

# Many Legs Make Life Work in Nillumbik



Photo: Newspix

**David Norden has just spent a few hours in a shopping centre dressed as a shiny red bus with his legs, covered in black tights, dangling out below. And he's going back tomorrow to do it all again. Such is his commitment to and love of the Walking School Bus program.**

Describing himself as a 'professional volunteer', David is his family's main carer and is the parent coordinator of Diamond Creek Primary School's Walking School Bus program. Situated in the car-dependent Shire of Nillumbik, the school's success in bringing about a massive cultural change towards walking is remarkable.

Out of a school population of 210 students, 134 are walking regularly on a Walking School Bus.

'Walking to school at Diamond Creek is so popular now that it has become uncool not to walk. I am getting phone calls from parents saying "My children are nagging me about getting on this Walking School Bus; what is it?"', David says.

The Nillumbik Shire Council's Walking School Bus program is a partnership between the Shire, VicHealth and the Nillumbik Community Health Service. The program currently has 16 buses over seven schools with 96 active volunteers and over 300 children enrolled to walk on the buses. The program's coordinator, Joan Lauricella, who works out of the Community Health Service, has been able to attract an enormous number of volunteers, a component that has proved challenging for many other Walking School Buses across the state.

Joan puts the popularity of the buses down to a number of factors.

'It is really about the people within the schools. The buses have been more successful in some schools than others. Schools that have a parent coordinator of the project tend to be more successful as the parents take ownership of it. Our first intake of schools all had school coordinators; the second lot are all parent coordinators and we have found over time that this is a more effective way to go. All the coordinators are fantastic and enthusiastic', Joan adds. ➤➤

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Joan has also run over 26 training sessions for volunteers with over 130 parents attending the sessions.

‘I run the sessions according to need. I often organise training for a couple of people but then end up with a lot more as people have heard about the session.’

Nillumbik Shire, in the outer north-east of Melbourne, is a council with close-knit communities, ranging from typical urban settings to small rural townships and remote bush. The area has a large number of families, with residents having a keen commitment to the environment. But they are, paradoxically, very car-dependent. The area is poorly serviced by public transport, with no services in the rural zone.

The Shire has a proud history of community participation and volunteering. Or as David puts it: ‘It’s a community of people that have always wanted to have a say – it’s a very outspoken community. We are involved with a 2020 plan here. People want better cycling paths and we want to make the areas safer for walking. If we don’t have these things, people will always get back in the car.’

Mayor Greg Johnson says the Walking School Buses are going from strength to strength in the shire. ‘It’s great to see more and more children walking. It gives them a chance to have a chat and get to know their neighbourhood. It is really good for them to have some independence from their parents while walking to school.’

Joan says a number of formal and informal networks have been instrumental in developing, refining and sustaining the Walking School Buses. A steering committee comprising Joan, a representation for Council, school staff and parent volunteers from all schools meets twice a term. Parent and staff coordinators from the seven schools keep in contact with each other through emails and phone calls and share resources and information.

‘I have been talking to a neighbouring school, Eltham East Primary School, about their Walking School Bus. The school

president is taking 6 months off work and wants to put more of his time into their Walking School Bus program. I am showing him what we have done. This has led to increased communication between parents across the two schools and it’s not just about the Walking School Bus. We are building a friendship and a bond with another community and looking at how we can work together on issues that affect the whole community. For example we are looking at how we can tackle the problem of graffiti. It’s so great to connect and bond with other parents with the same issues and work out a solution together’, David says.

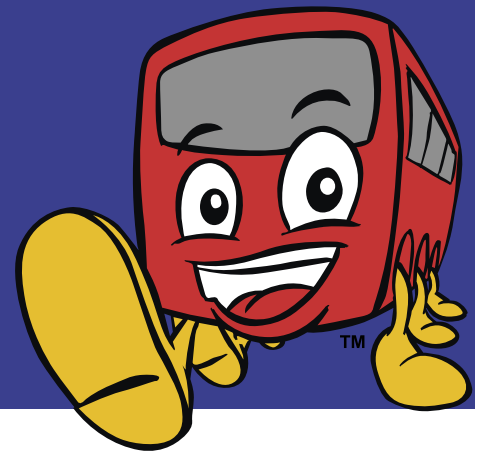
David, who is also a volunteer firefighter and Safety House coordinator for the Diamond Creek area, says the project has had support from parents and the community right from the start.

‘It is just so exciting. The biggest thing about the Walking School Bus is that you can’t knock it. Everyone wants to jump on it. Everyone thinks it is really worthwhile. The whole community is backing us. Everyone smiles at you, from the fish and chip shop owner to the hairdresser and the florist.’

David is quick to stress that he has a large team of volunteers that are as committed as he is. Michelle Molinaro walks each day on the bus with her two children and actively contacts the local media and regularly takes photos of the project. She says that walking on the bus has become an important part of her life.

‘I had cancer last year, so for me it has been one way to regain my previous fitness and improve my physical wellbeing. I am so pro-walking that my kids actually believe the car won’t start in the mornings at our house unless there is a really special event where we have to drive to school, and even then they walk back to meet up with the Walking School Bus! A walk each day has been built into their way of thinking about our world’, Michelle explains.

The school has had no trouble attracting sponsorship from organisations such as RoadSafe Victoria, Rebel Sports and the Commonwealth Bank and has an incentive system where the



children receive prizes and rewards every time they reach a milestone, such as every 10 walks, 50 walks and 100 walks. David has laboriously logged information about each child's walking habits every day since the project started.

It has also been able to attract a number of 'celebrity walkers' through the school newsletter and word-of-mouth of parents. These walkers have included local boy and Bushrangers opening batsman Lloyd Mash, Australian netballer Sherelle McMahon and a Dame Edna Everage lookalike volunteer from the 2006 Commonwealth Games closing ceremony.

'On "Walk to School Day" we had three Commonwealth Games volunteers walk with us and 150 students out of 210 walked that day', David says.

Information about the program is included in induction packs for new parents to the school, and this has been especially influential with new Prep students, David says.

'In the first week of school 17 out of 28 Prep children walked. We now have 24 children out of a class of 28 walking. For a lot of new parents, having a Walking School Bus program was one of the reasons they chose this school.'

Another local school running the Walking School Bus program, Eltham Primary School, has formed a relationship with the YMCA, which donated swim passes to the children who walked, which were handed out at assembly as a special treat. These children have also been given 'welcome to winter' hot chocolates on their way to school on approximately four mornings last year.

Volunteer Heather Martin can't contain her enthusiasm for the project. 'The Walking School Bus is a great "job". The children's chatter each morning is just lovely and the volunteers are a wonderful enthusiastic bunch of parents – we have become a very supportive group of friends', Heather says.

The Nillumbik Walking School Bus program illustrates how a community that has existing connections in some areas can develop immeasurable benefits in other areas through the relationships and trust built between parents and children who participate on the bus.

'I can definitely see a change in lifestyle with my own children and within the community. I have now got to know the children that my children are growing up with – it's great. Being on the Walking School Bus instils community values of respect in the children; it really is life education. We are having a few problems with some 13 to 16-year-olds, who are damaging property through graffiti and vandalism. Hopefully the younger children, who are learning community values through walking on the bus, will have more of a sense of being part of the community than these older children have at the moment', David says.

**For more information on Nillumbik Shire Council's Walking School Bus Program contact Joan Lauricella, Walking School Bus Project Officer, Nillumbik Community Health Service, on (03) 9431 1333 or at [joanl@nchs.org.au](mailto:joanl@nchs.org.au)**



Photo: Courtesy Nillumbik Shire Council WSB

### What made the difference?

- *Leadership and enthusiasm shown by parents and schools*
- *An existing community committed to social and environmental enhancements*
- *High-level commitment from local government, community health services, other community organisations, schools, parents and children*
- *Innovative communication and promotion strategies that utilised local media, celebrity walkers and a formalised communication network between school coordinators*