Public Health Issue

- An average of 15% of children living within two miles from school arrive by walking or bicycling today. Forty years ago, 48% walked or biked.¹
- Obesity prevalence among children and adolescents is almost three times as high as it was in 1980.²
- Nationwide, health and safety advocacy groups promote active commuting as a means of increasing physical activity among children and adults, teaching practical skills, and providing social interaction and overall enjoyment.

Program Action

Two central Florida schools, Spirit Elementary in Volusia County and Lake Sybelia Elementary in Orange County, created remarkably successful Walking School Bus (WSB) programs as a result of the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) physical activity initiative. The similarities between the two are striking, although not by coincidence—Spirit’s program design inspired Lake Sybelia’s. Nonetheless, both have successfully built dedicated volunteer bases, mapped precise routes that serve several neighborhoods, and advertised in various types of media. Their organized systems have generated consistent participants, passionate teacher and administrator advocates, and supportive parents and neighbors. It is no exaggeration to say that these WSBs have become sources of community pride.

Spirit Elementary School’s WSB, as Regional Coordinator Cathy Klein described, developed “organically, by the school’s nourishment and support of its volunteers.” CPPW, in collaboration with local partners such as the school district and transportation department, helped Spirit launch their WSB in the fall of 2010, and from there it blossomed. The WSB is run almost entirely by parents, many of whom have volunteered for two consecutive years and plan to sustain the program in subsequent years.

“...because safety is a priority here in Volusia County. When we walk in the mornings, people who drive by us look and smile. I think that says a lot.”
—Amy Bauchle, Spirit Elementary WSB Lead Volunteer

Impact

- The MicheLee Puppets used video clips of Spirit’s WSB in their Puppet Pedestrian Safety Initiative feature. It is shown on local elementary schools’ morning news shows.
- Spirit’s WSB was featured in a WSB-focused film developed by the Volusia County Transportation Organization to air on the Bright House network.
- A red-carpet event for the Bright House PSA premier and a poster contest were held in March 2012 to celebrate the Spirit Elementary WSB and promote additional programs.
- A formal WSB policy would reach nearly 61,000 Volusia County students.
Lake Sybelia Elementary was awarded a minigrant of $1,000 to jump start their WSB program in fall, 2011. The extremely long car drop-off line was Regional Coordinator Joy Goff-Marcil’s main selling point when she applied for non-infrastructure funds through Safe Routes to School. Operational, educational, and marketing materials were provided by CPPW, and thanks to additional funds from the Department of Transportation, a large wagon to tote backpacks and other heavy items was also purchased. Parents were made aware their option to walk with the group by an automated telephone recording of the principal, encouraging them to “Hop on the Walking School Bus and start your day the healthy way!” Her excitement for the program caught on quickly, and before long students and parents alike were joining the weekly walks. One impressive detail to highlight is that the program began without any promise of material incentives for participating; just the benefits of exercise and socializing. And it’s catching on. Lake Sybelia’s program was cited by a local legislator and child advocate as his inspiration for asking for CPPW’s help in beginning another WSB at an inner-city school. This cascade of events is a true testament to the ways in which the sharing of best practices and leading by example can bring about positive change.

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Spirit’s route includes three “bus stops” where children are picked up along the way. It passes through a stretch of busy road before transitioning into the school’s quieter residential area. Students hear about the walk every Tuesday and Thursday in the afternoon announcements, and a link to program details exists on the school website for parents to view at their convenience. An information booth is set up at kindergarten orientation, as well. The program has its very own e-mailbox, where community members are encouraged to write in if they would like to donate equipment like bicycles and helmets.

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- According to the Pedestrian Savings Calculator, developed by the Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation and Safe Routes to School, a group of 20 students walking just once per week, 1 mile to and from school, saves the following:
  ⇒ 69 gallons of fuel
  ⇒ 1354.7 lbs carbon emissions
  ⇒ 89.7 lbs other pollutants
  ⇒ Altogether almost $7,000

- The Lake Sybelia Elementary School WSB was invited to participate in the annual City of Winter Park Holiday Parade down historic Park Avenue in Winter Park.

“After walking with the Walking School Bus, my kids begged me to walk again the next day. We now walk three to four times a week. We get fresh air, burn off excess energy, and talk along the way.”
—Cynthia Forness, Lake Sybelia mom

As of January 2012, the Department of Transportation’s District 5 and the University of Central Florida have begun plans to institutionalize WSB activities through the School of Public Administration.

Contact

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1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009