

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Metrolinx Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area School Travel Household Attitudinal Study Report

Fall 2011

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Metrolinx's *Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area School Travel Household Attitudinal Study* was the second in-depth area-wide study of household travel mode choices and attitudes in regards to elementary school travel. The study supports the work of the *Stepping It Up* project (www.metrolinx.com/schooltravel).

Harris/Decima Inc conducted 1,016 telephone interviews in the spring of 2011 with randomly dialled Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) households, including oversampling of Hamilton and Peel residents in order to study regional differences. Survey respondents were GTHA parents and legal guardians with at least one child attending elementary school (junior kindergarten through grade 8). The survey focused on the respondent's eldest child attending elementary school and the parent/guardian's knowledge, attitudes and perceptions regarding their child's travel to and from school. The following are the key findings of the study.

How children currently get to school is determined by a number of factors: the most important is the distance between home and school. Most children who live within 1km either walk/bike to school or are driven by a household member, while those living between 1 and 2 km from their school are evenly split between walking/biking, taking the school bus, and being driven. Most children living greater than 2km away are being driven to school or taking a school bus. Although most households tend to own vehicles, parents who live closer to the school are more likely to see walking as a realistic option for their child. While children are driven to school at every distance, the proportion increases with greater distance from the school, despite the availability of school bussing to many children living beyond a walkable distance.

A child's age is another main factor influencing whether parents allow their child to walk/bike, or even use available school bus service. Although parents who have children younger than grade 4 are more likely to live closer to their child's school than parents of older children, younger children are less likely to be allowed to walk/bike to school. Young children who walk/bike to school are also almost always accompanied by a parent when doing so, while older children tend to travel independently or with peers.

While most parents report there is a menu of options available to their child for their trip to/from school (e.g. walking, bicycle, school bus, public transit, car), many parents choose to drive their child to/from school daily for a variety of reasons. These parents form the key target audience for initiatives supporting healthier and more environment-friendly methods of school travel. Three specific target groups were examined: 1) parents who live close to their child's school but drive their child instead of having them walk/bike ("Close Drivers Segment", 20% of parents), 2) parents who live beyond 2km but who drive their child instead of having them use available school bus service ("School Bus Target", 6%), and 3) parents who live 2km away and drive their child but are open to carpooling with other families ("Carpool Target", 11%).

When compared to other methods of school travel, driving their child to school is not actually seen by parents to be a particularly *convenient* or *appealing* method. When asked about the convenience of a variety of methods, including driving, walking, cycling, school bus and carpooling, parents reported methods other than driving their child as being more *convenient* and *appealing*. Among the three target segments, the *single most appealing option for parents is having their child walk to school with an organized group*. Parents in the Close Drivers Segment were also more likely to say they would prefer an option other than driving their child.

Most parents (75%) strongly agree that having their child get to school in an *environment-friendly way* is important. Over a third of parents strongly agree that they *chose to live in their neighbourhood so their child could walk or cycle to/from school* and this number is nearly two-thirds amongst parents whose child currently walks or bikes to school. However, 70% of parents are also worried about *strangers/bullies* approaching their children if they travel to school alone, and 56% strongly agree there is too much car traffic around their child's school, especially among parents with younger children and parents who already drive their child.

Parents in the three target groups are more interested than other parents in considering *alternatives* to the way their child currently travels to and from school. However, parental awareness of existing programs and initiatives such as iWalk, Active and Safe Routes to School, and CAN-BIKE, is low.

Parents were asked about a list of infrastructure improvements, services, household changes, and other measures, and whether putting any of these in place *would increase the likelihood of their child walking or biking to or from school*. Eighty percent of parents in the Close Drivers Segment said that implementing at least one of the listed measures would greatly increase the likelihood of their child walking or biking, with the following being the most popular measures: *'well-maintained sidewalks'* (44%), *'a school closer to home'* (41%), *'crossing guards and marked crossings in front of the school'* (41%), *'safety signage around schools'* (40%), *'slower speeds around schools'* (39%), and *'before or after school supervision'* (39%).

Parents were additionally asked about a list of resources to support their child in walking, cycling or carpooling, and the *likelihood of parents using such resources if made available*. About a third of parents in the Close Drivers Segment said they would be extremely likely to use a *Walking School Bus* (31%) and a *matching service for connecting with other parents for walking to school* (24%). Parents in the Carpool Target Segment would be extremely likely to use a *matching service to find other parents for carpooling to school* (32%), but also a matching service for walking to school (21%), if made available.

Initiatives promoting healthier and more environment-friendly methods of school travel such as walking and cycling appear to be popular among parents. Further, many parents are receptive to exploring and even adopting alternative methods to driving their child, given that the proper conditions and supportive measures are in place.