



Green Commuting Challenge

How a suburban middle school radically increased the number of students walking and reduced car traffic to the school

By **Duke Davidson**

IN AUGUST 2012, a small school for grades five through nine in Calgary, Alberta was getting ready to open their doors for their first school year. The citizens surrounding the newly-built Captain Nichola Goddard school had long awaited a facility to which their children would not have to be bussed. But the community's road network was not designed with the new school in mind. Situated on an already high-volume road and with minimal curbside parking, one teacher at the school knew that vehicle congestion was going to become a real problem during drop-off and pick-up times. So, with student safety in mind, she – Debbie Rheinstein – began work on the development of a *Green Commuting Challenge* (GCC).

In its simplest form, the GCC was designed to be a multi-week event in which students would pledge not to use a vehicle to get to school for the duration of the event. With the sole intention of reducing the number of parents driving students to school, Rheinstein and the rest of the faculty hoped to decrease the total number of cars at peak times, increase pedestrian visibility, and improve the safety of the students crossing the street. With the help of a student leadership team, Rheinstein launched the first GCC event in April of 2013. It ran for three weeks and despite minor hiccups, it was generally regarded as a success. Throughout the three weeks, parents, teachers, and students alike all noticed a reduction in the traffic outside of the school.

Now in its fifth year, the GCC has been extended to an impressive seven-week campaign. Participation has increased from 20 per cent of the students in 2013, to a staggering 67 per cent in 2015. The corollary to this increase is that the number of idling vehicles congesting the main streets might well have dropped by two-thirds!

Earlier this year I sat down with Debbie to discuss how other schools could implement a version of the Green Commuting Challenge. Hopefully, readers elsewhere will find her experience and suggestions helpful in developing a similar program for their school community.

In the first few moments of our meeting, she was quick to point out that because the GCC was launched during her school's first year, right away it became part of the school's culture. When designing the program, she focussed on three equally-important imperatives. First and most evident, was that the GCC would serve as a method to address traffic and safety concerns. Second, the GCC would encourage physical activity and exercise. During the bitter winter months of January, February and March, the number of students that are driven to school increases considerably, but when the spring thaw arrives, those numbers do not always return to normal. For this reason, Rheinstein hoped the GCC would remind students of their reliance on convenience and the health effects of inactivity. Thirdly, the GCC would draw attention to the importance of environmental sustainability by reducing fossil fuel consumption. Indeed, she attributes part of the success of the GCC to aligning these three imper-

atives with her school's citizenship mandate and its dedication to, "engage in ongoing local and global initiatives that enhance and support the lives of others." In other-words, the GCC was an organic compliment to other school priorities.

Rheinstein cautions that it might be tough to implement a GCC at schools which draw students from a much larger geographic area. Designated as a *community* school, the majority of its now 900 students live within 2.3 kilometers of the school. This radius was defined by the Calgary Board of Education as the *Walk Zone*, or the distance in which it felt was reasonable for a student to walk. By contrast, schools without a large "walk zone population" or one with heavy bus use would likely have a tougher time implementing a similar walk-to-school initiative. As well, factors such as geography, climate, student demographics, and socioeconomic factors may impact the design process.

How exactly does the GCC work at Captain Nichola Goddard? It all begins in early September with an open recruitment for the leadership team, a teacher-facilitated extracurricular group consisting mostly of seniors (Grade 9). While the student leaders put in most of the grunt work, Rheinstein and colleagues Maureen Brinker and Naomi Cohen act in a support role, offering guidance, and helping to promote the mandate of the GCC initiative. The Leadership team meets every Monday during the year to create e-newsletters, promotional videos, and prepare submissions for an online blog – all with the objective of encouraging student participation. Since the GCC is intended to be a simple but effective campaign, these tasks are well within the students' capacity. In the GCC's first year, the Leadership team's activities were of particular importance as the response from the student body allowed Rheinstein to assess the overall viability of the program.

As the faculty member in charge of the Leadership team, Rheinstein's role is to prepare the internal electronic notices and data collection system and answer parent inquiries. She also prepares letters to parents about the dangers of excess traffic in front of the school, and which outline the goals of the GCC. These letters often include positive messages that emphasize that students who walk to school are rarely late for class, and which highlight the social benefits of students walking with their peers to school in today's digital age. Lastly, during parent teacher interviews she always makes herself available for discussions about the GCC, armed with stacks of print material that include links to the GCC section on the school website and the GCC Blog. The more I spoke with her, the more it became clear that the success of the GCC at Captain Nichola Goddard School was not happenstance, but instead the product of her passion and commitment to the program.

Since all faculty members cannot be expected to be as excited about the GCC as the Leadership team or the support teacher, Rheinstein takes steps to ensure that they are willing to track participation and maintain excitement during the multi-week program. She provides fellow teachers with the tools they'll need, and makes clear what information she needs them to gather. In the GCC's first year, students who wanted to participate had to register during a lunch period in the week before the Challenge began. Because those students represented five grade levels and multiple homerooms, this meant that in order to track their

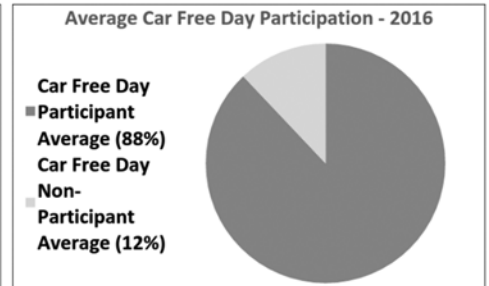
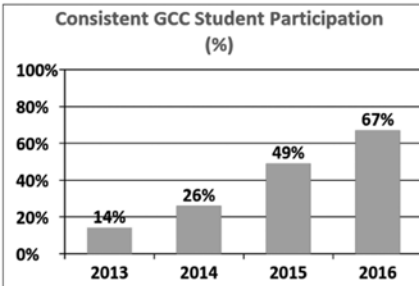
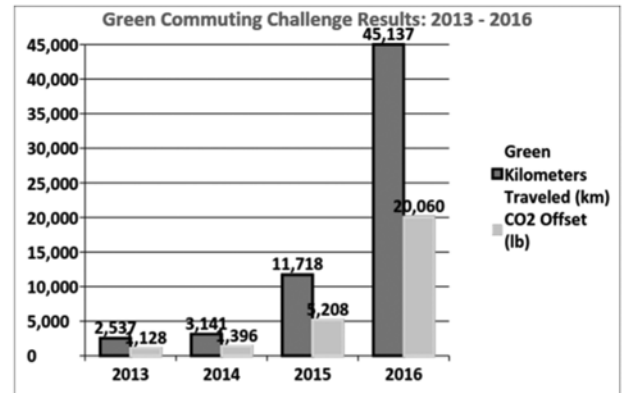


participation, students had to sign in with a member of the Leadership Team to record their green commutes each morning. This created morning crowds and sometimes interfered with the start of morning classes. As a result, things have since become more streamlined and less time-consuming for everyone involved. Rather than having to register, students simply confirm their daily participation in a simple Yes/No checkbox alongside their homeroom attendance. In the beginning, the Leadership team also attempted to calculate carbon offsets based on the specific distances walked by each individual student – something which Rheinstein admits never served much use to anyone. She has since come to believe that having more participation than the year before is all that's needed for her and the Leadership Team to give themselves a pat on the back.

Doing away with formal registration had another benefit. It enables students to participate as frequently as they like without a rigid commitment – something most teens and tweens are not keen on. But to encourage students to give it their all, Rheinstein's data collection method tracks the percentage of participating students in each homeroom. When the students are reminded that the homeroom with the highest participation rate each week wins a free pizza lunch, homeroom rivalries are ignited (to qualify, homerooms must have had a minimum of 60 per cent students participating). Positive peer pressure also encourages many students who would not normally participate to be part of the fun, and help root for the home-team. After five years, the Green Commuting Challenge is so well integrated into the school's culture, that when spring comes, the students simply expect the event. Put another way, it means that Goddard students who entered Grade 5 in 2012 will graduate five years later having experienced five years of the GCC and its three imperatives. It is Rheinstein's hope that many will carry some of the spirit forward as they become old enough to be able to drive motorized vehicles.



2016 Green Commuting Challenge Results



Over time, Rheinsein's efforts have met with some resistance. Apart from initially reluctant students and faculty, the group who expressed the most concern were parent drivers. While many were excited to let their children walk, save the gas, and avoid the traffic congestion, she learned quickly that others were driving their children to school for many reasons besides inclement weather. She heard many perfectly rational justifications that would likely be repeated at other schools such as; *it's not safe for them to walk alone; it's too far for them to walk; the roads are too dangerous; I'm going that way anyways; and it's just easier if I drive them.* Rheinsein recommends that one listen to each objection and do your best to quell them one by one. In response to concerns about children walking alone, she and the Leadership team developed the concept of hubs – designated meeting points where students could gather at a scheduled time and walk to school together. Similarly, when distance was raised as an issue many of these hubs were labeled secondarily as *drop zones* where parents could drop their kids off halfway and walk the remainder of the distance with other students. Both solutions helped to keep the area of the school car-free, and give even more students the opportunity to participate. Sure enough participation did increase. Today, these drop zones even have Google Map integration demonstrating continual improvement of well-used features. However, when it came time to address parents who touted convenience as an excuse, the students at Goddard took on that battle themselves, but with a humorous twist. Every year Rheinsein receives phone calls and emails from parents indicating that their sons and daughters are begging to be allowed to walk to school, and wondering what the GCC is all about. If ever there was an example of a first-world-problem, this might be it, and yet it's just another testament to the authority that the GCC now has at Captain Nichola Goddard.

Towards the end of our meeting, when I asked Rheinsein if there are any parts of the GCC that she is particularly

proud of, without hesitation she brought up *Car Free Days*. In order to motivate the students as the number of weeks of the campaign increased, the Leadership team incorporated a special Car Free Day during which all students are asked to avoid using a vehicle to go to or from school. While not technically any different than any other day of the campaign, they ended up being an unexpected highlight of the GCC for everyone involved. Much like the idea behind Earth Day, students were readily able to witness the impact of their collective action. As a result of its success, Car Free Days not only became a permanent addition to the GCC, Captain Nichola Goddard now includes two of them during the seven weeks. During the most recent Car Free Day, the GCC Leadership set a target of 80 per cent participation and surpassed it with a phenomenal 88 per cent engagement.

Thanks to their many successes, Captain Nichola Goddard School was awarded the Alberta government's Emerald Award for their outstanding accomplishment in the Green Commuting Challenge. Each year the school showcases the program at the City of Calgary Mayor's Environmental Expo. Here's hoping that the above details will enable many more schools to launch their own Green Commuting Challenge.

Duke Davidson holds a Bachelor's Degree in Environmental Management at Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia, and is continuing his professional development with a Master's Degree in Environmental Education and Communication. As self-employed artists and fabricators, he and his wife, Katrina, live in Calgary, Alberta with their daughter, Bridget. Both the author and *Green Teacher* would like to thank Debbie Rheinsein for providing considerable information for the writing of this article. For more information, contact her at djrheinsein@cbe.ab.ca or visit the GCC blog at <https://sites.google.com/a/educbe.ca/cnggch/>.