

The Walking Preschool Bus: A Neighborhood Solution

Low-income families identify transportation issues as one of the biggest hurdles to enrolling—and keeping—their children in preschool.

In Walking Preschool Bus neighborhoods, parent leaders are hired as “conductors” with a regular route to walk young children to and from preschool centers. Conductors work with COFI staff and local schools to identify families whose children are not regularly attending the area preschool/Head Start programs due to lack of transportation. Then Conductors, accompanied by COFI staff, visit these families to invite them to join the program.

Conductors implement “bus routes” to accommodate participating families, and, in this model program, receive training, supervision, and administrative support from COFI.

Most of the Conductors COFI hires are already very active at the school and in their neighborhoods, making them credible and trustworthy resources for marketing the

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program in the community. Many of them have been recruited from the ranks of POWER-PAC, a powerful, citywide organization of low-income parents in Chicago. These are the very parents who initiated the idea of trying this practical, peer-to-peer approach in their own communities.

For the past three years, COFI and POWER-PAC have worked in conjunction with the Chicago Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Education to pilot this idea at a few schools; results so far have been encouraging. School officials report that the Walking Preschool Bus program is increasing children’s preschool attendance and reducing their tardiness.

Why It Works

The heart of the Walking Preschool Bus, and a key to its success, is selecting, training, and supervising highly committed and reliable neighborhood parent leaders.

As in the Head Start Ambassador program (see companion brief), gaining the trust of the families builds an understanding and commitment to the vital experience of quality early learning. Conductors are able to persuade participants that regular attendance in preschool makes a major difference in school and life success.

The trust that is built during the recruitment phase is also critical later on when the Conductor calls to let the parent know that she is on her way or knocks on the door in the dead of winter and finds the family reluctant to let the child venture off in the cold. The Conductors use the trust they have built to again convince the family of why it is so important that the child still attend.

Recognizing the Walking Preschool Bus as one transportation option for some Illinois cities and towns, this brief describes how it works and makes recommendations for expanding its use.

Promising practices to enroll hard-to-reach families in quality early learning programs

This policy and practice brief comes from COFI (Community Organizing & Family Issues), the umbrella organization that trains and supports grassroots parents to be powerful leaders on issues that affect their families.

The Walking Preschool Bus program is an innovative, parent-created pilot project that is increasing participation of at-risk, low-income children in quality early learning programs.

It is one promising avenue for positive change. We share our experience in the hope that it can serve as a model and a process for addressing community problems with a “bottom-up” approach of authentic parent engagement.

For more information, visit www.cofionline.org and see the parent-to-parent research report, “Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?”

Walking Preschool Bus Conductors make sure preschoolers get to school safely.



Keys to success

Program Structure

Community Organizing & Family Issues (COFI) provides staff and management support to the Walking Preschool Bus project. COFI recruits and selects the Conductors, all of whom are low-income African-American and Latina residents from areas around the participating schools. Most of the Conductors are active parent leaders or other community residents who have expressed interest in helping with the program. Over time, the strongest and most consistent Conductors are those who have children at the school. Working with the Chicago Public Schools, all recruits are finger-printed and pass a background check before they are approved and hired as Conductors. They also need to have a working cell phone.

At each school, support for the Walking Preschool Bus is provided by a COFI staff person. He or she coordinates closely with school staff and is responsible for working with local parents and the school to recruit Conductors and participating families. Working with the school, the COFI staff member assures that the Conductors know and are fulfilling their responsibilities, including communicating well with the school and the families. The COFI staff person also arranges back-up Conductors in the event that the usual Conductor is ill. When a Conductor is ill, she or he calls both the back-up Conductor and the COFI staff person to report it. On the rare occasion that the back-up Conductor isn't available, the Conductor calls the parents to inform them that they need to transport their child to/from school for the day.

Following parents' lead to address community issues

Parent leaders in POWER-PAC spent two years digging deep into a wide cross-section of low-income communities, to find out why so many of the most at-risk children were not participating in early learning programs. In more than 5,000 interviews, transportation was one of the most common barriers identified by parents.

Some parents have physical disabilities, and many elderly caregivers have a difficult time walking children to and from school, especially in the winter. Caregivers may be responsible for other younger children and have to bundle them up for the trip each time they go to drop off or pick-up the preschooler. And, in some communities, families are afraid to walk their children to and from schools.

In addition, in Chicago and elsewhere, many preschool programs are only a half-day—some as short as two-and-a-half hours a day. For working parents, this schedule makes it difficult to get children to and from school and requires complicated and often expensive child care and transportation arrangements. According to a *Catalyst Chicago* article, “half-day programs are hard for working parents to navigate, contributing inadvertently to absenteeism” (August 30, 2011).

Parents came up with the concept of a Walking Preschool Bus. They brought the idea to the Chicago Public Schools' head of early learning who liked it and agreed to invest in this innovative solution. The parents went to bat for the idea at their local schools and developed a partnership between COFI, CPS, and the schools in order to pilot the program. The goal was to increase enrollment and stabilize attendance at preschools by eliminating transportation barriers. In implementing the project, we discovered the additional benefits of the opportunity for daily physical activity and socialization among children in the program.

Practical advice: recruit and support strong leaders, and build a good partnership with early learning program sites

Carefully select and screen Conductors, who often have little or no work history.

The Walking Preschool Bus program depends upon the unique trust that Conductors—who are peers of parents and caregiving grandparents—can establish with parents, other caregivers, and the children. And the program's success relies fundamentally on the reliability and timeliness of the Conductors—many of whom face their own challenges day-to-day, including income, employment, housing, food insecurity and chronic health problems within the family.

In order to be hired as a Conductor, applicants have to pass a background check, and frankly, in some communities it is difficult to find applicants who can do so. Additionally, it takes six to eight weeks to find out if the applicant passes the background check. At one school, the Walking Preschool Bus fell apart mid-year when one of the Conductors left and the process of screening a new Conductor took several weeks. During this time the children found alternative ways to get to school, didn't attend school regularly, or transferred out.

It can be difficult to keep the same Conductors throughout the year. As Conductors are working so few hours a day, walking children back and forth, if Conductors have an opportunity for another job with more hours, they often take it. However, when Conductors are parents at the school, they are more likely to stick with it over time.

Provide thorough introductory and continuing training to the Conductors.

On an ongoing basis, COFI offers a 7-session course in personal, family, and community leadership development that speaks specifically to the needs and interests of low-income parents. All Conductors have taken this training, called *Self, Family, & Team*—and, thus, have further developed their relational and “executive” skills. The ability to set, plan, and achieve goals is so vital to the Conductor role. In addition, Conductors are trained by COFI in the process and expectations of the role.

Provide strong staff support to the Conductors.

COFI provides structure and support to the Conductors, most of whom have little to no work experience. For each Walking Preschool Bus route and Conductor, a COFI staff person:

- » Works with the Conductor and school staff in the community to recruit families in need of the service and orient those families to the program. Each family signs a Memorandum of Understanding to participate (samples of all forms are available from COFI);
- » Structures outreach strategies to gain and maintain participants;
- » Organizes the Conductor’s schedule and creates a map for their route;
- » Checks-in daily to assure the children were picked up and arrive as planned;
- » Collects and reviews sign-in/sign-out sheets for each child from the Conductors; and
- » Above all, coaches, mentors and advises the Conductors and helps them to become ever more knowledgeable about the importance of preschool attendance and how to be effective in their role.

Gain solid cooperation from the schools or early learning sites.

The best programs are those where the school is a willing and strongly committed partner. At some schools, the preschool teachers refer families to the program and some even assist in the recruitment of Conductors. The engaged preschool programs also help to make sure that the communication between families, Conductors, and the COFI staff person is strong.

Encourage daily communication with participating families.

Family situations change, particularly when housing issues necessitate moving, and, thus, the number of children being walked to/from school can change from day to day. Moreover, as participating families are low-income, many do not have phones. Conductors are trained to check in with participating families regularly to find out if they anticipate any changes that will impact the program.

Parents came up with the concept of a Walking School Bus. Then they went to bat for their idea in their local schools.

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“I’m a working mom and I can’t take off work in the middle of the day to go pick up my child. The Walking Preschool Bus made it possible for my child to go to preschool.”

—MOTHER AT
JENNER ELEMENTARY



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Making a difference: the results, costs, and benefits

Over the past three years, between 17 and 25 young children each year have enrolled and regularly attended preschools as a result of Walking Preschool Buses at five different schools. The Walking Preschool Bus project has increased children’s preschool attendance and reduced tardiness, according to officials at the participating schools. Many of the children who are walked to and from school by the Conductor had attendance issues prior to the program’s inception. In addition, an enormous program benefit reported by parents of participating children is the assurance that their child would arrive safely to school and home.

The cost of this program is not insignificant, due to the costs of needed oversight and management. However, at a cost of under \$1,000 per child per year (about \$5 per child per day), the Walking Preschool Bus is comparable to the cost of a parent escorting one child on public transportation and far less than the cost of a taxi or driving. Costs include modest fees to the Conductors—\$10 per day per route, for approximately one hour of work—plus administrative costs of recruitment, staff support and supervision, training, finger-printing, and extra insurance.

The Walking Preschool Bus provides additional benefits over other forms of transportation:

- » It connects parents and caregivers daily to Conductors who encourage their children’s learning;
- » It facilitates communication between the school and the family—in many cases the Conductor relays messages from the teacher to the home;
- » It gets young children—many of whom are at high risk of obesity and live largely sedentary lifestyles—moving;
- » It provides opportunities for children to socialize and develop their social skills;
- » It provides opportunities for children to build relationships with one or two more caring, achieving adults—the Conductors; and
- » The program provides job training experiences for Conductors who often have little to no work history.

You can help spread the success of these pilot programs

With transportation issues being one of the biggest barriers to the participation of low-income children in high quality early learning, the Walking Preschool Bus provides a promising new approach which merits further piloting. We ask that early education centers, policy makers, and advocates consider the following ways to help make sure more “hard-to-reach” families have access to quality early learning programs:

Encourage preschool programs in high-density communities where transportation is a preschool enrollment barrier to try the Walking Preschool Bus idea.

Seek options in both the public and the philanthropic sectors to provide modest grants for programs seeking to try a Walking Preschool Bus.

Support efforts to systematically evaluate the impact of the Walking Preschool Bus on preschool program enrollment and attendance, as well as other benefits it may provide for children, families, and Conductors.