

## Executive Summary: Health Impact Assessment of School Transportation Policy in the Essex Westford Educational Community Unified Union School District

Beginning in June 2016, the Vermont Department of Health Burlington District Office completed a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) of school transportation policy in the newly consolidated Essex Westford Educational Community Unified Union School District (abbreviated the Essex Westford School District). Prior to consolidation the separate school districts had three different policies. School consolidation compelled the district to create a single transportation plan that was equitable across the district.

Thus, the goals of the HIA are:

- Determine the health impacts associated with diverse types of transport to and from school
- Recommend ways the school district, parents, and the community can promote positive health impacts and mitigate negative impacts related to school transport

Based on scoping with the community, the HIA focuses on the health impacts of:

- Injury/ Personal Safety
- Physical Activity
- Mental Health

These health impacts are studied through the different transportation scenarios of district provided transport, active transportation, and transport in personal vehicles. Components of the assessment are both quantitative and qualitative and include a profile of existing health conditions primarily from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, national literature review, a parent survey administered specifically for this project, and a focus group with local high school students. A Health Impact Assessment Advisory Committee comprised of local community members, parents, school staff, municipal staff, and representatives of regional organizations was convened to advise the Health Department in completing the assessment.

### Findings & Predictions

Findings are based on the results of literature review, the parent survey, and youth focus group data. Predictions of potential health impacts are summarized in the table below.

	<i>Injury/ Personal Safety</i>	<i>Physical Activity</i>	<i>Mental Health</i>
<i>District Provided Transport</i>	Positive Impact	Negative Impact	Positive and Negative Impacts
<i>Active Transportation (Walking &amp; Biking)</i>	Positive and Negative Impacts	Positive Impact	Positive and Negative Impacts
<i>Transport in Personal Vehicles</i>	Negative Impact	Negative Impact	Negative Impact

### Recommendations

Our assessment found that transport in private vehicles is likely to have negative health impacts on injury/personal safety, physical activity, and mental health. While physical activity would be positively

impacted by active transportation, the likelihood of students walking and biking to school is greatly influenced by travel distance, parental perceptions of safety, and parental commuting schedules. Any added bussing should be done in a way that preserves or increases current rates of active transportation. Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations be considered in development of the school transportation policy in the Essex Westford School District. These recommendations have been vetted with the Health Impact Assessment Advisory Committee and key community stakeholders. They are likely to promote positive health outcomes and mitigate negative outcomes related to potential changes in school transportation policy.

### **Encourage use of bussing by those eligible**

1. Maintain and expand bussing schedules to increase access to all after school activities (i.e. activity and late busses).
2. Coordinate pick-up/drop-off times with school start/end times to minimize blocks of time when students are not occupied at either the beginning or end of the school day. In the event this is unavoidable, include supervised structured activity within those blocks of time.
3. Enforce student behavior policies/protocols during bussing.
4. Ensure appropriately trained adult supervision, in addition to the bus driver, is in place on busses. If only a limited number of monitors can be hired, assign monitors to highest need busses based upon behavior incident data collected at the beginning of the year.

### **Improve school zone safety**

5. Provide an adequate number of crossing guards at high volume and high speed intersections.
6. Provide plenty of secure, sheltered bicycle parking that meets national best practice standard close to an entrance of each school building.
7. Work with municipal staff to identify and prioritize infrastructure improvements (e.g., sidewalks, paths, bike lanes, pavement markings, etc.) that would encourage and support walking and biking to schools.
8. Use pavement markings, signage, other prompts and enforcement to promote the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists in areas where busses and cars are operating on school grounds.
9. Minimize number of private vehicles near school grounds by supporting bussing, walking, biking, carpooling, remote drop off, etc.

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