





WALK THIS WAY

How Michigan launched the Safe Routes to School program.

By Dr. Christine Vogt, Dr. Ariel Rodriguez and Evan Jordan

Michigan may be home to the American automotive industry, but lately the state has been pushing new ideas for transportation. State initiatives under the federal Safe Routes to School program have been popping up nationwide and Michigan was one of the first to take action.

The state is helping kids become more active by walking or biking to schools in their communities. Taking this mission seriously, Michigan initiated a pilot program in 2003. Now with a full-fledged program and out of the pilot stage, Michigan's Safe Routes to School expects to receive about \$19 million through the next five years from federal funding. Supporters say Michigan is ready to engage and motivate school-aged children to be more physically active and to be aware of non-motorized transportation options.

Michigan's Pilot Program

The Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports, a non-profit organization located in the Lansing Capitol area, develops and disseminates initiatives which address promotion of a physically active lifestyle through edu-



cation, environments and policies. After receiving a grant from the Michigan Department of Transportation to fund a pilot project on safe routes to elementary schools, the council assembled a group of advisors from local and state agencies which represented transportation, education, community health, law enforcement and land use.

Michigan State University researchers were chosen as evaluators of the pilot project and six elementary schools were selected to participate in the first year of the pilot program. The following year, five more schools were selected for a total of 11 schools located in urban, suburban and rural areas.

Serious Issues Need Solutions

Dr. Lee Kokinakis, director of Active School Environments and Safe Routes to School for the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports and the Michigan Fitness Foundation says that Safe Routes to School is a program with important social repercussions.

"I've always thought of the program as a powerful intersection between a number of missions," she explains. These missions include getting away from motorized transportation, a more aware public health agenda and an increase in safety for students walking to school.

Research and recent news is telling the United States that its youth are leading a less healthy lifestyle than their parents or grandparents. During the past 20 years, the levels of obesity among children and adults in the country have grown to staggering numbers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only four states had obesity prevalence rates of 15 to 19 percent and no state had obesity prevalence rates above 19 percent in 1991. However, by 2004, the obesity prevalence in seven states rose to 15 to 19 percent and 42 states had rates of higher than 19 percent.

Today's youth, on average, are less active at home and many schools offer less physical education than previous generations of school children received because of funding cuts and demands on teaching more math, science, reading and language arts.

Mike Eberlein, coordinator of the Safe Routes to School program for the



Insights from Parents: Walking or Biking to School

	Enhancers	Inhibitors
Urban Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates opportunities to enjoy the outdoors – 72% Develops a healthy lifestyle – 70% Develops self-reliance in cleared children – 66% Increases independent thinking in children – 62% Trains children to walk or bike safely – 52% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cars going too fast – 55% Strangers – 54% Too many cars near the school – 40% Sidewalks/pathways not in winter – 34% Scary dogs

Method of Commuting to and from School by Rural/Suburban and Urban Schools

Method of Commuting	Community Type	No. of classrooms	% Mean
Morning Walking	Rural/Suburban	51	5.8%
	Urban	45	17.1%
Morning Biking	Rural/Suburban	51	1.4%
	Urban	45	0.9%
Morning School Bus	Rural/Suburban	51	55.0%
	Urban	45	37.0%
Morning Parent's Car	Rural/Suburban	51	33.8%
	Urban	45	38.3%
Morning Someone Else's Car	Rural/Suburban	51	3.9%
	Urban	45	6.2%
Morning Other Means	Rural/Suburban	51	0.1%
	Urban	45	0.2%
Afternoon Walking	Rural/Suburban	51	6.6%
	Urban	45	20.1%
Afternoon Biking	Rural/Suburban	51	1.2%
	Urban	45	0.9%
Afternoon School Bus	Rural/Suburban	51	60.9%
	Urban	45	37.5%
Afternoon Parent's Car	Rural/Suburban	51	27.7%
	Urban	45	34.4%
Afternoon Someone Else's Car	Rural/Suburban	51	3.3%
	Urban	45	6.4%
Afternoon Other Means	Rural/Suburban	51	0.3%
	Urban	45	0.5%

Bold = significantly different (p < .05)

Michigan Department of Transportation explains that at a local level, the obesity problem could be addressed with an infrastructure made more inviting for exercise. He argues that the state had not previously been thinking ahead for foot and bicycle traffic. "Michigan was developing around the assumption that people were driving everywhere," he says.

At the Michigan Land Use Institute, the issue of where schools are being located is considered part of a large and serious land use and sprawl agenda. A 2004 report, titled "Hard Lessons: Causes and Consequences of Michigan's School Construction Boom," reports that Michigan outpaced the country in new school construction, with most new schools located outside the city or town boundaries where land is harder to reach by foot or bike.

About the time the report was issued, Governor Granholm commissioned a land-use leadership council to identify serious land use concerns and make recommendations for action. Under the category "Directing Development to Existing Communities and Revitalizing the Urban Areas," the council included Safe Routes to School programs as a means of creating and maintaining livable urban areas.

Kokinakis says that the initiative solves yet another concern, which is beyond getting students to walk themselves to school. "There are kids who are already walking to school," she says. "Some are walking to school in difficult circumstances. Safe Routes to School increases safety for school children who walk or bike already."

Michigan's Safe Routes to School Initiative

Under the leadership of the non-profit Governor's Council on Physical Fitness for Michigan, other states' programs that existed in 2004 were reviewed and



adaptations were made to construct Michigan's program. Created by a group of professionals, the recently completed training manual shows the lessons learned and resulting tools that the eleven pilot program schools inspired. Lessons and tools were developed while visiting school grounds as children left to go home or by walking around neighborhoods and sidewalks or trails on foot or on bicycles.

The professionals then employed five "E" strategies to organize these lessons learned from students, parents and school administrators that would make a Safe Routes to School program both successful and sustainable. Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement and Evaluation are characteristics that are the foundation of the Michigan

program, as well as the national focus areas. Researchers were asked to design an evaluation program that would provide baseline data to each school so they could formulate initiatives for the other four "E's" in the early years of their efforts.

Some of the programs developed by the urban schools included a number of coverage areas. For engineering, programs were developed that would add new crosswalks and pedestrian islands and no-turn on red signal signs, locate new sidewalks and curb cuts for bike riders, install flashing light school zone lights and renovate parking lots for safer bus zones and vehicle drop offs.

The education and encouragement program created a kid-tested branding and marketing campaign with promo-

tions such as banners and backpack jewelry and would encourage hosting walk-to-school days and add more safety patrols from the student body. The enforcement program included working with local traffic and crime officers, slowing traffic in school areas with signs and patrolling and encouraging neighbors to be watching out for the welfare of elementary school students. Some of the urban schools began recruiting and encouraging other schools in their districts to consider joining the program.

Evaluation of the programs was designed for schools to efficiently and cost-effectively collect data from students on their attitudes toward walking or biking to school and their current and preferred ways of getting there.



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NRPA Connects Schools and Parks

Local park and recreation departments are one of the best untapped potential partners for the Safe Routes to School program, and could help enable not only better neighborhood connections to schools, but also connections to after-school activities, parks, trails, recreation programs and organized youth sports.

Informal surveys by NRPA of local and municipal park and recreation agencies during the past year indicate that there are a very large number of local park and recreation agencies that own or manage much of the land surrounding local schools and connecting to local neighborhoods. Park and recreation directors have expressed keen interest in Safe Routes projects, and seem especially willing to partner with local non-profits, school districts and other government agencies.

Park and recreation agencies bring some extraordinary resources to Safe Routes projects including environmental and technical knowledge, trail planning assistance, new volunteers, and more.

For more information about Safe Routes partners, contact Richard Dolesh, director of Public Policy for NRPA at rdolesh@nrpa.org or call (202) 887-0290.

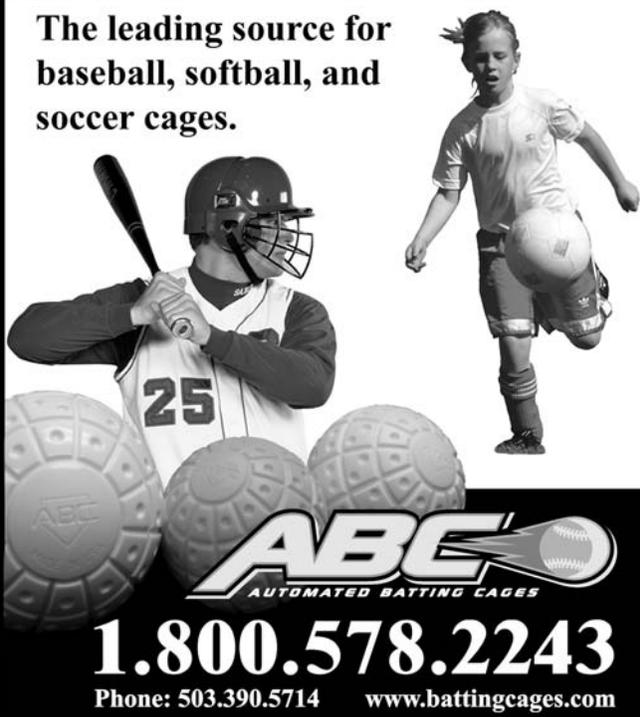
In selected spring or fall weeks, classrooms also tallied the number of students walking, biking, riding the bus, or being dropped off or picked up by a parent or older sibling. Parents of these elementary students were also asked to complete a questionnaire to gauge their attitudes toward walking and biking opportunities for their elementary-aged child. For the pilot schools, data entry and analysis was completed by university faculty and students, with funding provided by Michigan Department of Transportation. Results from these surveys are in the tables that follow.

States and Communities Getting on Board

State transportation departments are currently responding to and organizing

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Swimming Pool Operations A Framework for Action, produced by Sandy MacIntosh

This is an educational video that is widely used in the training of swimming pool operators. It addresses many of the key chemical, physical and biological issues in the pool environment. It visually illustrates many day-to-day problems encountered by pool professionals. The program assists instructors in addressing these issues by showing specific examples that are difficult to explain verbally. \$75.00

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to implement the new federal legislation. Many states, including Michigan, have named a state coordinator. Texas, Colorado, Florida and California, are already prepared to move Safe Routes to School programs further along, particularly with the necessary financial resources to make infrastructure improvements around schools. Communities can begin to study the federal legislation and the state program guidelines to prepare for grant opportunities to fund local and statewide efforts.

Eberlein explains that communities appreciate that the initiative overlaps a number of issues. "As I go around talking to people, I'm proud to say that it's a unique program in that it affects societal problems that are not necessarily related to transportation."

That kind of overlap is getting more people on board. Administrators of school districts, bus and transportation departments in school districts, community planners, road commissions, park and recreation managers, parents of kindergarten to eighth grade, and students can begin to consider future efforts to increase public awareness and encouragement for more walking or biking to school.

Community-based coalitions may also find that Safe Routes to School fits nicely with other initiatives promoting physical activity such as programs initiated by Congress that target youth health issues.

Eberlein says that communities can get started by reading Michigan's handbook, which is a step-by-step document that can lead a school through the process.

Now that the Safe Routes to School program is out of its experimental phase, 25 other schools have joined in and are proceeding at the local level, Kokinakis says. "They're all at different points on the continuum," she adds. Those furthest along, particularly the

original pilot schools, are thinking about applications for federal funding.

Kokinakis sees a successful future for Safe Routes to School. "This program has the potential for community development and safety, to build neighborhoods and revitalize the lives of people."

A younger generation of our society is eager to walk or ride a bike to places near their home or schools, and Safe Routes to School can benefit communities and produce a better transportation option, even for high school students, college students or working adults. Programs like Safe Routes to School, along with other community trails projects, can have communities realize that destinations really are a hop, skip or a jump away. 

GET YOUR COMMUNITY READY

Additional resources for the Safe Routes to School programs:

Walk to School Day
www.walktoschool-usa.org

Michigan's Walk to School Program
www.saferoutesmichigan.org

National Federal Highway Administration
<http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/saferoutes/statecontacts.htm>

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