

Strategies to encourage active travel to school

Walk to School and beyond



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Introduction

Walk to School encourages primary school children to regularly walk, scoot or ride their bike to school each October. It aims to build healthy habits for life by making physical activity part of children's daily travel.

The month-long program generates positive change with more children using active travel more often. The program's intention is for participating schools to carry this change forward, with ongoing support and direction from local government organisations, to sustain students' active travel throughout the year.

About this guide

This guide is for local councils, community health and relevant community organisations in Victoria that are involved in delivering VicHealth's Walk to School program.

It focuses on behavioural actions and engagement activities to encourage active travel and maintain school participation. An integrated approach also requires supporting infrastructure and road safety initiatives.

This guide has four sections that cover practice, people and planning:

- Making Walk to School a success
- Maintaining momentum
- Generating and maintaining school support
- Working strategically with multiple schools.

It provides practical suggestions and strategies, along with a range of case studies. It responds to diverse school contexts – small primary schools on country roads to very large schools in new urban communities – where people are working to help sustain active travel behaviour to school.

Walk to School resources

For more information on the steps to deliver Walk to School in October, go to walktoschool.vic.gov.au

This website has great resources, templates and tips to help kids get involved with Walk to School.



Making Walk to School a success

Here are some ideas and strategies to generate interest and encourage more walking, scooting and cycling to school.

Build momentum early

Plan and engage with schools well ahead of October. Many councils run events and competitions in Term 3 to get schools ready for Walk to School and spark interest in children and parents.

- City of Port Phillip ran a competition to get schools to sign up by a specific date in Term 3 to win a coffee cart for a Walk to School event. This is very popular.
- Maroondah City Council ran a 'Bag Tag It!' design competition in August. Winning designs were turned into bag tags for the school. It was popular with all age groups and involved STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) teachers, who became advocates and gave Walk to School a higher profile.
- City of Boroondara ran a postcard competition. Students put their creativity into designing a postcard about their Walk to School experience. The council received thousands of cards, which raised awareness with parents. Postcards were displayed in schools and Boroondara libraries.

Hold fun events

Special events can be scheduled throughout October to build excitement with primary school children.

- **Themed walk, ride or scoot to school days:**
 - Walk and Wheel Wednesdays
 - Fancy Feet/Bling Your Bike or Scooter: students decorate their shoes, socks or bike
 - Walk a Bear: Warrnambool City Council ran a day when students walked their favourite soft toy to school.
- **Footpath chalking:** Students chalk active travel and road safety messages on the nearby footpaths.
- **Special guests and in-school events or performances by a local celebrity:** Parent networks can help to find guests.
- **Healthy breakfasts**
- **Slow bike race at school:** Slow riding around an obstacle/skills course.

Need more ideas? Ask the students for suggestions.



Working with remote schools

Students at schools in and near rural communities often travel long distances and many arrive by school bus. Opportunities to Walk to School are limited but here are some ideas:

- **Active travel to bus stops:** Use similar incentives as Walk to School.
- **Walking events within school grounds:** Walk and run events before or during school, which could involve parents and families. The appeal of these may wear off fairly quickly unless they are linked to other incentives, like gaining house points for active travel.
- **Private school bus park and walk:** Schools in the Southern Grampians with a school-contracted private bus worked to identify a safe drop-off point for students to walk the last distance to school while the bus delivers their bags.
- **Active travel in other parts of the day:** Look beyond school to other activities for children to build activity into their day, such as commuting between school and after-school activities.

Offer incentives and rewards

Use strategies to make walking, scooting and cycling more appealing by 'gamifying' activities. This can motivate individual students to do more and encourage healthy competition among friends and classes.

Incentives work well for short periods but lose power over time as they become familiar and expected. Vary incentives and actions to suit different age groups; for example, stickers appeal far more to younger students than older ones. It is a good idea to seek student feedback on what appeals before purchasing rewards.

- **Classroom calendars:** Calendars are used by many Walk to School programs for tracking trips, and also give recognition to students in class. For example, the Victoria Walks [guide to classroom calendars](#).
- **Passports, punch cards, wristbands:** Different ways to track students' active travel. They can be designed and monitored by students.
- **Stickers and badges:** The Victoria Walks [Change to Walking program](#) used stickers as rewards for weekly walking.
- **Golden Boot award:** [City of Port Phillip](#) used this as a class reward for the most walking each week. It became a talking point among students and schools and was a great hook for social media posts.
- **Competitions:** Glen Eira City Council combined active travel trips with entry into a 'Golden Ticket' lottery. The more children walked, the more tickets they received for a big prize draw.

Whole-school incentives or rewards may also help to secure school commitment to participate in Walk to School month or continue collecting active travel data for council.

Incentives, rewards and promotional gifts

What is the difference between incentives, rewards and promotional gifts, and which are more effective?

- **Incentives encourage continued action:** Incentives can provide personal satisfaction ('My passport is full') or status ('I'm top of the leader board'). They support active travel behaviours.
- **Rewards acknowledge achieved actions:** Sometimes rewards overlap with incentives, as public recognition can boost a child's motivation to continue walking. Class or whole-of-school rewards have a more lasting impact and avoid excluding children unable to participate.
- **Promotional materials act as gifts:** Research has shown that branded merchandise (e.g. water bottles, shoelaces) creates short-term satisfaction and raises awareness but does not encourage ongoing travel behaviours.

Share success and personal stories

Personal stories are great for encouraging others. People rely on stories that they remember to evaluate information and make decisions. Sharing achievements and positive experiences may give others confidence to participate.

- **School newsletters:** Include regular articles and photos about events, active travel results, personal profiles of families, travel tips and the like. Ensure a parent or carer has given written consent before publishing any images of their child.
- **Social media posts and videos:** Profile current and upcoming events. Warrnambool City Council recorded impromptu smartphone videos of students' stories about active travel and used them in [Facebook posts](#). Strathbogie Shire Council created a [promotional video](#). The Victoria Walks [Change to Walking](#) initiative made a short video about the program and results. Ensure you have written consent from a parent or carer.
- **School app prompts:** Send prompts and reminders about events, positive road safety and active travel behaviours.
- **Public pledges/commitments:** Encourage schools to make a public statement about active travel and road safety through prominent messages at the entrance to their buildings. Encourage families to make and display public pledges for specific events or actions.

Maintaining momentum

The way we usually travel is often a hard habit to break. Here are some ideas for encouraging and sustaining active travel habits beyond Walk to School and helping schools maintain momentum after big events. Individual activities or incentives may have limited ongoing impact, but the combination of a number of actions can have a much greater effect.

Identifying which strategies to initiate or continue should be a shared process with each school community. Engagement strategies to achieve this are covered in the next section.

Identify walking routes

Identifying popular walking routes to school will make families more confident about active travel.

- **Identify walking routes:** For more information go to Victoria Walks' [guide to walking routes and decals](#). Work with families and students to identify and audit routes. Include park and walk zones away from school.
- **Use footpath decals to mark walking routes:** These can be designed by students or you can use designed and ready-to-go [Walk to School decals](#).
- **Create customised maps of walking routes:** Develop these with students and families. Share them with new school families as part of their orientation using the Victoria Walks [Walking Maps](#) online tool.
- **Signs:** These help to promote 'Park and walk' locations or 'Kiss and drop' zones.

Focus on small steps

Provide options so that busy families don't feel overwhelmed.

- **Suggest manageable actions:** For example, 'walk one day more than you usually do'.
- **Highlight active travel once a week:** For example, continue to run 'Walk and Wheel Wednesdays'.
- **Use the school calendar:** Add school, state and national Walk to School events to the school calendar.

Keep sharing information

- **New parent information:** Create a simple active travel page on each school's site and/or a handout for new families. Include this in orientation sessions.
- **Art, story and video competitions:** Student work can be used for decals, posters, social media posts and the like. City of Greater Geelong ran a student Walk to School video competition to win a prize, with several schools participating.
- **Council website:** Add an 'Active Travel to School' page to your council website, with links to related activities and participating schools.



Address local barriers

There may be a range of issues or concerns identified by school communities. Here are some examples of common challenges and potential responses.

Lack of infrastructure

- **Road safety audit:** Work with council traffic engineers to complete a road safety audit along priority routes. City of Darebin includes this work as a first step in their Octopus Schools program, which focuses on infrastructure improvements alongside behaviour change interventions in schools.
- **Prioritise improvements:** Identify and prioritise infrastructure and road safety improvements, which may range from school facilities (e.g. secure bike parking) to local area works (e.g. pedestrian refuges at crossing points on busier roads).

Driving to school on the way to another destination

- **Offer suggestions:** For example, encourage walking part of the way or planning a walking trip at least once a week.

Parental fears around traffic and personal safety

- **Walking buddies:** Matching older and younger students to walk together.
- **Informal walking school bus:** Connect members of the school community interested in sharing regular walking to school days. See the [Victoria Walks guide to starting a walking group](#).

- **Park and walk events:** Several councils have successfully promoted drop-off to specific locations for students to walk independently or supervised to school.
- **Road safety education:** Knox City Council's road crossing supervisors run '[Safety with Lottie](#)' incursions to teach primary school students road safety skills.

For more suggestions, see the VicHealth [guide to encouraging safe and independent travel](#).

Unsafe driver behaviour

- **Safe parking:** Help reduce incidents of unsafe driver behaviour through parking management and behavioural responses. Implement a good parking behaviour points system and student rewards.
- **'Kiss and drop' or 'Drop and go' zones:** These are similar to an airport taxi pick-up/drop-off zone, which is supported by 'no parking' signs to ensure cars are not left unattended. City of Kingston has implemented these at a number of schools and reduced traffic congestion.
- **Safe driver behaviour pledges:** Encourage families to make a public commitment to safe driving around school (e.g. a signed form displayed at school).
- **External resources:** Promote the VicRoads [safe driving around schools resources](#) in communications.

Monitor progress

Regular monitoring will maintain motivation and measure change.

- Encourage hands-up surveys one day a week or one week each term.
- Short annual online survey of parents and students to understand travel patterns and perceptions/interests.
- Perform regular counts of bicycles and scooters at school.

Generating and maintaining school support

The best way to implement additional actions beyond Walk to School in October is with support and buy-in from participating schools.

School communities need support to keep them engaged on extra-curricular programs. It helps to have strategies to create buy-in and shift focus from identifying issues to solving issues.

Connect with schools

- **Research each school's context:** Consider how the context of each school will influence their ability and willingness to support active travel. Find out about:
 - school size, location and geography
 - local area demographics
 - road speeds and distances.
- **Meet the principal:** With limited time, many schools to visit and possibly long distances, it may be hard to meet face-to-face. However, meeting the principal and other key staff will help to establish a positive relationship with each school and to get a feel for the school culture.
- **Be prepared:** Have some questions ready for an introductory school meeting. Identify areas of common interest, such as parking issues or concerns about the health and wellbeing of students.
- **Make a written commitment:** It is hard to move forward without support from the school's leadership team (principal or school council). Seek written confirmation. This could simply be a response to an email or it may develop into a formal partnership agreement.

Questions to ask schools

- How big is your school?
- What is your growth rate?
- Is the current student enrolment at, above or below its design number?
- How do most students travel to school?
- Are there issues with parking, traffic congestion or access?
- How many students travel by school bus?
- How many students live outside the school zone?
- What is the demographic makeup of the school?
- How many languages other than English are spoken at home?
- Are there cultural sensitivities we should be aware of?
- Have you participated in other active travel programs?
- How engaged are parents in school life?



Engage with parents and carers

Parents and carers are the key decision-makers for how children travel to school. Getting their support to lead activities can be challenging!

- **Parent/carer workshops:** Invite parents to participate in a workshop. Be prepared. It may help to have a facilitator to guide discussion. Be clear about what school and council can achieve in the short to long term. Give people the opportunity to air concerns and issues; write these down and group into themes. Identify issues that are within the school community's control and encourage people to brainstorm creative solutions. Write these ideas down and then identify specific actions (clear, small steps) to work towards these solutions.
 - A local collaboration of stakeholders from the Southern Grampians region ran a structured workshop with parents, school communities, council officers, bus companies, health workers and students using 'systems mapping' methodology to help identify localised enablers and barriers to active travel and ways to encourage more walking to school. This identified priority actions to take forward.
- **Pop-up stalls:** Hold a 'travel to school' stall when there will be lots of families around, such as after assembly. Display a big map of the local area to help people consider walking or park and walk options. Capture issues and suggestions. City of Kingston has effectively used pop-up stalls as part of their parent engagement.
- **Peer-to-peer conversations:** Identify school community leaders who are willing to have direct conversations with their networks to encourage people to participate in events.

- **Personal experience:** Encourage parents and carers to experience walking themselves. Organise local walks around the area or to school.
- **Homework:** Encourage the school to set a 'Walk with a parent' homework activity where students go for a walk in their local area with their parent or carer and then write about it.

'What's in it for me?'

Find out what is important to parents and students through intercept or online surveys. The answers to 'What's in it for me?' help frame communications, build support and remove barriers. When people see how other families are making it work, they are more likely to give active travel a try.

- 'I work from home for an hour after I walk my child to school. It makes my commute less stressful.'
- 'I'm doing the best for my child to set healthy habits for life.'
- 'It's fun!'
- 'I find trying to get a park in front of school stressful (so I choose to park and walk).'
- 'I found it saves time if we walk (kids in and out of the car and time trying to find a park adds up).'
- 'I get some time out (when neighbours are able to share active travel days).'

Encourage student engagement and leadership

Active travel to school is about children's health and wellbeing and building their capabilities. It makes sense for them to lead change. Students are often far more receptive to positive problem-solving and often identify creative solutions.

- **Student workshops:** Run a similar process to the parent workshops. Guaranteed they will be faster and more creative!
- **Active travel student committee:** Students can lead specific actions, help create a forward plan for the school and monitor progress. This may be as varied as running an active travel event, monitoring hands-up surveys to 'storytelling' about their local walking experiences.
- **Student ambassadors:** Warrnambool City Council Healthy Moves program works with student ambassadors from each school to identify and deliver actions. Students work directly with the council officer. This gives students ownership and helps keep momentum within each school.

Create a plan

A plan helps clarify what council is contributing, and what the school will do to grow active travel. Whether it is student-led or driven by some keen parents and/or the school council, a simple plan helps a school community stay on track.

It is best if council facilitates the process of developing a plan, rather than leading it, so that the school takes ownership. Keep the plan short, simple and realistic. Focus on a calendar of events and activities for each year. Ensure it responds to the school context, their priorities and resources.

Wherever possible, identify champions to lead actions. Champions may be students, parents, grandparents or teachers who are keen to incorporate active travel themes in their teaching.



Working strategically with multiple schools

Working with a number of schools can spread the benefits of active travel across a whole neighbourhood or region; for example, by reducing local area congestion. It may also broaden the community's focus to encouraging active travel for other daily transport trips.

Working with 15–50+ schools, however, requires setting priorities for school engagement and building partnerships among schools and other organisations to support ongoing implementation.

Build networks and partnerships

- **School networks:** Invite schools to participate in an active travel network to share ideas and strategies.
 - City of Whittlesea facilitates a quarterly meeting of local schools. It now groups schools into clusters to work more closely with 'like schools'.
- **Cross-council collaboration:** Collaborate across councils to share learning and resources.
 - Maroondah City Council has an eastern region active travel forum and works with City of Whitehorse and Manningham City Council, including hosting region-wide schools events.
- **Partnerships with other organisations:** Identify and work with other organisations to help share resources or tap into volunteers to lead school-based actions.
 - Mornington Peninsula Shire worked with Bicycle Network's Ride2School, school children and council officers to map routes to school in Mt Martha.
 - Rural City of Wangaratta has worked in partnership with YMCA, Northeast Health Wangaratta, Gateway Health and GOTAFE students to deliver Walk to School actions with participating schools. 100% of local schools took part in 2018.
 - Southern Grampians schools are working with the Western District Health Service to trial hospital volunteers to help as Walk to School guides.

Volunteers have passed the required police checks and will regularly staff local walking routes.

- Hepburn Shire Council has worked with a local Men's Shed to make trophies for all schools.

Leverage and build on results

- **Leverage positive results:** Use results to demonstrate success and provide evidence for business cases and grant submissions for specific actions or supporting infrastructure.
- **Join other actions:** Look for opportunities to build on other council or local actions to strengthen Walk to School outcomes.
- **Link different council areas:** Talk to and connect different parts of council (e.g. engineering, transport, community development, health promotion, recreation, youth engagement, local laws) to better understand the context of local school communities and work being led by other areas that could inform, strengthen or help fund active travel to school initiatives.
- **Align with policies and strategies to extend commitment:** Ensure planning for active school travel is linked to council's strategic plan and sector-specific strategies such as transport, municipal public health, recreation and the like.
 - Golden Plains Shire Council and four neighbouring councils have identified active travel to school as one of their priority areas within the G21 Regional Health and Wellbeing Action Plan.
 - Southern Grampian's community-driven Obesity Prevention Strategy has been a key driver and framework for its work encouraging active travel to school.
 - Warrnambool City Council have included active transport to school in the Road Safety Plan and Healthy and Wellbeing plan.

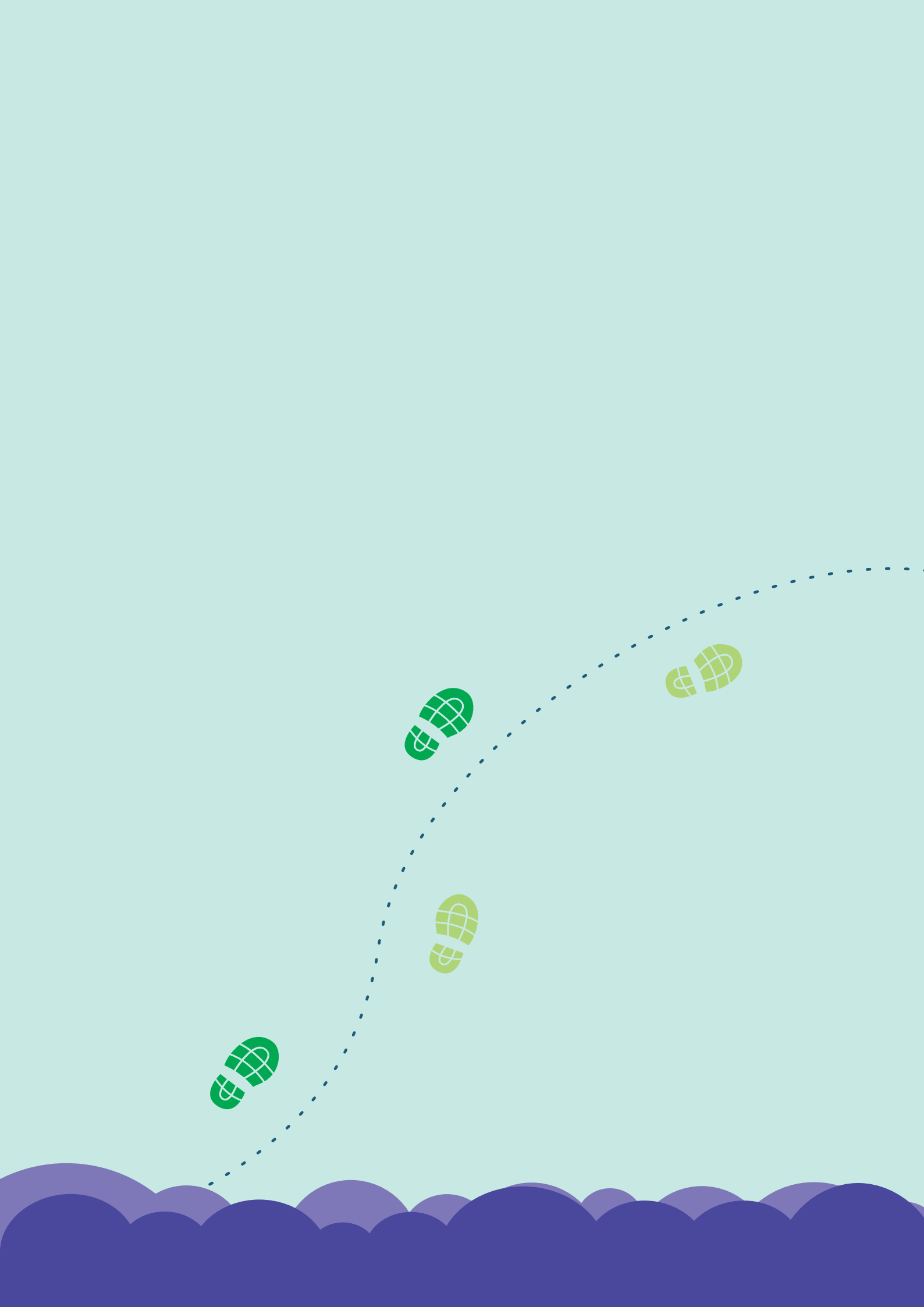
Conclusion

Walk to School in October generates great momentum for more children to walk, scoot and cycle to school more often. VicHealth supports local government organisations to build on this momentum to maintain active travel by students throughout the year.

This guide provides ideas and strategies to deliver effective actions, school engagement and planning to make Walk to School a success across Victoria. The long-term outcomes are healthier, confident and capable children who choose active travel as a lifelong habit.

For more information on delivering Walk to School and related resources, go to www.walktoschool.vic.gov.au





Useful resources

For all resources linked to the Walk to School program please visit the website: www.walktoschool.vic.gov.au

About VicHealth

A world first health promotion foundation, VicHealth focuses on promoting good health and preventing chronic disease.

We work with partners to discover, implement and share solutions to the health problems facing Victorians. We seek a Victoria where everyone enjoys better health and wellbeing.

VicHealth is the champion of health for all Victorians. We work to keep people healthy, happy and well – preventing chronic disease and keeping people out of the medical system.

VicHealth
Ground Floor
15–31 Pelham St
Carlton, VIC 3053
Australia

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