

# off ramp: A Secondary School Vehicle Trip Reduction Program

## Organization

BEST (Better Environmentally Sound Transportation)

## Status

Started 1999, ongoing

## Overview

off ramp is a unique program that works with high school students to select and adapt program strategies to encourage their peers to walk, cycle, skateboard, in-line skate, take transit and carpool to school more often.

The program is managed by BEST, a Vancouver-based sustainable transportation NGO. Currently there are off ramp groups across Greater Vancouver and in Victoria, Kelowna and Whistler, BC, Swift Current, Alberta, Whitehorse, Yukon and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The off ramp program trains and supports secondary school student leaders in developing strategies and activities to encourage their peers to travel to school by walking, cycling, skateboarding, in-line skating, transit or carpooling. The program is one of the few in Canada aimed at driving-age high school students.

In 2000, off ramp was selected as a “Best Practice” under the category of Education & Youth by the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Budget: \$96,000 annually

## Contact

Arthur Orsini, Program Coordinator  
BEST (Better Environmentally Sound Transportation)  
Telephone (604) 669-2860  
Email: [arthur@best.bc.ca](mailto:arthur@best.bc.ca)

## Resources

- off ramp ([www.offramp.ca](http://www.offramp.ca))

## Community context

As with high schools in jurisdictions across Canada, more and more students are driving to school themselves or get driven by their parents or guardians. In the Greater Vancouver Regional District alone, the percentage of students driven to schools has increased by 53% in 10 years. Today, almost half of the region's children now get to school by car.

Nationally, it was reported in 1998 that 47% of Canadian children never walked to and from school and that 64% of children never cycled to and from school, even though 91% of school-aged children had a bicycle.

The decrease in high school students choosing more sustainable transportation options has also coincided with a lack of education campaigns targeting youth to counteract popular media messages around car use.

## Policy context

Currently, none of the school boards where off ramp clubs operate maintain any specific cycling promotion or sustainable transportation policies.

Municipal transportation policies and strategies are rarely linked with elementary or high school transportation concerns.

## Rationale and objectives

The off ramp program was designed in response to the changing transportation choices of high school aged youth and the environmental problems these choices posed. “Short trips like going back and forth to school in a car are the most polluting and generate significant greenhouse gases,” says program coordinator Arthur Orsini.

To more effectively reach teenagers, the program trains student leaders to create off ramp clubs in their schools to deliver and coordinate a mix of special projects, events and social marketing programs.

More recently, a growing body of medical research has highlighted the health risks associated with increasing levels of inactivity amongst high school aged youth. The off ramp program promotes and encourages more active

transportation choices which have been demonstrated to reduce the risk of developing such health concerns as adolescent diabetes, coronary heart disease, hypertension and obesity.

The objectives of the off ramp program are:

- To increase the number of youth walking, cycling, taking transit, carpooling to school
- To help youth rethink and debunk popular car culture
- To promote sustainable transportation through effective youth-driven communications and social marketing
- To work with youth to develop quick and easy strategies to encourage more sustainable transportation practices at school
- To identify barriers to the promotion and implementation of strategies designed to make transportation more sustainable at high schools



*off ramp's end goal*

## Actions

The off ramp program trains and supports secondary school student leaders in developing strategies and activities to encourage their peers to travel to school by walking, cycling, skateboarding, in-line skating, transit or carpooling.

As a student-led program, off ramp seeks to change perceptions and attitudes about car use and more sustainable transportation options, such as walking and cycling.

Given the low cost, transportation efficiency and independence associated with bicycle use, off ramp places a special emphasis on getting more students on their bicycles. “We want to teach students that riding your bike is fun and environmentally friendly,” says Orsini. “If only a few students are riding their bikes, other kids won’t bother.”

Better Environmentally Sound Transportation, or BEST, is British Columbia’s leading sustainable transportation organization. BEST seeks to make communities healthier places to live by promoting sustainable transportation and land-use planning, and pedestrian, cycling and transit-oriented neighbourhoods.

In 1999 BEST hired a staff person to work directly with student leaders and teachers to develop solutions to counter the trend towards an increasing number of car-trips to school. Called off ramp, the program was the region’s first intensive effort to involve high school students in sustainable transportation solutions.

The off ramp program works with interested schools to establish an off ramp club or group. An off ramp group consists of five to seven student leaders and one lead teacher.

The goal of each off ramp club is to change attitudes and circumstances so that secondary school students increasingly use sustainable forms of transportation. Each club hosts activities to:

- Raise awareness of the health and environmental consequences of individual travel choices
- Raise the social stature of sustainable transportation choices, such as walking, cycling, skateboarding, in-line skating, transit and carpooling
- Reward “good” behaviour of those already traveling to school sustainably
- Dismantle barriers that prevent or limit the use of sustainable transportation in and around the school community



*An off ramp bicycle repair clinic at Johnston Heights Secondary (Surrey)*

BEST provides support through training workshops, resources, site visits, presentations and encouragement at special events at the schools.

Events are planned to focus the group’s efforts into activities to get the rest of the students walking, cycling, taking transit, or carpooling to school. Each student leader is asked to lead an extended project to eliminate one of the

barriers to sustainable transportation at their school. Some of the common events and promotions include:

- **Surveys.** off ramp provides three surveys for use in school-based transportation demand management programs. These include: an annual tally sheet to chart travel habits throughout the year; a student survey to find out why people choose to travel the way that they do, and what might encourage them to change; and a survey called parentguard, which is designed to involve parents and guardians in forming carpools for students.
- **Bicycle maintenance and building workshops.** Program organizers bring in bicycle mechanics from local bike stores for general question and sessions and in-depth lunch hour seminars. In addition, special “chopper” bicycle construction courses are sometimes offered where students learn to build specialized chopper bicycles, a popular and super cool type of bicycle.



*Student-built “Chopper” bicycles at the Purple Thistle Youth Centre in Vancouver*

- **Promotional events and contests.** Program leaders organize bicycle gear fashion shows in partnership with local bike stores where the latest in bicycle fashions and accessories are modeled by high school students. These events often include other events and performances, including bike trick demonstrations where bicycle stunts and tricks are performed in different locations throughout the school and a “how slow can you go” bike race, where racers must ride their bicycles as slowly as possible without falling off. The events are well attended and build excitement and support for bicycling to school.



*A bicycle gear fashion show at Terry Fox Secondary (Port Coquitlam, BC)*

- **Postering.** Organizers arrange workshops where students paint and collage posters to promote off ramp activities and produce collages that help raise questions concerning car culture and sustainable transportation.



*Student poster-making at Mt. Doug Senior Secondary (Saanich, BC)*

## Results

Since its inception in 1999, off ramp has reached over 12,000 secondary students and teachers in Vancouver’s Lower Mainland and beyond. Other program successes include:

- Reduction in the number of SSVs (single student vehicles) by up to 46% on off ramp event days
- The installation of new or additional bike racks at participating schools
- The launch of an annual cycling event day in the Lower Mainland called Cycle in the Rain Day on the last Thursday in February
- The launching of off ramp clubs in Whistler, Kelowna, Swift Current, Whitehorse and Winnipeg

Given the success of the program, BEST has also received many requests for off ramp resources from environmental and bicycling organizations from across Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America.

In 2000 off ramp was awarded a Best Practices Award: Education & Youth from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development).

## Participants

School-based off ramp clubs partner with local bike shops and businesses for prizes, bike tune-ups and giveaways at school events. The Vancouver-based AdBusters magazine has provided artwork and materials relating to countering the car culture and World Car-Free Day.

## Resources

Program events and activities are designed to be low cost and easy to organize. Program coordination funding has been provided by various partners, including BC Transit in Victoria, VanCity Savings Credit Union, Environment Canada's Climate Change Action Fund, Transport Canada's MOST program, TD Canada Trust's Friends of the Environment Foundation and individual donors.

## Lessons learned

**Focus on enjoyable and engaging events and activities.** It is important to put the focus on having fun with off ramp activities and programs. Although other project activities such as surveys are useful program tools, they are often more difficult to carry out and do not engage youth in a dynamic manner.

**Develop stand alone resource materials and program supports.** BEST's limited resources made it difficult to respond to the number of requests for help that the off ramp program has received. With the development of more complete resource materials and a program web site, they are hoping to make off ramp clubs easier to launch and support without BEST's intensive involvement.

**Provide youth leaders with direct support and mentorship.** Despite the availability of electronic resources, sometimes student leaders need to be able to contact a real, live person in order to get support and backing to take action. As one student leader from West Vancouver wrote in an e-mail: "I feel kind of bad, because most of the things to get the project started don't actually require any outside help, just someone motivated enough to do it. ... Hope to hear from you soon!"

**Seek program sponsorship and support.** Maintaining off ramp activities and events can be difficult without funding for prizes and giveaways which can help keep students more involved. Local bike stores, banks, healthy food suppliers and skate shops can all help support local off ramp activities and events.

## Next steps

Currently, BEST is cataloguing its most successful off ramp strategies for schools and youth leaders. The finished document will be called 101 Ways for Youth to Take Action and will offer youth groups anywhere a mix of "quick & easy" ideas (aimed at early successes) and "in-depth" strategies (leading to ongoing progress).

Along with the development of the catalogue, BEST will also be developing a web-site for youth to upload their innovations. The Web site will permit the creation and start-up of a new off ramp clubs without the intensive support of a local program coordinator.

Other future steps include:

- Expanding and supporting new off ramp schools throughout the Vancouver and Victoria areas
- Moving outreach to youth audiences outside of secondary school, such as youth groups and post-secondary institutions
- Training and supporting environmental organizations in other parts of Canada to launch off ramp programs locally

---

*Images are courtesy BEST*