



The signage and results of one Daily School Route (DSR), an enhanced approach to active school travel that creates active transportation systems for kids. © Civicplan

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# Safer streets for students create healthier neighbourhoods for everyone

BY PAUL SHAKER, RPP

Neighbourhood schools are typically centrepieces of their respective communities, and they are focal points for travel twice a day for children and parents. This movement between home and school also links community planning with public health in the context of active transportation and physical activity. However, while some kids walk or wheel to school, many others make the trip by car.

In fact, fewer and fewer students are walking or cycling to school. From 1986–2011, the rate at which Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) students 11 to 13 years of age were driven to school

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doubled, according to a Metrolinx study. At the same time, the percentage of children walking and cycling fell from 62 per cent to less than half.

Why is this important? We know exercise is a critical part of the school day because it helps optimize brain health, including cognitive, mental, social, and physical health. A child with a healthy brain is ready to learn, interact with others, and deal with stress. As walking and cycling can help achieve this, the school day really begins as soon as a child starts their journey to school and ends when they arrive home.


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While there have been many programs and initiatives aimed at increasing active school travel, success has been mixed. This is because there are many different but connected issues affecting the decision to walk/wheel to school. For example, traffic safety, street design, cycling networks, family schedules, public awareness, and distance to school all factor into a successful walk/wheel to school program. What is needed is an approach that reflects this reality.

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The Daily School Route (DSR) is an enhanced approach to active school travel that creates active transportation systems for kids. The DSR sees kids as “transportation users” within their own system and creates a network of routes, called Student Streets, to help facilitate safe, effective active school travel. The goal is to see 100 per cent of students who live close enough walking or wheeling to/from school daily, regardless of age, ability, or personal circumstance, so they can experience the benefits of active transportation. Since 2020, the DSR has been introduced at 25 schools across Hamilton and more signed routes are being implemented in 2023. But this isn’t the only benefit.

Through a data-intensive engagement process, including safety hotspot mapping and an innovative draw-your-route tool, the DSR is able to look at entire city wards to capture information about the active transportation environment among several schools that are geographically co-located. With routes identified for several schools at once, necessary safety improvements are flagged to make the Student Streets safe, convenient, and attractive. When combined with ward-wide improvements, such as speed limit reductions, what results is a ward strategy to create safer streets for all residents.

The goal of the DSR is to get more kids walking and wheeling to school on a daily basis. A fundamental part of this is making streets safer and more pedestrian friendly. After all, if the current design of neighbourhood streets isn’t working for students, then it’s not working, period. 



**Paul Shaker, MCIP, RPP**, is a Member of OPPI and a principal with Civicplan, a program partner with the Daily School Route (DSR). For more information about the DSR, visit <https://dailyschoolroute.org>.