

Safe Routes to School

by Hannah Twaddell

You kids today are so soft! Why, when I was your age, I had to walk TEN MILES to school – EVERY day – in twelve feet of SNOW – UPHILL BOTH WAYS!

OK, maybe I'm applying just a tad of revisionist history there. But, unfortunately, kids today really *are* soft. And one of the reasons is they don't walk or bike to school.

In 1980, six percent of children were overweight – one of every 17 kids. Now it is 16 percent nationwide, up to 27 percent for Black and Hispanic children.¹

Current health guidelines say adolescents need at least 20 minutes of sustained physical activity every day, and younger children need at least an hour. Walking and biking are wonderful ways for kids to get that needed exercise. Yet, only 12 percent of children age five to fifteen walk or bike to school, and almost 70 percent of all children's trips are by car. Among our nation's population at large, walk trips have declined as a share of all trips by 40 percent since 1977, while driving trips have increased to almost 90 percent.²

The upshot is that our country's moms and dads are doing a lot of driving, not only to school, but to everything from soccer and gymnastics to ballet and marching band practice – trying to make sure their kids get exercise. Is it just me, or is there a conundrum here? And don't get me started on the problem of rising asthma rates among children, who fill their lungs daily with the pounds of

vehicle emissions that waft through our playgrounds and neighborhoods.

The bad news is too many children can't walk to school because there is no safe way for them to do it. New schools are often built on isolated tracts of land, while local sidewalk and bike networks are full of gaps or do not exist at all. The good news is that health agencies and community planners have started working together to support Safe Routes to School (SR2S), promoting walking and biking to school through community education, group activities, stricter traffic law enforcement, and safer streets.³

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SR2S programs are not terribly complicated or expensive. They are typically created by grassroots groups of parents, teachers, health agencies, and planners who start by focusing attention on kids in neighborhoods who could walk to school, but don't. Local SR2S programs work their way up to more challenging efforts like upgrading or adding sidewalks. While most current SR2S programs focus on grades K-8, planners are hopeful that as programs mature, they will also deal with issues such as the increasing number of teenagers driving to school.

³ The SR2S concept was initiated by Sustrans, a non-profit sustainable transportation group in England <www.sustrans.org>. Over the past four years, SR2S has quickly spread through communities in the U.S. and Canada. In fact, the draft "Next-TEA" federal transportation bill includes dedicated funding for SR2S programs.

Marin County, California, is one of many areas where SR2S programs have taken off. According to Wendi Kallins, SR2S coordinator for the nonprofit Marin County Bicycle Coalition, the program started five years ago at nine schools, and now includes 40. This growth is explained by the program's positive results. Within the first two years, the nine pilot schools experienced a 57 percent increase in the number of children walking and biking to school.

The Coalition has secured more than a million dollars in grants to promote and educate the community about the concept of SR2S, as well as to complete engineering projects such as sidewalk and pathway construction, curb ramps, traffic signals, and intersection safety improvements.

Kallins offers several ideas on how local planning commissions can support SR2S programs:

- Plan compact communities with access to schools through pedestrian-friendly pathways;
- Preserve existing neighborhood schools when possible, and plan for new schools within neighborhoods rather than on the edge of town;
- Design community streets with narrow lanes and other traffic-calming features that discourage speeding;
- Plan the roadway network to consider all users; and
- Consider children's needs for particular pathways, such as off-road trails.

In the Charlottesville, Virginia, region, the nonprofit Alliance for Community Choice in Transportation (ACCT) has implemented SR2S programs at three schools. Funded by a startup grant from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, ACCT is now self-sufficient with monies from local foundations and individual donors. The organization works very

¹ *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2004* (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics), <<http://childstats.gov>>.

² An excellent summary of this data from the U.S. Department of Transportation's 1995 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey can be found in "A Primer on Active Living for Government Officials," prepared by Active Living Leadership at San Diego State University, <www.activelivingleadership.org>.



Students at Greenbrier Elementary in Charlottesville, Virginia, walk to school on Walking Wednesday. A popular item: bandanas given out as part of the Be Safe, Be Seen campaign.

closely with the local Metropolitan Planning Organization to advocate for bicycle and pedestrian projects that improve safety and access around schools.⁴

Alia Anderson, SR2S Project Coordinator in Charlottesville, encourages planning commissioners to personally visit their schools and talk with teachers, school nurses, kids, and parents about what they would like to see happen, as well as the experiences they have had with kids who walk to school now. Anderson also suggests evaluating road plans from a child's perspective, adding that streets designed to be safe for children are safe for everyone.

In Maine, the state Department of Transportation and the Bicycle Coalition of Maine <www.bikemaine.org> are working to implement SR2S programs – from the state's largest city, Portland (pop. 63,000), to small rural towns. Maine's approach links infrastructure improvements to school-specific programs. To begin implementing SR2S, Governor John E. Baldacci recently authorized \$500,000 for sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, flashing lights, and other improvements in 13 communities (funded from a voter-approved transportation bond and federal transportation enhancement funds).

The key to success is bringing people together to identify common concerns and devise solutions that fit their com-

4 The Charlottesville program is also highlighted in the article, "Preparing Successful Grant Proposals," on pages 16-19 of this issue.

munity. The Surface Transportation Policy Project, a national research and advocacy organization, lists six basic strategies common to successful Safe Routes to School initiatives:

1. *Invite partners.* Key participants include school administrators, teachers, parents, and children; elected officials; public works, planning, traffic safety, public health and law enforcement staff; and neighborhood groups. All you need is a champion – a parent or, perhaps, a planning commissioner – who is motivated to bring people together.

2. *Figure out how the physical environment could work better.* Through community meetings (and in the classroom) parents, children, and other interested residents, can help map ideal routes to school and identify ways to fix hazards.⁵

3. *Make the necessary improvements.* A little money can go a long way with simple, but highly effective projects like signal timing, crosswalk striping, short off-road connector trails, and bike racks, many of which are eligible for federal safety, enhancement, or environmental program dollars.

4. *Create education and enforcement programs.* Parents and neighbors can form "walk-pools" and "eyes on the street" agreements to make sure adults are walking with or watching kids during their trek to school. Police can educate – and aggressively ticket – unsafe drivers. In my community, a group of citizen health advocates, including a chiropractor and members of the local track club, presented recommendations to the school board to reduce the remarkably heavy weight of students' backpacks.

5. *Generate excitement through media coverage and special events.* SR2S program directors have come up with scores of creative events ranging from bike safety rodeos to essay contests. National Walk to School Week, held every October, is a great opportunity to join in a well-organized event and get your community thinking about safe and fun ways to promote walking to school.

5 For sample classroom worksheets and projects, check out: <www.climatesolutions.org/smartmoves>.

6. *Evaluate the program and "reintroduce" it each year.* Successful SR2S programs build, one school at a time, toward making biking and walking a mainstream approach to student transportation. It is important to evaluate what works, and to institutionalize successful program elements in schools, public works, planning, and law enforcement agencies. Since the student population (and parents) constantly changes, it is also necessary to "reintroduce" the program each year, explaining its goals and activities.

SUMMING UP:

Safe Routes to School programs represent one valuable way in which planners, planning commissioners, school officials, and residents can foster a mutually beneficial relationship between schools and the surrounding community. Even more importantly, SR2S programs provide a framework for taking concrete steps to promote walking and biking, and develop safe connections between neighborhoods and schools. ♦

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Resources:



The "Safe Routes to School Toolkit," prepared by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, has everything you need to get a program started, including worksheets, surveys, and information about funding sources. A free copy, as well as information about national Walk to School Week, is available at: <www.walktoschool.org>; or call: 919-962-7419.

Another excellent resource is "KidsWalk," a guide prepared by the Centers for Disease Control: <www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk.htm>; or call: 770-488-5820.