issues of confidentiality.

In the future, other options will be explored for reaching Educators. However, it should be understood that the low response rate for the program evaluation among Educators is consistent with jurisdictions across Canada and in the United States.

Due to the small sample size, the results were tabulated by hand.

Executive Overview

TOPLINE RESULTS

► **Background & Experience with ASRTS**

Community Partners indicated a higher degree of familiarity and length of involvement with ASRTS programs compared to Educators. Half of Educators surveyed had their first contact with the program in the past two years, while most Community Partners had participated for at least two years. Half of the Community Partners had been engaged with ASRTS for over five years. Their lengthy experience was evident in their thoughtful, extensive feedback.

International Walk to School Day is the annual premier event held in October. It was the usual starting point for introducing active transportation into Ontario elementary schools, according to both Community Partners and Educators. Other programs were added in some of these schools, which could include Spring into Spring, the IWALK Club, Walking/Wheeling on Wednesday or Walk once a Week (WoW), a Neighbourhood Walkabout, and No Idling at School. According to Community Partners, a significant number of schools in their community are now involved in a number of ASRTS programs.

► **Program Strengths and Barriers**

It is encouraging to see that most Community Partners had not experienced many failed programs. Educators indicated that the singular and most popular ASRTS element is the International Walk to School Day. In their estimation, it worked so well because it was a one-day event that garnered support from students and the community alike. They found that it was relatively easy to organize and that parents were willing to lend support for this once-a-year celebration of walking to school. Student participants liked the fanfare and the fact that they were participating in a international event. See the Detailed Findings section for more insights into what makes the ASRTS program popular.

Community Partners provided insights into program success factors, which included convenience (time of year, duration and ease of participation), longevity which breeds momentum, support resources from Green Communities Canada, honoraria and ease of promotion (in schools and local media).

Educators and Community Partners provided detailed feedback concerning barriers that they had encountered in introducing and operating ASRTS programs in their schools and communities. Educators had to face practical problems such as busy, car-oriented parents, inclement weather, low student interest in walking, competitive activities and realities posed by the existence of bussing. While Community Partners were aware of these barriers, they tended to focus more on

Executive Overview

ASRTS Activities

International Walk to School Month (IWALK) is an annual event held each October and kicks off a year of ASRTS. Schools can participate on IWALK Day or for the entire month. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/iwalk.asp.

Walk/Wheel on Wednesday or Walk Once a Week (WoW) builds on the success of International Walk to School Month and encourages families to walk to school at least once a week. Schools can also encourage students to walk at school during recess or lunch time. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/walkwheelwed.asp.

Spring into Spring takes place between Earth Day (April 22) and Clean Air Day (first Wednesday in June) each year. Schools are encouraged to participate as often as they can and the program is linked to many related issues and other spring-time events, like Turn TV Off Week, Safe Kids Week, Environment Week, etc. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/sis.asp.

The **IWALK Club** encourages students to get active as often as possible following International Walk to School Month (IWALK). Students receive an IWALK Club card and each time they use active

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safety concerns, liability issues and the inconvenience of walking programs in relation to established bussing and parent driving patterns. It is difficult to alter entrenched patterns and to go against the prevalence of driving children to and from school or delegating to the local school bus to ensure that they arrive safely at their destination.

This report provides extensive detail of the opportunities and barriers that apply to all ASRTS programs from the perspective of Educators and Community Partners.

► ASRTS Accomplishments & Impacts

Educators and Community Partners agreed that ASRTS has succeeded in achieving the goal of activating students. In the words of an Educator, ASRTS has “encouraged students to become active and educated the students about why it is good for them to be active/benefits of physical fitness.”

Introducing walking and popularizing it at the school level has had the impact of fanning out into the community, according to some Community Partners. Not only has it popularized active transportation among students and Educators, but it has helped bring to the fore other related matters. This includes traffic safety, health benefits of walking and links with environmental issues. It has brought together parents, teachers, other community members and the local government to find ways to support walking beyond the school level.

ASRTS has been successful in reaching public health units with the timely message that walking is essential for children’s physical development and to remind them that this can be one of the effective means of addressing mounting evidence of child obesity. In addition, some Community Partners indicated that since its inception over a decade ago, ASRTS has grown well beyond the classroom and is now becoming part of the broader community. The issue of making communities more friendly settings for active transportation is now on the agenda of public health units, planners and some local government officials.

► Program Evaluation

Few of the ASRTS programs have undergone formal evaluation, with student surveys being the most likely method used among the respondents that have completed this step. Further, there appears to be low interest in conducting assessments in the future, given that this item is low on the list of items identified as requirements for sustainability.

Executive Overview

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travel to get to school, or they participate in a related activity at school, they get a stamp on their card. Every 10th stamp is a Golden Sneaker Sticker. When the card is full – equal to 50 activities – the school can provide rewards to classes. The IWALK Club also features a Walk Around the World Activity. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/iwalkclub.asp.

Walking School Buses are parent or senior student led walking groups that escort children to and from school in a safe, caring environment. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/walkingschoolbus.asp.

The Neighbourhood Walkabout involves the community, school board and municipal stakeholders in assessing and addressing safety in the school zone and on the routes to school. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/aszs.asp.

No Idling at School campaigns encourage driving parents to turn off their engines while parked in the school zone. See www.saferoutestoschool.ca/noidling.asp.

► Communication and Promotion

Communication is key in creating awareness among parents and students. Both Community Partners and Educators used a wide variety of means available to spread news of the ASRTS activities, including announcements in local newspapers and radio stations and internet postings. However, they agreed that the most successful way of reaching the key target groups is via newsletters sent home with the children, posters in schools, word of mouth and school PSAs.

► New Plans & Programs

Community Partners operate both in schools and in spheres beyond schools, and hence appeared to be seeking new opportunities for supporting active transportation programs using channels not available to teachers/Educators. They were twice as likely as Educators to embark on new initiatives. Their focus included seeking support at the municipal level, working with local planners and increasing much needed signage around schools to make walking safer, whereas those Educators who hoped to move ahead were hoping to introduce new ASRTS elements such as a walking club, or to make stronger environmental links with the program.

► Attitudes & Perceptions

While Educators' responses are limited overall, there was general agreement that "ASRTS activities provide a means to improve school spirit and build community" and that the program works well if the focus is narrow – do a few things and do them well. They also agreed that walking demonstrates to students that they can play an active role in addressing climate change by walking, but that parental uptake at home and pressing curriculum requirements impede active transportation program development.

Community Partners held similar beliefs about ASRTS as Educators, with one difference: they are more convinced than Educators that student rewards and inducements are essential.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Community Partners outlined a number of ideas which they hoped could be moved forward in the next one, five and ten years. In addition to increasing participation in ASRTS programs and enhancing existing programs, they aimed to tackle the big infrastructure barriers that currently impede walking.

Executive Overview

Funding and lack of human resource capacity at the community level are the leading immediate challenges, followed closely by the need to promote and lobby on behalf of active transportation programs. Continuing efforts are required on all these fronts; few are at a secure place yet. And, by admission, the most neglected area requiring attention is lobbying and advocacy, which is difficult for most partners as they are public health departments and advocacy is beyond their mandate.

► **Role of Green Communities Canada in Achieving Goals**

Community Partners envisage that Green Communities will continue to provide expertise, program support materials and links to other active transportation programs located provincially, federally and internationally. Provision of financial assistance ranked lower in their wish list. It is noteworthy that some Community Partners imagine that Green Communities' roles might diminish over time, moving more to a consulting role and advocacy for active school travel policies.

► **Requirements for Sustainability**

Community Partners understood that ASRTS's sustainability is dependent on having adequate funding for staffing, materials and public education/promotion. In addition, it will require strong ownership via policies at board, municipal and higher government levels. Only then can active transportation become entrenched at the school level and be viewed as normative by Educators, parents and the community at large.

► **Assuming Responsibility for ASRTS**

The majority of Community Partners indicated that local steering committees related to public health units should be the local champion for ASRTS programs, with significant input from school boards and municipalities. Also, parent councils should be prepared to work in tandem with these partners and Green Communities to ensure the future of ASRTS.

Executive Overview

CONCLUSIONS

The goal is to make ASRTS freestanding and self-sustaining, community by community.

ASRTS is aimed at mobilizing the student population, accessed through the education systems. It started at the grassroots level – introducing an innovative, ‘new’ activity: walking. Seeds were sown for over a decade, school by school, to the point that ASRTS is now part of an international movement. Green Communities’ ASRTS program is widely recognized for its work; in 2007 it hosted the first international conference on walk to school programs.

Ontario Public Health Units were seen as logical ‘partners’ in supporting active transportation/ walking programs in schools. Green Communities has developed a comprehensive ASRTS program with adaptable and replicable activities, and provides on-the-ground experience, program-related resource materials and broader government, national and global linkages.

Many Community Partners understand that it is incumbent upon them to build their own local organization and support networks that will assume ownership of the programs in the longer term. Green Communities’ role would evolve into one of providing expertise, inspiration and important provincial, national and international links.

Communities with ASRTS programs require nurturing and support from the point when the program is introduced onwards. However, this evaluation demonstrates that these micro-level initiatives have captured the support and interest of public health units, and in some cases local area planners, politicians and other community networks.

Community Partners and Educators understand that ASRTS’s goal – to make walking to school and elsewhere in your community a normative activity – is good for people’s health and for building community spirit. Furthermore, now some Educators and partners understand that it is a natural link with the rapidly increasing attention that is being paid to the environment. However, making walking a safe and reasonable activity for all to enjoy means that key infrastructure elements must be in place. The fact is that many communities are still struggling with how to change inhospitable physical environments to those that would support active transportation.

New data is emerging, as the price of filling the family vehicle continues to increase, indicating that there is a slight decline in usage and an increase in multi-stop trips. Some Canadian cities are experiencing increasing transit ridership;

Executive Overview

according to Canadian Urban Transit Association ridership in 2007 increased by 3.1% from 2006 and over 15% in a five year period. Bicycle stores report a surge in demand and where possible, more urban dwellers are walking to work. The good news is that walking is becoming more of an option in people's minds.

Government, health advocates and parent groups are focusing increasing attention on child obesity, its causes and the long term health and economic impacts. In addition to pressing advertisers of unhealthy products to limit or cease targeting messages to children, more attention is being paid to taking corrective actions. This includes promoting healthy diets, i.e. 'Reach for 5 to 10 a Day', increasing student food literacy and reintroducing activity into school curricula. Walking to school programs fit well into this rapidly emerging constellation of behaviours aimed at making Canadians of all ages healthier.

Public opinion polls now indicate that environmental concerns including the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas is a major issue for many Canadians. The fallout of this realization is that many people are starting to re-evaluate their lifestyle with the aiming of reducing their carbon footprint. Transportation, i.e. the addiction to driving and its impact on the environment, is now on the agenda. This bodes well for walking programs if they are promoted and supported.