

Road Worrier:

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Grown-ups carpool, so why can't kids?

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Luana Deans isn't ready to let her 5-year-old, Eva, ride the school bus, but she's weary of the so-called "carpool" lane at Stough Elementary in West Raleigh.

She's ready for a real car pool.

Every morning, Deans drives to Stough and idles in line for 20 minutes to deliver her daughter to kindergarten. She returns in the afternoon to pick her up after another 20-minute queue.

Lots of parents join the twice-daily snail parades at Stough (rhymes with "plow") -- and at every Triangle school. Assistant principals serve as traffic cops to enforce what schools call car-pool rules. They open car doors for many a parent who does all that driving and idling to chauffeur a single child every day.

"Schools generate so much traffic," said Deans, who worked as a transportation planner until she had her third child last year. "Car-pooling to school helps families save money, save time and help the environment, even if they only share a ride a few times a week."

Two years ago Deans lived in Florida, where a state-funded commuter service program helped local schools set up carpooling networks. There wasn't anything like that at Stough. After consulting the PTA, she took matters into her own hands.

Sign up to seek

Deans set up a "Pool 2 School" page for Stough at Carpoolworld, an online ride-share service. Stough parents can register for free at www.carpoolworld.com/stough elementary.html, list their addresses and preferences, and look for potential partners.

"The Web site is so easy to do," Deans said. "Really, anyone can set one up. It includes a Google map that shows the homes of everybody registered, and the location of Stough in the center."

Stough parents will be more likely to find success as other parents add their names.

"I saw two parents today who were talking about the new car-pool program," Tina Lee, PTA vice president at Stough, said last week. "Through the Web site, they realized that they lived only a couple of miles apart -- and they managed to arrange a car pool."

A few other Wake schools have car-pool efforts, with PTA volunteers maintaining maps and spreadsheets to help parents connect with one another.

Carpoolworld is one of a number of online services that make this easier. It's a national matchmaking service designed mainly for commuters who want to share the ride to work.

Riders sign up for free, and some large employers pay a fee to set up home pages for their workers. Carpoolworld did not charge Deans for Stough's page.

The rising price of gas has driven thousands of Triangle commuters to register with a local database service, Share the Ride NC, funded by the state Department of Transportation.

About 60 local schools are listed as destinations by Triangle residents registered at sharetheridenc.com, but it's not clear how many are students and how many are school workers. The online form includes a comments section where parents can indicate that the riders are students.

Amanda Simmons of Triangle Transit, which maintains the local service, recommends that parents and other would-be car-poolers use every option available to find partners. Some Triangle commuters find success with Share the Ride NC, while others meet their matches through Craigslist.

The clogged "car-pool" lanes at local schools suggest that plenty of Triangle parents could use localized car-pool programs such as those Deans recalls from her years in Florida.

Meanwhile, Deans waits to find her own match. One Stough family in her neighborhood is interested in sharing the morning ride but not the afternoon pick-up.

Her daughter, Eva, would happily board the bus with some of her bold young friends in kindergarten.

"I'm not ready to put my 5-year-old daughter on a school bus," Deans said. "I know a lot of families do every day, but I'm not ready yet."

Enlighten the Road Worrier: blogs.newsobserver.com/crosstown or (919) 829-4527 or bruce.siceloff@newsobserver.com. Comments, questions and tips welcome. Ple

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