

It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air

2004 Pilot Program

Lessons learned and recommendations

This pilot idling reduction program was based on the plan PRR presented to the Washington State Department of Ecology in June 2003 and the subsequent program in 2004. The end results of this pilot implementation show the initial recommendations for the program were – on the whole – sound and fruitful.

However, as with implementing any program, the program team learned lessons along the way in both years of the program. This section is meant to help teams executing future iterations of this idling reduction program achieve great results with less effort.

The “lessons learned” and recommendations that came out of the 2003 & 2004 program are listed below.

Situation: Many parent pledge forms came back without the name of the teacher or school from which they came.

Lesson learned: More information is needed on the pledge form.

Recommendation: Include spaces to enter the name of the child’s teacher and school on the parent pledge form for parents to fill out when completing the form. This way, if forms are returned in unmarked packets, their origins can be traced. A place to identify the district should also be added to the bus driver and delivery driver pledge forms.

Situation: As can be expected, idling times in the morning/drop-off time period were slight compared to afternoons.

Lesson learned: Dropping a child off a child in the morning is significantly faster than planning an arrival time that is exactly synchronized with the time a child will depart school.

Recommendation: To save money in program evaluation, observe and track idling behaviors in the afternoons only.

Situation: There were some participating schools that expressed concerns about the potential staff time it would take to implement the program. These schools were offered the opportunity to become control schools.

Lesson learned: The principals can act as an advocate but also a barrier in dealing with the staff. It is important to manage expectations when asking others for their time.

Recommendation: As early as possible, get a commitment and endorsement from not only the principal, but also the staff and any staff representatives. Encourage new participating principals to interact with a principal from a previous year’s program to assuage their concerns. They have many priorities to deal with early in the school year. Provide examples of materials and walk them through what is expected of them on a step-by-step basis.

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Situation: Portland schools pulled out of the program.

Lesson learned: Despite careful planning and a number of contingency plans, you sometimes don't know that things are not going well. Similarly, you might not ever know the "real" reason someone changed their mind. There are frequently both internal and external factors over which you can have no control.

Recommendation: When qualifying a school or school district ask the hard questions up front including whether or not there is anything the principal can think of that might prevent them from participating. The potential danger with asking this type of question is it lends itself to the principal "inviting" reasons for not participation.

Situation: We were asked to specifically keep one community group from working with the schools.

Lesson learned: Like the above example, there are situations over which you have no control.

Recommendation: The focus of the program must remain pure. Program managers should use every effort to implement a successful program, honor all wishes and avoid using the program for any other non-related issues (e.g. organizations or individuals not getting along).

Situation: When providing incentives, some parents expressed concern that this should not be needed and perhaps creates precedence for future expectations.

Lesson learned: It is important to remember that not all people will agree with the program or the program design.

Recommendation: The comment is appreciated; however, this is a significant problem for which history has demonstrated other efforts have not been successful. Incentives should not be positioned as "incentives" but rather as a "thank you" from a community business to a community member for helping to make the community and the environment better.

Situation: A business had agreed to provide incentives and then changed ownership.

Lesson learned: Businesses change ownership and people move from one job to the next.

Recommendation: Ensure that there is a "paper trail" that will make it easier for the new individuals to understand the commitment and expectations that exist. It is also important to invest the time to explain the program to them so that they become advocates and ambassadors for future years, and for when they move onto the next position.

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Situation: Not all businesses were willing to donate the incentives requested.

Lesson learned: It is important to have a person who is comfortable making this type of request doing the solicitations. Also, if the person doing the solicitation is being paid, it is important to balance the cost of asking for something to be donated against the cost of a direct purchase.

Recommendation: Assign this task to the appropriate person and set parameters for making the decision to request free, discounted or direct purchases.

Situation: Utilization of local PTA/PTSA chapters to take “ownership and implementation” of the program and/or support it via staffing did not come to fruition.

Lesson learned: The local PTA/PTSA chapters and leaders are voluntary by nature. Going into a school year their plates are filled with responsibilities for existing programs. Taking ownership of a program such as this was viewed as too cumbersome by the members. Many of the volunteers’ schedules can only accommodate activities of one hour or less and during non drop-off/pick-up times at school. The hours in which we needed volunteers conflicted with the times in which the PTA/PTSA parents were getting their kids ready for school, preparing to pick them up, or other scheduled activities. This is compounded by confidentiality procedures which block access to information about PTA/PTSA leadership. Also, leadership turn over happens frequently which impacts continuity.

Recommendation: The PTA/PTSA can best be utilized to disseminate information via existing internal communication channels such as newsletters, meetings and mailings. In this capacity, the PTA/PTSA can act as conduits for behavior change.

Situation: Recruiting title sponsor for key tag

Lesson learned: The companies contacted (Car Toys, AAA of Washington and Better World Club) had similar feedback. The cost of sponsoring the key tags compared to the exposure they would receive did not have a favorable ratio, i.e., the cost to reach each program participant was prohibitively high. They also felt the reach was minimal in a pilot scenario and would rather spend \$15,000 to reach the entire state versus \$5,000 to reach three or four school districts.

Recommendation: If possible, pitch to the companies early and offer them the widest possible exposure. If the program’s reach is limited, target local businesses and divide the exposure between them to offer a more attractive balance between reach and cost.

Situation: Key tag durability

Lesson learned: Thicker key tags are necessary. Original pilot key tags were run on 10 pt white vinyl.

Recommendation: Consider heavier vinyl or another medium for key tags

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Situation: Key tags triggering incentives

Lesson learned: A program that utilizes key tags to trigger incentives at multiple locations takes a great deal of time to design and adds unique variables to the program

Recommendation: If you feel a key tag is the best vehicle for triggering incentives, begin negotiations early with sponsoring partners and be ready to deal with the variables this option requires. For example, the sponsor may want to honor the tag for a limited time period or number of discounts – be aware of this and think of creative ways to keep your key tag attached to parents' key rings after the incentive period ends.

Situation: Whom to contact when recruiting for participation

Lesson learned: In a pilot situation it is most beneficial to begin recruitment at the principal level. Principals have a handle on the physical layout of their site, staff and faculty capacity to take on program work, the amount of time parents idle at drop off and pick up every day, etc. Give them the support and information they need to be your advocate in conversations with district administrators.

Recommendation: If possible, begin with the principals. Other "ways in" include obvious options such as the district administration and other less obvious options like high school ecology club advisors.

Situation: Everett Middle School, staff turnover leads to dropping pilot in district

Lesson learned: While administrators generally stay in one position for years, administrative staff turnover can cause a disconnect and throw implementation plans off track

Recommendation: Keep in frequent contact over the summer to track commitment level, intra-district staff transfers, etc. and be ready to brief new administrators on the program from the ground up

Situation: Reasons districts gave when declining the invitation to participate

Lesson learned: Different districts gave different reasons for not participating. Faculty discontent. Other goals or priorities for the district or school. Lack of time. Overabundance of existing workload.

Recommendation: Be sure you're asking the right person before you solicit participation; an ecology club advisor has a different perspective from the district operations manager. Don't accept an immediate "no" as the final answer. However, be sensitive to the fact that schools have many, many other priorities and their resources are already stretched.

Situation: Don't overwhelm with information on recruitment call

Lesson learned: Too much detail at the start makes it sound like more work than it really is

Recommendation: Keep it simple in your initial call – it's about getting drivers to pollute less and giving teachers, students and parents something in return for polluting less. Once the person on the other end of the phone has bought into the vision, then you can get into details.

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Situation: Face-to-face is preferable

Lesson learned: Running the program over the phone is a barrier that should be avoided when possible

Recommendation: Get out of the office when you can. Meet after your initial call to explain the program, review the site, brief the office staff, etc. If you can give a three minute presentation at a faculty meeting, do so. Putting a face on the program is a worthwhile investment.

Situation: Rules and regulations for posting signage on school property

Lesson learned: Posting signage at some schools may involve city ordinances

Recommendation: When possible, be informed on city regulations regarding signage. This is different in every town, so what is an issue in Seattle may or may not be an issue in Selah.

Situation: Different district, different culture

Lesson learned: District and school cultures vary more than expected. This has a direct effect on the amount of effort dedicated to implementing program tasks.

Recommendation: Scan the organizational environment quickly when you begin working with the district or school and plan for interest and effort to differ greatly even within each district and school.

Situation: Physical layouts and their effect on idling behaviors

Lesson learned: Certain schools have physical layouts that prevent or make it extremely difficult for drivers to stop. Other schools spill over into residential streets. These schools with limited on premise parking and/or drop off and pick up areas also face an additional challenge when placing signage to influence drivers.

Schools with larger parking lots and room for parents to queue on school grounds are often better able to influence drivers with signage and offer drivers' spots to park and turn off their vehicles.

Recommendation: Walk the grounds of the school with the principal, transportation officials or other school officials before making your plans. Determine what can and cannot be done both on and off school grounds. Frequently, neighborhoods adjacent to schools have active "watch" groups. Get in touch with these organizations if they exist and enlist them in the program. Adapt the messaging to the physical layout. Find out if local officials, outside of the school district, e.g., the city, need to be involved in posting signage.

Situation: Coordinating media outreach with the district

Lesson learned: Each district has preferred methods for dealing with unique concerns including, but not limited to, student privacy

Recommendation: First of all, be mindful of the result media attention can have on idling behaviors. If you are concerned about gathering accurate baseline data, don't make a splash before launching the program. Second, work with the district's public information officer to better secure publicity that is beneficial to all partners.

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Situation: Full-day staggered Kindergarten vs. full-day every day Kindergarten vs. half day Kindergarten

Lesson learned: Kindergartens often offer a variety of schedules, even within a single district. Common schedules include: all-day every day; half-day every day; and all-day every other day with alternating Fridays.

Recommendation: Find out what Kindergarten schedules are offered in the district(s) you are working with and be sure to allow the schedule to inform the amount of time you give teachers to distribute and return pledge forms

Situation: Considering contracted food vendors as partners

Lesson learned: Sometimes your first choice as a prospective party sponsor may not be the most logical choice. While current contract holders may be happy to sponsor parties, competitors may also be interested in attracting some positive attention within the district in preparation for the next round of bids.

Recommendation: Check with the district first to see who their outside vendors are for services, such as food and beverage, before making sponsor recruitment calls

Situation: Timing, the pros and cons of back to school

Lesson learned: Parents are inundated with paperwork during the first few weeks of school. Faculty and staff are swamped processing new students and all of the paperwork parents receive, fill out and return.

Recommendation: Have your program lined up and ready to go before the start of the school year. Post any signage during the summer. Aim to distribute anti-idling information the third or fourth week of school in order to have the greatest impact. Pitch the program as "it's a new year and a great time to start practicing new behaviors" or something similar.

Situation: Building in funding for contingencies

Lesson learned: Fixing unexpected problems and investing face time can be costly

Recommendation: While this pilot did succeed in recruiting and retaining three locations, when a fourth location dropped we were unable to invest the necessary assets to recruit a replacement location. Also, the program team was not able to invest in the amount of face-to-face interaction it would recommend for future implementation of anti-idling programs. Our recommendation would be to reserve funding specifically for getting program staff in front of partners several times during the program.

Situation: Separate pilot/control locations vs. single pilot with pre- and post-campaign idle time measurement

Lesson learned: Every research methodology has its pros and cons

Recommendation: Select your methods, work hard to make sure all data collected are sound and replicate your collection over a period of time. Measuring the same place, at the same time in the same way over a period of months or years will give you stronger data for measuring change and campaign influence.

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Situation: Including information on district bus pollution reduction measures

Lesson learned: Through executive interviews with both district and contractor transportation supervisors, we learned most internal policies forbid extended idling due mostly to the impact on operating expenses. However, anecdotal information gathered during the pilot phase showed some drivers do idle longer than their supervisors expect.

Recommendation: Dedicate program resources exclusively for tracking bus idling times and deliver information to transportation supervisor.

Situation: Sustained faculty contact in implementation phase

Lesson learned: While very few classrooms returned zero responses, several returned less than 80% participation

Recommendation: Work with the principal to nudge and encourage teachers during program implementation as one way to improve the number of classrooms meeting or exceeding the 80% participation goal

Situation: Encourage idling reduction behavior by parents at bus stops

Lesson learned: Some parents idle while waiting for buses to pick up or drop off students at neighborhood bus stops

Recommendation: Specifically address this behavior in program materials, perhaps by including it when listing other places people frequently idle, e.g., drive ins, ATMs, etc.

Situation: Questions from parents

Lesson learned: Some parents will inquire about district anti-pollution measures

Recommendation: When customizing program materials, include information on measures such as anti-idling policies, bus retrofits or fuel grade choices, etc. that are useful pieces of information for parents to understand current anti-pollution efforts

Situation: Sustained principal contact at critical points in the campaign

Lesson learned: Keep in touch

Recommendation: Do the bulk of your preparation work in the spring and early summer, then reduce the frequency of contact while the principal deals with the crush of the new school year. Be in touch to take care of any pre-launch questions and during implementation. Stay in contact while data are analyzed and deliver the data once they're finished. Be sure to say "thank you."

Situation: Arming idling measurement volunteers/temps with information for parents

Lesson learned: Parents will ask why people are standing around with clipboards

Recommendation: Give your volunteers/temps information about the program to share with parents who ask questions. Some parents are concerned their license plates are being taken down, etc. Be sure the volunteer/temp has a number or e-mail to refer parents to who have further questions.

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Situation: Measuring idling times, the pros and cons of temps and volunteers

Lesson learned: Training volunteers and temps is both difficult and critical. Temps cost money and will show where and when you need them. Volunteers are free but can't always show up where and when you need them. Limited budgets may make this a non-issue for many programs, making volunteers the only option.

Recommendation: Which ever option you select, give all idling timers consistent training. This requires face-to-face interaction but the investment will yield better returns in the area of higher quality, more reliable data.

Situation: Revising data collection sheet

Lesson learned: Data collectors need pre-determined answers for each category. This improves data standardization and makes it easier for each temp or volunteer to quickly enter accurate data.

Recommendation: Make standardized answers for each category and put them on a form that is easy to read and fill out. If budget allows, many data scanning services will help you design a form that suits your program's needs. Subsequent scanning of these forms will increase data coding accuracy and save time.