SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School

Bike Buses:
Let's Bike to School Together

Lincoln, NE. Source: Joe Dauer

Welcome to the Bike Bus!

The concept behind a bike bus is a simple one: Groups of students and adults riding to school together. However, a bike bus is more than the sum of its parts, sparking enthusiasm among families and showing communities what's possible for the trip to school. Bike buses, also known as bike trains, come in all shapes and sizes. In Tempe, AZ, riders in a monthly bike bus meet in a local church's parking lot, then the group rolls in the bike lane all the way to school. The weekly bike bus in Orem, UT, follows a route with planned stops along the way, growing in size until the riders gather for a few snacks before pedaling the final blocks to school. A bike bus in Portland, OR, has attracted worldwide attention and regularly features 150 riders.

A bike bus can be small and informal with a few families riding together, or it can be more complex and attract many riders. All bike buses offer an active, social, and fun way to travel to school that helps communities envision streets where people can walk and bike, not just drive.

"When I see families biking on other days without us it makes me think that we've made it easier for them"

– Tempe, AZ

About This Guide

This guide, updated from our 2017 publication, is informed by interviews with eight fantastic bike bus leaders from around the country. It also reflects the National Center for Safe Routes to School's experience with bike safety and coordinating National Bike & Roll to School Day since it began in 2012. It is organized around some of the questions you may ask if you're considering starting or supporting a bike bus:

- Who can start and lead one?
- How should a route be selected?
- What are the expectations for safety and rider rules?
- How do I get the word out?
- What will help make my bike bus a success?

Also, throughout the guide, you'll see quotes from bike bus leaders sharing their first-hand perspective and expertise.

Step 1. Who Can Start and Lead a Bike Bus?

Chicago, IL. Source: Active Transportation Alliance

In short, nearly anyone! Just like bike buses come in all different varieties, bike bus leadership varies, too. Some examples of leaders who start up and keep bike buses moving include:

- **Parent volunteers:** Many bike buses are led by a parent or group of parents of students at the school.
- **Teachers and other school staff:** A school's teacher often makes a good bike bus leader. They have credibility as known members of the school community and have channels to directly communicate with students and get messages home to caregivers. A specials teacher (e.g., P.E., art class, or others) has the added advantage of working with students from different classes and grades throughout the week.
- **Local organizations:** In some cases bike buses are led by local groups, such as bike advocacy groups or Safe Routes to School champions. These groups may have access to networks of volunteers to lend support.

The School's Role

Getting the school on board is important for spreading the word. A principal, dedicated teacher, or PTA/PTO member may provide the link between bike bus leaders and students and their families. Schools may help by:

- Distributing flyers in student take-home folders or newsletters.
- Making announcements or including bike bus details in school email blasts.
- Making arrangements for the bike bus arrival on school grounds; for example, providing a clear path separated from vehicle traffic and/or ensuring a proper storage area for bikes.

National Bike to School Day in Washington, DC.
Source: National Center for Safe Routes to School

Made Possible by Volunteers

Volunteers are key to making bike buses safe and successful. Some bike buses require caregivers to ride with their children, while others encourage or are neutral on parent presence. In some places, volunteers from the community, local bike groups, or local agencies provide the adult support needed. More support is needed for younger elementary age riders.

Step 2. Planning the Route

A route needs to consider where the leader lives, where student riders live, students' riding abilities, and the safety of the bicycling environment. The first step is to choose the type of bike bus that makes the most sense for the school and neighborhood.

Two Bike Bus Styles

Let's All Meet!

In some areas, the best option is to have all riders gather at a set location and ride the entire route together. A church, community center, park, or another location with a quiet parking lot works well. Bike bus leaders set a time, communicate when the bike bus will depart, and riders all leave together.

Advantages

Leaders only need to communicate one location and one start time to all riders.

Riders not on the route or close to the route can all join the bike bus.

It accommodates parents who may not feel comfortable riding alone with their child to meet the group (or having their child ride alone to a stop).

Planning the route involves safety and directness with less concern for proximity to students' homes.

It's easy to communicate instructions and announcements to the group.

Minor repairs can be handled before departure.

Disadvantages

Riders may need to travel out of their way to join at a starting point. If it will require a car ride, then a trusted adult will need to be available to drive.

There may not be a good meet-up location.

Brooklyn, NY. Source: Emily Stutts

We'll Swing By!

More like an actual bus, this bike bus features planned stops, where riders can join the bike bus. Leaders communicate the starting point and time, the route, and the times when they plan to reach each stop. Along the way, the bike bus grows as more riders join.

Advantages

Riders along the route do not need to backtrack to join; they simply hop on the bike bus as it passes closest to their homes.

The route may have more of a community feel by going past homes and through neighborhoods.

Disadvantages

This requires additional coordination to arrange the stop points and to stick to a reliable time schedule.

A route is needed that will allow students to easily join the ride.

The route may be longer to use stops that fit riders' homes.

Route Selection Considerations

Sometimes route selection is very straightforward. For example, there's a park on a greenway near the school and everyone meets at the park and rides the greenway. Other times, there are considerations that need to be balanced.

"Think more about social networks. Where are friends who also bike? Kids are willing to bike a few extra blocks if they are with their friends."

– Lincoln, NE

Proximity to School and Homes

Typical bike bus journeys range from approximately .5 mile to 1.25 miles[1]. Finding a route that's manageable both in terms of topography and distance from the school is important. Students of different ages and experience levels will influence what's considered manageable and comfortable. Knowing your riders and the terrain will be important in deciding where to start the ride and what will make for a fun bicycling trip to school.

Where students live is another consideration. If starting from a central spot, consider a spot convenient for potential riders who may be arriving by car or by bike. Good starting points also have plenty of space to gather before starting the ride. If planning a route past riders' homes, find a route with convenient places for the riders to wait.

Built Environment

Distance and proximity may need to be balanced with the biking conditions. Some basic infrastructure considerations can guide your route selection. Look for:

- Roads with low traffic volumes and low vehicle speeds.
- Minimal road crossings.
- Bicycling facilities available along the route like protected bike lanes, off-street cycling paths, and signed bike boulevards or neighborhood greenways.

For a better idea of how the route will work for a group, take a test ride. If possible, invite someone from your local transportation department along with you on the ride. Together you can see what routes feel comfortable and provide the right balance of convenience to homes, proximity to school, and supportive road design. On the test ride, keep in mind that groups travel more slowly than the speed of one or two adults.

For more information about biking infrastructure see the National Association of City Transportation Officials guide, *"Designing for All Ages and Abilities,"* and the Federal Highway Administration's *"Bikeway Selection Guide"* and *"Proven Safety Countermeasures: Bicycle Lanes,"* in the Resources list at the end of this guide.

When There's No Route

Sometimes biking to school isn't safe or feasible, but another option for active travel exists.

"Start with a walking school bus when there isn't a route. Bike bus is an expression of joy, community, and creativity with so many ways to do it. A walking school bus is still a good way to make it happen. Remote drop-off with a walking school bus is an option."

– Portland, OR

Be Flexible

As you start your bike bus, it's key to be flexible about the route. For all the planning and practice you do, riding with the group may reveal new details. Keep an open mind and be ready to change if things don't feel safe or feel difficult for some riders.

Hood River, OR. Source: Megan Ramey

What Happens After School?

Bike buses often cover the trip to school, but what happens at the end of the day? Bike bus organizers have different approaches, and these depend on student schedules, adult volunteer availability, and other logistics. Some bike buses do the trip in reverse, leaving school to ride home with the students. Others do not have an organized bike bus to go home because students head to afterschool programs, have other activities after school hours, or there aren't volunteers available to manage the bike bus. In these cases, families should make a plan with their students; some may ride home in smaller groups and others may be met by their caregivers.

Step 3. Setting Up for Safety

Getting to school safely while having fun is a key part of the bike bus. Infrastructure along the route (discussed in Step 2), is one consideration. These other factors help ensure everyone is riding safely:

Adult Participation

Adult volunteers play a role in keeping the bike bus safety by riding with the group.
Depending on your group and the environment you ride in, adult rider roles include:

- Riding at the front of the group to keep pace, form a line student riders stay behind, and watch for intersections and traffic.
- Riding alongside students on roadways that require riders to stay to the right or stay in a bike lane.
- Riding ahead as a "corker" in intersections, holding cross street traffic until the bike bus passes through the intersection.
- Riding as a "sweeper" at the back of the pack, making sure that no rider falls behind.

Chicago, IL. Source: Active Transportation Alliance

Riding Formation

Infrastructure and drivers often dictate what works for a bike bus. When planning the route, you'll need to be aware of what's safe given the environment and may even need to change riding styles throughout the trip. Here are some examples of how groups ride:

- **Side by side, no more than two riders:** In a bike lane or when it's necessary to ride to one side of the road.
- **Single file:** In a bike lane or all the way to one side of the road.
- **Taking the entire roadway:** On streets with low traffic and low speeds.
- **Using the sidewalk:** In some locations, the sidewalk may be the best option, but check that local ordinances permit it.

Brooklyn, NY. Source: Emily Stutts

Helmets

Let families know that helmet use is expected. In some cases, bike bus leaders may be able to find helmet giveaway opportunities to have one or two helmets for riders without them.

National Bike & Roll to School Day in Washington, DC. Source: National Center for Safe Routes to School

Preparing Students

Besides helmets, consider safety reminders that might be needed pre-ride or before the bike bus begins operating. Example rules include:

- Stay behind the lead adult
- Give space to other riders
- Communicate with the riders around you

Training students and adults before bike bus riding is not always needed, but can be a helpful step, particularly if you are initiating a large-scale bike bus program.

While caregivers are ultimately responsible for preparing their children to ride with a bike bus, leaders can help by providing caregivers with bike safety resources and any special rules or expectations. Proper bicycling equipment can support a safe and comfortable ride to school. Everyone must have a bicycle that fits, is in good mechanical condition, and is equipped with features to support safe commuting. The handout included in this guide details how to check that bike components are operating safely. It can be provided to both the bike bus

"We met with the PTO to review safety, stopping, helmets, gloves, and other equipment. We also met with adults to do a practice ride and review group riding techniques."

– Boise, ID

leaders and to the caregivers of student riders. Encourage riders and leaders to review the handout and gather all of the necessary supplies before the first ride so everyone is ready to go.

Plan for the Unexpected

It will be important to plan and communicate procedures for when things don't go as planned. For example, what will happen if the bike train or the student rider doesn't show up on time? What is the plan for inclement weather days? Members of the bike train should discuss in advance and be prepared to handle unexpected situations, such as:

- Inappropriate student behavior
- Emergencies/injuries
- No shows (rider or leader)
- Mechanical issues
- Blocked routes

On-bike training in Haywood County, NC.
Source: National Center for Safe Routes to School

Where possible, share "what if" procedures with everyone involved.

Step 4. Getting the Word Out

Promoting the bike bus and keeping participants informed requires finding ways to connect with families. From high-tech to low-tech options, communications methods vary across bike buses. One strategy may be ideal, or a combination of several strategies may work best for your community.

- **School flyers:** Flyers with information on bike bus details help spread the message in and around the school. Flyers can be posted (consider locations where families arrive at the school) and added to student take home folders.
- **Texting or messaging apps:** Use text chains or messaging apps to keep in touch with participants. Bike bus leaders send updates on upcoming bike buses, keep caregivers and volunteers updated on the day of the bike bus, and notify riders at bike bus stops that the group is on the way to pick them up. A GPS tracker can also help everyone keep track of the bike bus location. The level of communication depends on the particular bike bus and how it's organized so there are no "must-dos" here.
- **Yard signs:** Simple yard signs at the school and along the route let the neighborhood know that the bike bus is happening in a given week and also designate where the bike bus will start and pick up along the way.
- **The bike bus:** The best advertisement for a bike bus might be seeing it. Particularly if a bike bus is starting with one or two families, responding to questions and interest from other families passing by on their way to school can be a simple way to build participation.

"The thing that helped us the most was putting out signs where the bike bus meets"

– Orem, UT

Timing

Once you've decided how you'll communicate with participants, there are some key times to relay information:

Chicago, IL. Source: Active Transportation Alliance

Before the Bike Bus Begins to Operate

This is the opportunity to get riders on-board for the bike bus. Flyers and other school-based communications will help you spread the word. Share route details, time and date, and contact information. This is a chance to build your contact list, too, if using any texting or messaging apps, so you can be in touch before the day of the bike bus.

Throughout the School Year

Regular reminders of the bike bus will help keep active participants updated on what's happening and attract new riders.

On the Day of the Bike Bus

Communication on the bike bus days helps make sure it runs smoothly, and everyone knows where to be. Some bike bus leaders announce when they're arriving at the starting point, when they set off, and when they're approaching stops. This can be as much or as little as is needed for the group.

Tips for Success from Bike Bus Leaders

We asked bike bus leaders for their top tips on getting bike buses started and keeping them fun and thriving.

Keep it Simple and Convenient

"Be ready to start where you can and grow."

-Portland, OR

"The bike bus has to be easy for leaders and for families. This includes picking a route that you can reliably get to, aiming for a frequency that keeps the momentum up but doesn't burn you out, and finding a core group that's ready to ride."

-Brooklyn, NY

Music

"If I forget my speaker, people comment on it."

-Lincoln, NE

"Gotta have the vibes!"

-Brooklyn, NY

Time the Kick Off

"Make a commitment to start in spring. In spring, the weather is nicer for consistent rides. Consistency builds momentum. After summer, you'll see an uptick in riders in the fall."

-Portland, OR

"Fall is hard to start a bike bus because you're competing with communications about so many other subjects."

-Lincoln, NE

Be Consistent So Families Can Rely on the Bike Bus

"You need a route you do consistently at the same time every time"

- Hood River, OR

National Bike & Roll to School Day. Source: www.walkbiketoschool.org

Leveraging the Bike Bus to Make Better Communities

Bike buses give visibility to young people using the community's streets and to people traveling by bike. They have the power to inspire dialogue and changes to streets to improve safety. The visibility of the bike bus can be key to getting support not just for the bike bus but for biking and safe, active travel in general. This includes making sure that local decision-makers see the demand a bike bus creates. For example, in Orem, UT, transportation planners did bike counts on a bike bus day and witnessed the need to support biking on that route.

"[The bike bus] helps embolden decision makers to install infrastructure. It builds community support. Use it as a tool for advocacy."

– Hood River, OR

Growing Community Support for Cycling

Bike buses impact community support for cycling while also bringing benefits to the individual riders. Students who participate in bike buses as elementary students may be more likely to continue riding into middle school. They can also be personally rewarding for both leaders and riders.

Building Trust in the Community and Independence for Kids

At the group level, bike buses also help to build community connections and trust. Bike buses are built on volunteer support and trust in letting students take a bike ride with a group from their neighborhood and school. These rides offer a chance to support families and give students an experience of independence.

Keeping it silly in Hood River, OR. Source: Megan Ramey

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following incredible bike bus leaders who shared their experience and advice:

Sam Balto – Portland, OR
Lisa Brady – Boise, ID
Joe Dauer – Lincoln, NE
Kendra Flory and Hannah Moulton Belec – Tempe, AZ
Zach Goulding – Orem, UT
Megan Ramey – Hood River, OR
Emily Stutts – Brooklyn, NY

Resources

Bike Bus World – Bike Bus World provide support for bike bus leaders across the world. Find resources, tools, and ways to connect for more guidance on the site.

Chicago Family Biking Bike Bus Guide and Videos – Created by bike bus leaders in Chicago, Chicago Family Biking features videos and other guidance for bike bus organizers and riders.

Federal Highway Administration Bikeway Selection Guide – Presents considerations for different bikeway types.

Federal Highway Administration Proven Safety Countermeasures: Bicycle Lanes – Describes evidence for safety benefits for different types of bicycle lanes.

National Association of City Transportation Officials Designing for All Ages and Abilities – Provides information and illustrations of different types of bicycle infrastructure and how these elements can make riding safer for all ages.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Helmet Fit Guide – Tips on checking for proper helmet fit.

National Walk & Bike to School Days E-Bike Safety – Resource list for e-bike safety for middle and high school students.

Tempe, AZ. Source: Kendra Flory and Hannah Moulton Belec

[1] Simón-i-Mas, G., Martín, S., Honey-Rosés, J. (2024). *A Global Survey of Bike Bus Initiatives.* Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ICTA-UAB). City Lab Barcelona. URL: https://ddd.uab.cat/record/283387

Bike Bus Equipment Checklist

Before setting out with a group for the bike bus, use the following checklist to ensure bikes fit their riders and all bikes are in good shape for the ride.

Check bike fit

Students will be safest and most comfortable on bikes that fit them at their current size, not ones that they will "grow into."

- ☐ When standing over the bicycle, there should be 1 to 2 inches between the rider and the top tube (bar) if using a road bike and 3 to 4 inches if using a mountain bike.
- ☐ When sitting on the bike, the rider should be able to touch the ground with both feet.

Check bike condition using the ABC quick check

It is important to make sure that bicycles are in good operating condition before any ride. The ABC Quick Check is an inspection approach that encourages review of Air, Brakes, Chain, and Quick release parts, all of which should be inspected and in good working condition before each ride:

- ☐ **A**ir – Check the air pressure, spin the wheels, and make sure the tires are not worn out.
- ☐ **B**rakes – Check to make sure coaster brakes will stop the bike by spinning the back wheel and applying the brake. If the bike has hand brakes, check to see that the levers don't hit the handlebars when squeezed. Lift one tire up at a time and spin it; squeeze the levers to see if the tire stops. The brake pads should be clean, straight, and contact the rims properly.
- ☐ **C**ranks, Chains, and Cogs – Grab the crank arms and try to wiggle side to side. There should be no movement. Spin the pedals and cranks to see if the chain drives the rear wheel. The chain should look like metal, not rust or black gunk. If the bike has gears, check to make sure the gear levers and derailleurs (gear-changing mechanism) work to shift the chain between gears.
- ☐ **Quick** Release – Some bikes have quick releases on the wheels or the seat post. Check to make sure they are tight and closed properly.
- ☐ **Check** – After making sure the seat and handlebars are tight and the proper height, ride your bicycle around the driveway or parking lot and check that everything works well.

In addition to the ABC Quick Check:

- ☐ Check that bicycles have reflectors on the front, back and both wheels. If riding when it's dark or nearly dark, there should also be white headlights and red taillights.
- ☐ Riders should have a bike lock to secure their bicycle once arriving at the school. U-locks are preferred over cable locks, which can be easily cut. Attach the frame and front wheel of the bike to the bike rack.
- ☐ To help transport backpacks and other bulky items, consider if bike baskets, saddle bags, or some other cargo carrier could help.

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Made possible by:

Suggested Citation:
Heiny, S. & Pullen-Seufert, N. (2025). Bike Buses: Let's Bike to School Together. National Center for Safe Routes to School.

Cover photos clockwise from top left:

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