

Breakfast Bus Pumps Up Lake Tyers



Photo: Wayne Paulus

Something new is happening that has the children living at the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust bounding of out bed these days. Not only do they have a delicious and healthy breakfast to look forward to but getting to the breakfast table is great fun. The children are part of a unique Walking School Bus program. This bus doesn't walk to school, it walks to a breakfast program.

At 7am, every school-aged child in the community is collected from their home and walked down a path to the administration centre for a 7.30am breakfast. The route is 1.7 kilometres long from the first pick-up to the breakfast room.

This breakfast bus is a partnership between the community, East Gippsland Shire Council and the Department of Justice. Kaylene Wickham, East Gippsland Shire Council's Walking School Bus Coordinator, was invited to the Trust by the

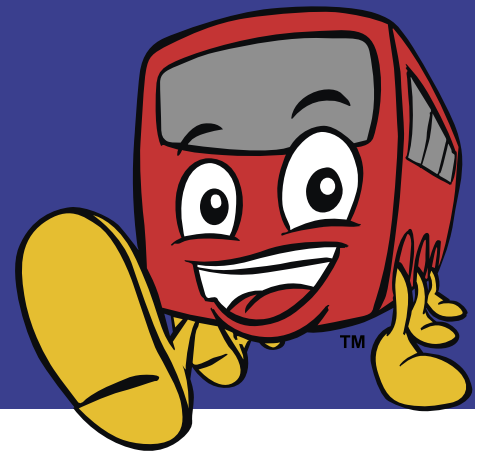
Department of Justice, who were working with the residents on a number of programs.

'The Department of Justice recognised the need to get the kids up and to the breakfast program first, before tackling how to get them to school, so I believe that the breakfast program started as a way of combating absenteeism at the schools', Kaylene explains.

It was Lake Tyers resident Maggie Wilkinson's idea to connect the Walking School Bus with the breakfast program.

'I was travelling home one day through Bairnsdale and I saw a whole lot of children walking together. They looked so good and when I asked what it was, a couple of the kids told me it was the new Walking School Bus program. I mentioned it to Annette [Forbes, Project Coordinator, Lake Tyers Community Renewal Project] and next thing you know it was all happening in our community.'

The Walking School Bus was seen as an effective and enjoyable way to get the children out together in the morning. Members of the community were handpicked to be the first volunteers. The training was modified to suit the local environmental conditions.



“I have seen a huge difference in the kids – they are so much more responsive. There is a real connectedness in the community; a real sense of relationship between people.”

‘It is a community and not a place with heavy traffic, so we had to adapt the Walking School Bus model to suit the environment we were working in’, says Kaylene.

Maggie was officially the Walking School Bus’s first driver. ‘The first couple of days we had to get used to getting up so early, but it was so good we didn’t mind. The kids are so bright and happy now and if you were to come down here at 8am you would see how pumped up and ready to go to school they all are,’ Maggie says.

The bus originally ran five mornings a week for 2 months but lost some momentum after the Christmas break. It is now running every Monday and Tuesday – with successive days deliberately chosen at the start of the week to get the children in the pattern of getting up and joining the bus.

Even on the days that the bus doesn’t run, most of the children naturally wander down by themselves to get breakfast, although occasionally some don’t make it on time, due to the bus not walking that day.

‘The kids just love it! They already knew each other really well but this gives them a really relaxed time early in the day’, Kaylene says.

‘The really interesting thing is that with some Walking School Buses the kids don’t want to wear vests. But these kids are the opposite. They are so proud of being part of the project that they want the biggest and brightest vest! They want everyone to know they are part of the program, which shows that it makes them feel good about being involved. Kids who are not recognised for other things, for example being sporty, are now recognised for being part of a really good thing. They are part of a program that is making them a lot healthier and adds value. This then extends to many other areas of their lives.’

Annette Forbes, Project Coordinator, Lake Tyers Community Renewal Project, says that feedback from two local schools has shown absenteeism has dropped dramatically since the

program was introduced in August 2005. Nowa Nowa Primary School had 100% attendance at the school in the first term of 2006. The schools also noted that the children are playing games together before school starts and that school was now seen as an enjoyable and important part of their day.

‘My experience with other communities has shown me that children respond very well when they are given a role and have certain levels of responsibility. This project is often one of the only aspects of their daily life they can have control over. The children have really embraced it. Kaylene is a tremendous motivator and I believe the impetus of this project has been maintained because of her energy and commitment and the trust she has built up in the community’, Annette adds.

Kaylene believes, and surveys show, that children enjoy school more as they can concentrate better after having a healthy breakfast and some early exercise.

‘Two of the children got an award from their school for attending the school the most days. The elders were so proud. It reinforced the value of education to the community.’

Kaylene also feels that walking on the bus has given the children a new love of play.

‘The kids love being active now. They will kick the footy for 10 minutes while they are waiting for the bus. We have ponchos for every child and a minibus to drive them on days when it is pouring with rain. There is a whole system in the community that has been built around getting these kids to school.’

Natalie Johnson has been both a driver and a conductor on the Walking School Bus. Her two children walk with her.

‘I got involved because of the children. It makes them real happy. When we are walking they talk and laugh. >>>

They'll talk about school, talk to the other kids. They are really excited on the Walking School Bus. They loved it during the Commonwealth Games [in March 2006] as we gave out awards of gold, silver and bronze medals. The kids really loved that.'

The whole community has embraced the Walking School Bus and is delighted with the impact it has had in many areas.

'I have seen a huge difference in the kids – they are much more responsive. There is a real connectedness in the community; a real sense of relationship between people. One of the new volunteers did not think he could contribute to the community, so the community encouraged him to get involved with the bus. This project is all about being connected', Kaylene says.

Kaylene is currently encouraging young adults in the community – those aged over 18 who haven't become parents yet – to become volunteers so they can get to experience the same sense of belonging that the current volunteers and children feel.

Maggie hopes that with the help of the parents they can expand the volunteer base so that the bus can walk every day again.

'The parents have already seen for themselves how well it is going and how much the children love it', she says.

The Lake Tyers walking to breakfast bus has shown how a seemingly simple project can have an immediate and lasting effect on the whole community.

'I love being involved with the Walking School Bus program because I know I am making a difference. One of the volunteers invited me into her home; I was so honoured to be establishing new friendships through this program. It gave me a real sense of "we are kicking goals here, we are really getting the message out that we can and are doing this together". I think people are realising that this is a great thing for their children and that it doesn't matter who is involved in it', Kaylene adds.

For more information on the Lake Tyers Walking School Bus Project contact Kaylene Wickham, East Gippsland Shire Council, on (03) 5153 9500 or at kaylenenew@egipps.vic.gov.au



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What made the difference?

- *Community leaders seeing the value of children walking together*
- *A partnership formed between the people of the Lake Tyers community, the Department of Justice and East Gippsland Shire Council*
- *The children's eagerness to walk regularly in a group with their friends to breakfast*
- *Adapting training to suit local community needs*