

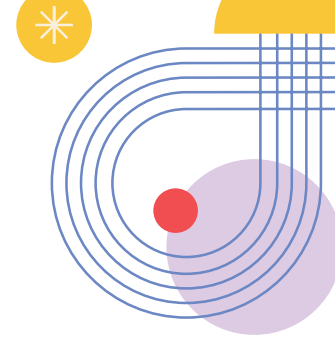
RESEARCH BRIEF:

Sustaining the Walking School Bus as a community-led school safety intervention

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BACKGROUND

Many children in rural KwaZulu-Natal walk long distances to and from school without formal transport or adult supervision. Previous research has identified multiple risks during the school journey, including road traffic dangers, bullying, harassment, intimidation, and violence (Ngidi et al., 2018). The Walking School Bus (WSB) was developed as a community-based response to these concerns. The intervention involved groups of children (aged 10-14) walking together along designated routes under the supervision of trained adult volunteers (Ngidi & Essack, 2022).

Although the original WSB ended after the pilot study, community members in the Taylor's Halt area continued operating the programme through a volunteer-led model. Over time, the WSB was adapted by community members and grew beyond its original focus on supervised walking and became embedded within broader systems of care and support for children.

AIM

This research brief explores how the WSB evolved after the pilot study, what factors supported or constrained sustainability, and how caregivers, volunteers, and children perceived the programme's value in everyday life.

METHODS

This study draws on qualitative data collected in Taylors Halt, KwaZulu-Natal, during 2026. Data sources included three in-depth interviews with caregivers/parents, three interviews with community volunteers/implementers, and one focus group discussion with five Grade 7 learners (boys and girls) participating in the WSB. The focus group discussion included participatory visual activities in which learners selected, discussed, and drew "superheroes" to describe experiences of safety, danger, bullying, protection, and support during the school journey. Data were analysed thematically using a rapid analytic approach.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Research Ethics Committee (REC1/17/09/25). Written informed consent and child assent were obtained from all participants.

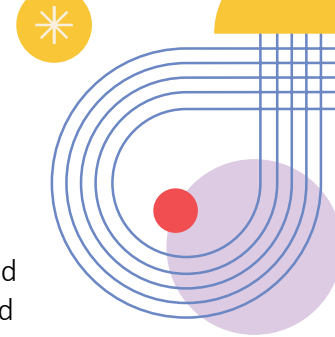
RESULTS

The WSB evolved beyond supervised walking

Participants described how the WSB changed after the pilot research project ended. The WSB shifted from a structured intervention with daily oversight by adult chaperones who received a stipend, to a volunteer-led model currently operating 2 days per week. Despite reduced days of operation, caregivers, volunteers, and learners consistently described the WSB as necessary and valuable within the community.

One of the most significant adaptations involved introducing homework support and reading activities. Volunteers described assisting learners after school, particularly children living with grandparents or caregivers (as is common in the area) who struggled to support schoolwork at home. Reading clubs focusing on isiZulu, English, and Mathematics were also introduced to address concerns about literacy and comprehension difficulties among younger learners.

Participants described these adaptations as practical responses to everyday community needs rather than



formal programme expansions. Over time, the WSB evolved beyond supervised walking and increasingly served as a broader system of care that linked safety, supervision, learning, and informal aftercare.

Safety remained the most valued aspect of the WSB

Across participant groups, safety remained the most valued aspect of the WSB. Before the WSB, participants described school journeys characterised by fear, bullying, intimidation, and exposure to danger. Caregivers worried about children walking long distances without supervision along isolated roads, while learners described feeling unsafe when travelling alone or encountering older children who bullied or threatened them during the journey to and from school.

Parents repeatedly associated the WSB with reassurance and reduced anxiety about children's safety. One caregiver explained that they *"love this [WSB] initiative because it is good and it ensures that our children are safe,"* particularly in a context where *"those boys who smoke whoonga [heroin-laced street drug mixture]... steal money from them"*. Participants valued the adult supervision and described adult chaperones as helping children travel safely, navigate traffic, and avoid dangerous situations during the school commute.

Learners similarly associated the WSB with reduced bullying, fewer conflicts during the journey, and safer movement along busy roads. Participants described chaperones as trusted adults who monitored children during the commute and ensured they arrived safely at school and home. Participants' accounts suggest that safety was experienced not only as protection from physical harm, but also as reduced fear and greater emotional reassurance for both children and caregivers.

The WSB offered social support

Beyond safety, participants described the WSB as supporting children's social well-being, school participation, and daily routines. Learners valued walking together, socialising with peers, and receiving support from chaperones and older children during the school journey. Participants also associated the WSB with improved punctuality, earlier arrival at school, and more time for homework and studying.

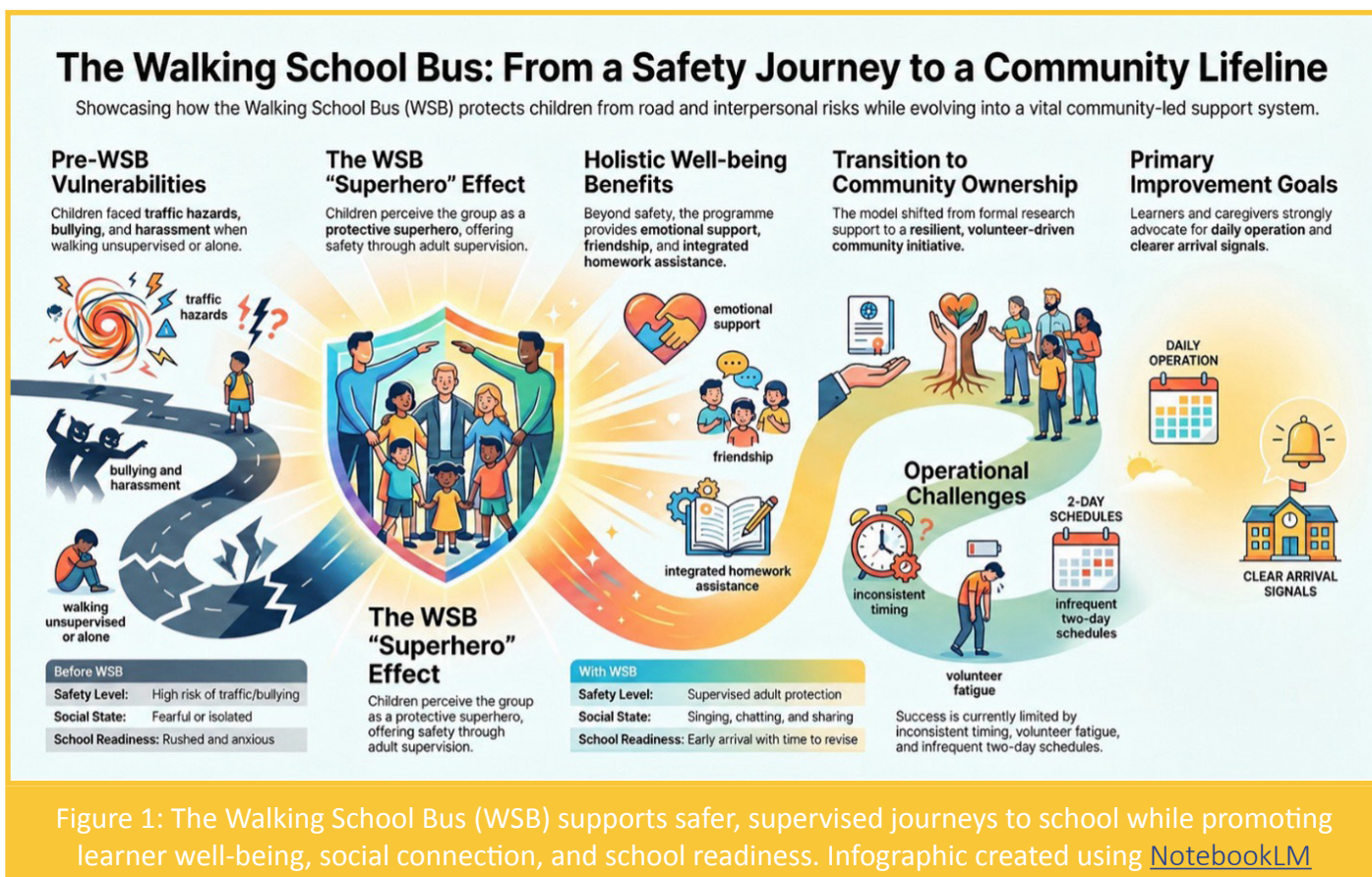
The participatory visual activities similarly reinforced children's perceptions of the WSB as organised, supportive, and protective. Learners contrasted unsafe journeys before the programme with safer and more structured journeys after joining the WSB. Chaperones were frequently described as trusted adults who protected children and helped them navigate difficult situations during the school journey.

Sustainability constraints

Although participants strongly supported the WSB, they identified several operational and structural challenges affecting the programme's long-term sustainability and reliability. Learners described frustrations with inconsistent pick-up times, uncertainty about routes, and the limited number of operational days. Parents and volunteers similarly expressed concern that operating only two days per week left children vulnerable on days when the WSB was not running. Several participants suggested that the WSB should operate daily and expand to include younger and older learners who continued to face risks during the school journey.

Participants highlighted multiple barriers affecting sustainability, including limited volunteer numbers, insufficient route coverage, lack of uniforms and communication tools, weather-related challenges, and difficulties sustaining the programme without financial support. The WSB depended heavily on unpaid

volunteer labour, with volunteers balancing programme responsibilities alongside informal employment, caregiving duties, and financial pressures. One volunteer explained that although they remained committed to the programme, “some days it’s hard, especially when it’s raining”.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The WSB was implemented and evaluated to address a persistent gap between learner transport policy and the realities faced by children in rural communities. Although learner transport is recognised as a basic right in South Africa, many learners continue to walk long and often unsafe distances to school because transport provision remains constrained by limited resources and budgets. Within this context, the findings suggest that the WSB represents a practical, community-based, low-cost and high-value intervention that can strengthen learner safety, psychosocial well-being, and school readiness while broader structural transport challenges remain unresolved. Based on our research, we make the following recommendations:

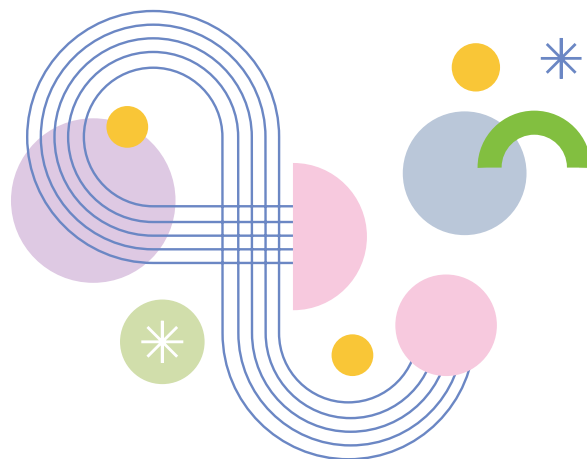
- **Recognise supervised walking initiatives as an important complementary policy response:** While the long-term provision of formal learner transport should remain a central policy objective, resource limitations mean that many rural learners are likely to continue walking to school in the foreseeable future. The WSB demonstrates how supervised group walking can provide an immediate, feasible, and contextually appropriate response to improve learner safety in under-resourced communities.
- **Support volunteer sustainability:** Community ownership emerged as a major strength of the intervention; however, sustained implementation depended heavily on unpaid volunteer labour. Practical support such as modest stipends, transport assistance, uniforms, or communication tools

may help reduce volunteer fatigue, improve retention, and strengthen programme continuity without substantially increasing programme costs.

- **Retain and strengthen integrated learning support:** The WSB evolved beyond a safety intervention and became a source of emotional support, peer connection, homework assistance, and reading support. These findings suggest that school safety initiatives should also be viewed as opportunities to strengthen learner well-being and educational support through partnerships with schools and community organisations.
- **Expand institutional support while maintaining community ownership:** Although the intervention remained strongly community-led, participants identified resource and staffing constraints that affected long-term sustainability. Stronger collaboration between schools, government departments, municipalities, universities, and civil society organisations may help provide the practical, logistical, and organisational support needed for sustained implementation and possible scale-up.

CONCLUSION

Although the earlier pilot evaluation did not find statistically significant reductions in bullying, the WSB continued because participants experienced the programme as valuable in everyday life. Qualitative findings described perceived and experienced reductions in bullying, greater feelings of safety, improved supervision, and the psychological safety afforded by travelling in organised groups with trusted adults, even where these changes were not reflected in measurable impact outcomes. The findings suggest that community-based interventions may remain sustainable when they respond to locally recognised needs and provide meaningful everyday benefits for children, caregivers, and communities.



Suggested citation: Essack, Z., & Ngubane, T. (2026). *Sustaining the Walking School Bus as a community-led school safety intervention*. Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI)

REFERENCES

1. Ngidi, N. D., & Essack, Z. (2022). Mapping the unsafe school journey: Rural primary school children's perspectives on dangerous social geographies in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 94, 102655.
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