

When I am retired, or independently wealthy, whichever happens first, I am going to become a school bus driver. Well, not a driver, exactly. More like a school bus walker. So, when it fits into my schedule better, I want to start a walking school bus. There is a trend in several communities across the nation to create walking school buses. A responsible adult or two walks a specified route at a specified time and picks up students along the way and gets them to school safely. There are a multitude of benefits to the plan. Besides the obvious exercise component, there is also a reduction in vehicle pollution. According to recent publication from Eat Right Montana, 20-30% of morning traffic, and therefore, morning pollution, is from vehicles taking children to school.

A change, provided through walking school buses, that I think families, students and school officials would all appreciate is that there is a reduction in traffic from students being dropped off at school, which, in turn, creates a safer school zone. Just this morning on the way to school, my daughter asked me why she couldn't ride her bike to school. Traffic was my number one concern. We live right on a highway and I don't think there is enough shoulder on the road for my 8-year-old to be turned loose during a busy traffic time. She'd also have to navigate an intersection where less experienced drivers are crossing to the high school student parking lot. So, my answer, when she asked, was that I didn't think she could do it safely – not because of her own skill, but because of all the other variables. As I pulled into the school to drop my kids off just as the bell rang, I could have mentioned that we never seem to be consistent with how quickly we can get ready in the morning. Our inconsistency with morning routines is one of the reasons I could not commit to being a 'school bus walker' currently. You never know when you are going to have a 5-year-old hairstyling meltdown or some other such dramatic delay! But, enough about me and my excuses, and back to the benefits . .

“Walking or biking to school is really a win-win-win situation,” says Cathy Costakis, Physical Activity Coordinator with Montana's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program (www.montanana.org). “First, there are serious health benefits. Kids, and the adults who accompany them, get the physical activity they need for optimal health and well-being. Secondly, there are academic benefits because children who are fit and healthy are ready to learn. And, finally, there are environmental benefits. When more kids get to school under their own power, it reduces traffic and vehicle emissions, especially in school zones.”

Here are just a few more benefits for walking to school from the Eat Right Montana October newsletter:

Taking 15 to 20 minutes to walk or bike to and from school is an easy way get at least half of a student's daily dose of activity. Most school age children do not get the recommended 60 minutes of activity each day. Being physically fit helps kids maintain healthy weight and reduces their risk of high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol.

Studies show a strong relationship between being physically fit and performing well in the classroom. Children who walk or bike to school are more likely to be fit and, therefore, succeed academically. They arrive at school wide-awake and ready to learn each morning. Walking home from school is also a great way for students to get an activity break and be prepared to start homework or chores when they get home.

Walking and talking is a wonderful way to connect with kids and to find out what is going on in their lives. Students often open up to adults when walking with them routinely and it provides a great way to stay connected. A friend of mine, who is a single father, made it a point to walk two miles with his middle-school daughter every day. Though his daughter is older now, he still counts those times as critically important for their relationship. Sometimes there are even benefits of developing relationships with other neighborhood students who are walking. It may even encourage more sibling interaction.

With all the benefits for walking to school, I may even have to try to work it into our families' routine somehow. I do plan to give it a try on International Walk to School Day, the first Wednesday of October. After all, it is only a mile from our house to the school. I'll find out after I walk it at 8 a.m. with my two young girls if it is uphill both ways or not!