



Connecting Families, School, and Community through a Walking School Bus in Philadelphia

Three blocks. That's the distance covered by the neighborhood walking school bus for students going to Philadelphia's Edward Gideon School. Along those three blocks amazing things happen: children get to school safely, trust is building, and a sense of community strengthens. In Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania—where about 400 children are involved in pedestrian crashes each year—a routine that first began as a way to reduce absenteeism and improve safety has grown into something much bigger. What started as a practical response to immediate concerns has become an effort with broader impact for the community.

“Putting your feet to the task in education”

Edward Gideon School, like many schools across the country, faces attendance problems, and has used different strategies to address high absenteeism.

Gideon is a designated Community School located northwest of downtown Philadelphia. According to the School District of Philadelphia website, “Community Schools are a partnership among the City of Philadelphia, the School District of Philadelphia, and school communities to remove barriers to learning and support the success of each student.”

With that mission in mind, the walking school bus was a natural fit. Transportation and safety challenges can keep students from getting to class, so creating a reliable, supported way for children to walk to school aligns with the Community Schools approach. As Gideon’s Community Schools Coordinator, Gregory Wright helps lead this work through the Mayor’s Office of Education.

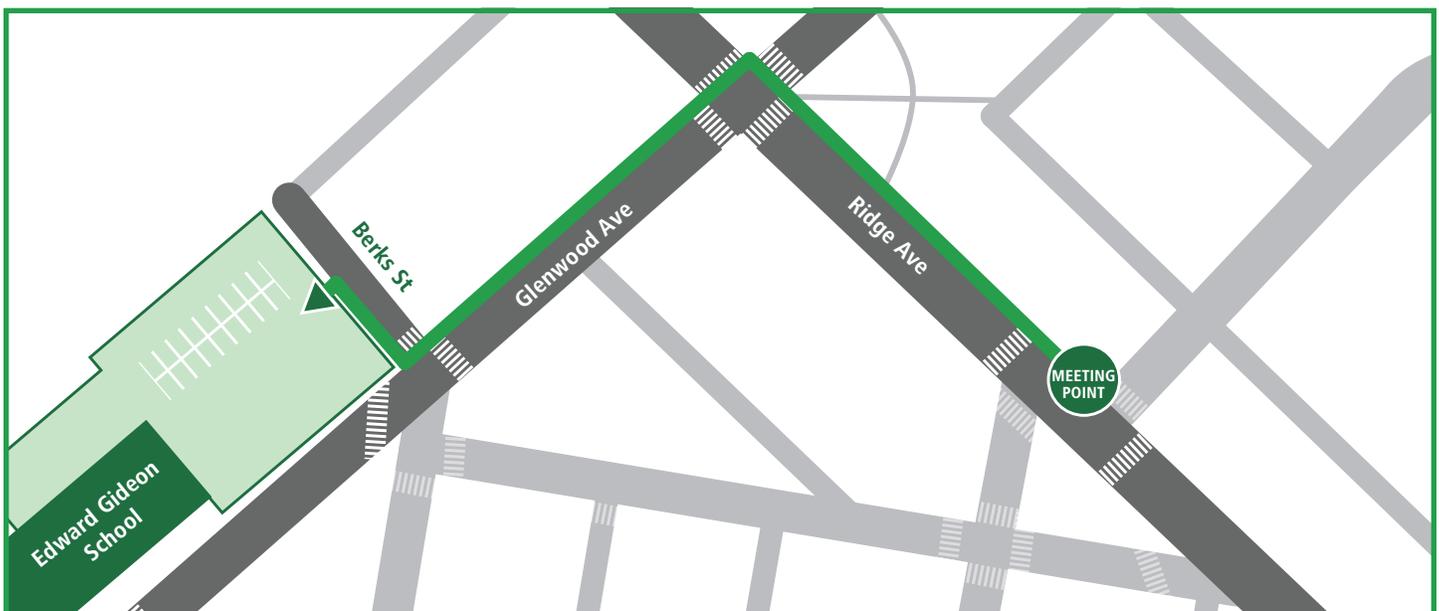
The walking school bus is not new for the school. In 2017, school leaders began talking with students and families about absences to better understand the challenges they were facing. They heard about work schedules, limited resources for transportation, and children who were too young to walk to school on their own. They also learned that some caregivers carried their own memories of negative experiences

of school, which made it harder to connect and trust the school system and feel confident about their own children’s experiences.

School staff floated the concept of the walking school bus as a creative means to help children get to school safely in a way that would reassure families and literally meet them where they were. Again, school officials started by talking with families. “The goal was, if you can’t get your children to school, meet us at a centralized location and we’ll take them the rest of the way,” said Wright.

“The biggest piece is putting your feet to the task in education,” said Stephanie Ridgeway, Community Engagement Coordinator for the City of Philadelphia. “And I say that in terms of everybody can move.” She reiterated that the ultimate goal of creating and maintaining the walking school bus was to impact the students’ school experience.

In this community, many people already knew each other, students were accustomed to walking to school, and the proposed walking school bus meeting spot was close to a housing development where several families lived. “It makes it a lot easier for them to come out,” says Ridgeway. “When you live in an inner-city area, you want to make sure you know the people who are connecting with your children. The faces and names are important. The consistency is important.” The route itself was then designed to align with the crossing guard post at West Glenwood Avenue and Ridge Avenue.



Gideon walking school bus route

To address concerns with driver speeds along West Glenwood Avenue, Wright and community leaders teamed up in 2018 to gather approximately 100 neighbor signatures to support asking the city to make safety improvements. The city installed speed cushions, crosswalks, and stop signs along the road in 2019. These features offered the benefit of improving safety for all road users at all hours of the day, not just students during the trip to school.

Support from school administration was another key piece to putting the program in place. The school's principal, Dr. Shauneille Taylor, was open to the new initiative and arranged for the walking school bus to be an official school club. This allowed staff who helped lead the bus to be paid for their time, providing extra incentive to participate. Dr. Taylor secured funds allotted to extracurricular programs to offer this stipend. The pieces of the walking school bus puzzle were falling into place.

“This is relationship building”

With Wright's organizational dedication, interest from families and school staff, and support from local volunteers, the walking school bus launched in 2019. Families were invited to join through fliers and Instagram.

Today, an average of 25 students participate regularly, though the group can be as small as eight and as large as 40 students. Kids and adults meet at 8:20 am, and at 8:30 am the group starts the walk to Gideon. Walking school bus leaders communicate



The walking school bus meet-up. Source: City of Philadelphia



Gideon walking school bus celebrating Walk to School Day in 2019. Source: Walkbiketoschool.org

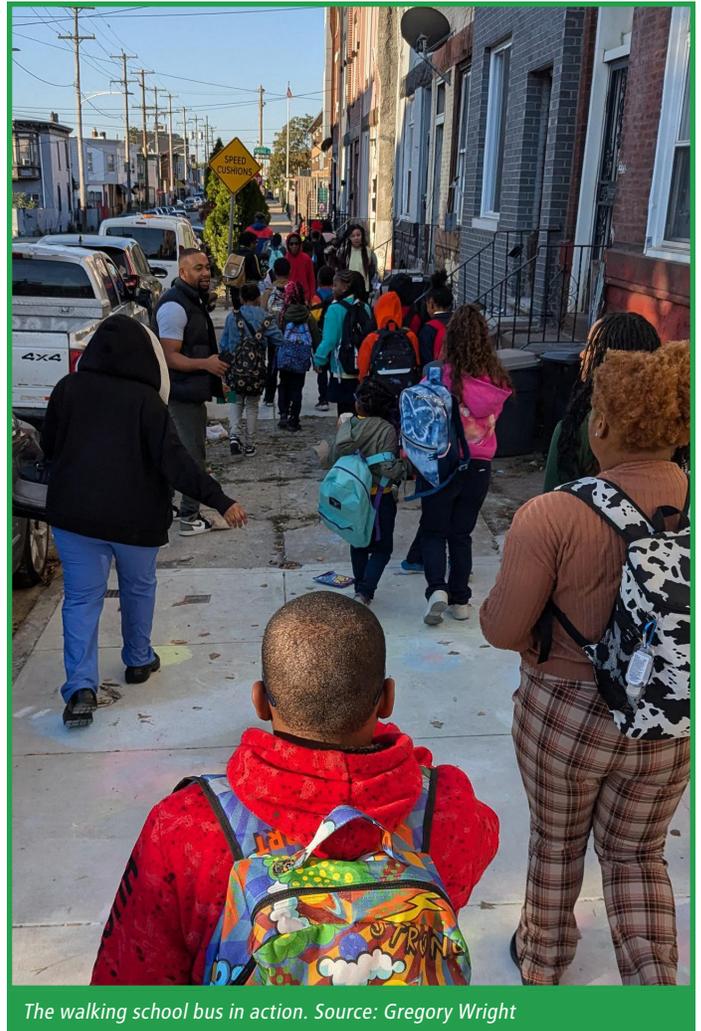
updates via Instagram and school messaging platforms, and there is an understanding that the school bus won't happen when it's raining. Older students, who sometimes have higher absence rates compared to younger students, are given leadership roles in the walking school bus as an incentive to participate. Local volunteers who assist with the walking school bus generally have a connection to the school; they may be caregivers already walking their students to school, city officials including Safe Routes Philly (the city's Safe Routes to School program) employees, or health-focused partners like nutrition educators. Volunteers are subject to safety screening processes.

Occasional small extras make the bus a little more exciting. For instance, hula hoops at the meeting point give students a fun way to stay engaged and active while they wait for others to join. Snacks, when available, offer an extra draw. Students also love seeing themselves on the school's Instagram page, and taking part in the walking school bus is a sure way to become an Instagram star. Music is another key motivator. One day, a student who intended to skip school was invited to serve as the day's walking school bus DJ and choose the music for the commute.

One of the most important parts of the walking school bus is the informal community meeting that happens before the walking trip begins. Bus leaders talk to the students and caregivers to get a sense of what is happening in their lives. For some caregivers, the walking school bus has become the face of Gideon and a chance to build trust with the school. "This is a way to connect with the school. This is a way to get to know folks at the school but not be in the school. It reduces a barrier," says Ridgeway. Wright builds on that idea, saying, "Seeing me, they think that Gideon is out in the community, and that goes a long way for our community members around here."

Furthering the community-school connection, leaders alert school staff about issues they hear on the walk to school that may impact students at the school, whether a student is struggling or there are rumors of a brewing conflict. "This is your kind of window to see what's happening in the community," said Ridgeway.

"This is relationship building," adds Ridgeway, noting that the connections extend to the caregiver



The walking school bus in action. Source: Gregory Wright

volunteers as well. The walking school bus has become a support system for the whole child. For example, a grandmother with mobility challenges had difficulties getting her grandchildren to school. Her home was a short walk to the school but separated by a few large intersections. Because of the conversations that arose as part of the walking school bus, leaders learned of this family's dilemma and decided to add her home as a stop on the route. The grandmother could watch her grandchildren join the group each morning and feel secure about them getting to school safely.

The walking school bus faces several challenges. At one point, the bus operated four days a week, but it now meets once a week due to limited leader availability. Staffing can also be an issue at crossing guard posts, including one location along the walking school bus route. In addition, neighborhood tensions occasionally arise, so leaders stay alert in order to protect students and avoid potentially violent situations.

The program currently lacks data on whether participation in the walking school bus is associated with improvements in school attendance, but they aim to more closely track walkers in the future. Weather also affects participation. During the 2023–2024 school year, Safe Routes Philly helped by providing gloves for students, but the walking school bus generally pauses during inclement weather and throughout the colder months.



Safe Routes Philly provided gloves for walking school bus students.
Source: Stephanie Ridgeway

Challenges aside, its presence in the community has grown. Local officials have joined the walk while campaigning for elected positions, and caregivers have used those moments to share concerns and raise requests about needed improvements in the community. For example, one caregiver talked to multiple officials about trash in the neighborhood. “And now there’s a whole cleaning team along that corridor because of that parent advocating,” said Wright.

“The walking school bus has become a staple at Gideon,” said Dr. Taylor. “I imagined it as a way to get students to school safely and on time and it has evolved into so much more. The community is all in on Gideon’s walking school bus! They honk their horns in support, encourage us to keep walking with

students, and thank us for getting these students to school safely.”

Believing it when you see it

The walking school bus is its own form of outreach. Passersby often ask the group what they’re doing in the mornings, providing an opportunity to share information about the program. “Philly’s one of those places where no one will believe you until they actually see it,” said Peter DeCarolis, Coordinator, Safe Routes Philly. Many community members take time to stop and thank the leaders for being there.

It’s also become a point of pride for some of the students participating, including the older kids who take leadership roles in the bus route. “So, when you think about it, it’s not just the walk. It’s the walk that’s fueled by, hey, I’m the leader today. Hey, I’m the one that’s keeping people moving forward. Hey, when I get to school, I’m going to be that person that’s able to talk about this,” said Ridgeway. At the start of a new school year, students stop Wright to ask when the walking school bus will launch. They want to make posters, hand out snacks, and manage the music; they feel ownership of the walking school bus and want to be involved.

At Gideon, there is interest in expanding the program to more than once a week. The school district has also expressed interest in replicating Gideon’s walking school bus concept at other Community Schools. While doing so would involve finding matches between available resources and goals of the individual school communities, seeing the example at Gideon has spurred interest at other schools.

At the end of the day, a walking school bus can be about getting kids to school safely, and it can also be about so much more. “Something as small as somebody saying good morning to you is life changing,” said Ridgeway.

Recipe for replicable success

Organizers identified six key ingredients that contributed to the success of the Gideon walking school bus:

1. Having a supportive administrator “who really understands why this is important:” Gideon’s principal advocated for the walking

school bus and provided creative ideas for backing up the efforts.

2. Champions who bring energy to organize, promote, and lead the effort: One person can launch the walking school bus – a school staffer, teacher, or caregiver, for example – but the right team must also inspire the movement to grow.
3. Compensating school staff organizers: Paying school staff who organize and maintain the school bus contributes to the sustainability of the program (e.g., Wright is a paid school employee).
4. Dedicated volunteers: It takes more than one person to keep the walking school bus going. There is room for community-based organization staff, caregivers, and other community members.
5. Peer leadership: Identifying older students who can have meaningful roles in the walking school bus provides a valuable source of help, a sense of ownership, and can sustain participation.
6. Consistency builds trust: Caregivers and children are more likely to stay involved if they see the same, familiar faces on a regular basis.

It takes a community

“You want to make sure that you know the folks that are connecting with your children,” said Ridgeway. While Wright, DeCarolis, and Ridgeway manage the overall program, the Gideon walking school bus has many partners who contribute to its success, many of whom are volunteers or funded by the city:

- 22nd District Philadelphia Police Department
- Caregivers
- City of Philadelphia Crossing Guard Program
- Gideon School Principal Dr. Shauneille Taylor
- Gideon School teachers and other school staff
- Informal student walking school bus leaders
- Nutrition educator
- Other partner agencies
- Town Watch Integrated Services



Gideon walking school bus on Walk to School Day in 2019. Source: walkbiketoschool.org

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Cover Image: Walking school bus students and leaders. Source: Gregory Wright



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