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## Guest Commentary/ Newton Public School Safe Routes Task Force

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Newton -

It's time to add more traffic around our city's elementary schools: walking school bus traffic.

A walking school bus is one or more adult "drivers" accompanying school children along a designated route to school. Parents can put children on the "bus" anywhere along the route. The drivers walk the children safely to the school's front door.

The walking school bus is the answer to the question, "How can we increase the number of children walking to school without adding to the burden parents already face getting through the morning, particularly working parents?" The beauty of walking school bus routes is that they increase walking to school while allowing parents to get an earlier start on the morning.

Elementary school parents will be hearing more about walking school buses as we start the school year. Newton was recently awarded a grant from WalkBoston to fund a Community Safe Routes to School coordinator. (WalkBoston administers the grant, which is funded by The Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and Executive Office of Transportation.) The Safe Routes to School coordinator will be working with PTO Safe Routes to School committees at each of the elementary school on programs to increase the number of children walking to school. Creating active walking school bus routes is a major objective.

Why do we want to increase the number of children walking to school?

- Walking to school instills healthy habits for a lifetime
- A good walk primes children for the academic day

- More feet on the sidewalk means fewer cars on our neighborhood streets
- Fewer cars on the streets means less congestion, less pollution, and less global warming

And, in a virtuous cycle, fewer cars means safer streets, which makes walking more attractive, which reduces the number of cars ....

There is growing urgency to increase the number of children who walk to school. Childhood obesity and related problems like diabetes are on the rise. Public health researchers consider growing child inactivity an epidemic and speculate that, due to inactivity, our children's generation may be the first that does not live as long as its parents'. We need to promote healthier habits.

And, we must decrease the amount of vehicle traffic to, from, and around our schools. School-time traffic is overwhelming our neighborhoods. Nationwide, school-bound vehicles constitute 20- 25 percent of morning traffic. As any Newton elementary school parent knows, all that traffic comes together in a school-driveway scene of increasing chaos, not exactly a promising setting to start the school day.

With each car and truck we take off the road to school, we create a fitter child or two, quiet our streets, and reduce global warming.

We recognize that, for many parents, driving to school is not a luxury. This is especially true for single-parent homes and for families with two working parents. That is why the Safe Routes to School Task Force, the city-wide umbrella organization for the school-based SRTS committees, has identified walking school buses as the major initiative for the school year. Up-and-running, a walking school bus route *helps* working parents, relieving them of the need to get their children to the school steps.

As you and your family start the school year, get on the bus.

*This column was co-written by Jean Fulkerson, Newton's Community Safe Routes to School coordinator, Alicia Bowman, PTO chairmen of Mason-Rice and Theresa Fitzpatrick. PTO chairman of Angier Elementary. Bowman and Fitzpatrick created the Safe Routes to School Task Force.*