



# Safe Routes to School

## LYNDALE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

*Encouraging walking and biking to school*

### *Safe Routes to School: Healthy Kids Focused Students*

Across the nation, communities are employing strategies to increase physical activity to improve kids' fitness and reduce the obesity epidemic. One such effort is Safe Routes to School, which encourages more children to bike or walk to school. According to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Transportation, 42 percent of school-age children walked or biked to school in 1969 while only 16 percent of children walked or biked to school in 2001.

Locally, Minneapolis Public Schools has implemented Safe Routes programming in 10 schools with a grant from the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support through the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). The goals of Safe Routes programming within the school district are to: 1) encourage healthy living and combat childhood obesity, 2) increase knowledge of pedestrian and bicycle safety, 3) strengthen neighborhoods and communities, and 4) support "green" environmental efforts.

Safe Routes programming aligns with the school district's Wellness Policy to build an environment that supports and develops healthy learners by promoting healthy eating and physical activity. Safe Routes also complements the district's Changing School Options plan, which allows more students to attend schools closer to home and saves on transportation costs.

### *About the evaluation of Safe Routes*

Wilder Research was contracted to evaluate Safe Routes programming. In the first year of the evaluation, Wilder Research assessed the progress of Safe Routes at three Minneapolis schools: Lyndale Community School, Nellie Stone Johnson Community School, and Seward Montessori School.

As part of the evaluation of Lyndale's Safe Routes programming, Wilder Research conducted key informant interviews and a parent focus group. Interviews were conducted with three individuals, including parent and school staff members involved in the Safe Routes programming. Interviews focused on the collaborative process of implementing Safe Routes, engagement strategies, challenges to increasing walking and biking to school, and the overall impact of Safe Routes programming at Lyndale. A total of 11 parents participated in the focus group and were asked about their experiences with walking and biking to school, perceptions of benefits and barriers to walking and biking, and awareness of current neighborhood and school efforts to make walking and biking to school easier. Three parents also participated in a family interview with their children to tell their stories of walking and biking to school. Additional information about Lyndale's Safe Routes programming was gathered from school district-level Safe Routes staff.



## ***Safe Routes at Lyndale Community School: A collaborative effort***

Lyndale Community School is a PreK-5 public school in south Minneapolis with an enrollment of about 390 students in the 2009-2010 school year.

Collaborative efforts among parents, school staff, and district level Safe Routes staff make Safe Routes programming possible. Safe Routes at Lyndale began in the 2009-10 school year. A few key parents, who walked with their children to school every day, initiated Safe Routes and have taken leadership of the programming. To carry out their ideas for Safe Routes, parents and school staff worked with district-level Safe Routes staff to learn more about implementing Safe Routes. District-level Safe Routes staff connected parents and school staff to an opportunity for a \$1,000 mini-grant from the National Center for Safe Routes to School. Parent Scott Borden volunteered to prepare and submit the mini-grant. Of about 250 grant applications, Lyndale was 1 of 25 schools nationwide to receive the mini-grant.

The mini-grant helped parents and school staff plan and coordinate Safe Routes programming. Grant funds were used to buy safety equipment for adult volunteer walkers and incentives to encourage student participation. Since its kick off on Earth Day 2010, Lyndale has hosted a “Walk to School” day twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a “Walk and Bike Safety Day,” in which students received lessons about walking and biking safety during their physical education class.

Grant funding also helped Lyndale establish four organized and parent-led “Walking School Buses,” where parents walk with their children on mapped routes and pick up

other student walkers at designated stops along the way to school. Parent Scott Borden mapped out the four routes and did a practice run of each route to ensure that they were safe and that there was enough time for each designated stop. He called every family within Lyndale’s walk zone to personally tell them about the Walking School Buses and invite them to participate. School staff helped distribute participation sign-up forms and maps of the Walking School Bus routes.

Lyndale has received support from the Lyndale Neighborhood Association as well. The neighborhood group helped promote a safe neighborhood for walkers and bikers by advocating for lower speed limits around the school and helping to find resources to support Safe Routes programming.

### **Accomplishments**

Safe Routes at Lyndale has had many accomplishments in its first year of programming.

#### **Student and parent participation**

The involvement of students and parents play an important role in making Safe Routes successful. Parent and caregiver volunteers, who walk with their children and other children, help make the Walking School Buses feasible and safe. They also encourage and motivate each other and other families to walk to school.

At the Earth Day kick off event for Safe Routes, Lyndale exceeded its goal of getting at least 50 students to walk to school. On that morning, 65 students walked to school and many signed up to be part of the Walking School Buses. Interest and participation in the Walking School Buses continues to grow. At a community building event at Lyndale

### **Safe Routes—Connecting parents, teachers, and students**

Holly’s daughter, Sarah, attends Lyndale Community School, just two blocks from their home. Sarah walks with her mom to school every day. She likes to walk to school because she gets to meet new people and talk to her friends. She thinks walking with her mom is fun. They enjoy doing activities together, like going to the park or making snowmen in the winter. Holly also finds benefits in their morning walk. She said, “Walking to school with my daughter has given me a touch point with her teachers. I have other kids at home, so I don’t have the time to spend in the classroom. It has been a really nice way to connect.” Holly mentioned that Sarah’s friends do not always walk with them, and then they do other activities. She said, “Sometimes, we stop at the park on the way home and observe nature.” Holly enjoys the time she gets to spend with her daughter on the walks, and believes the rewards far outweigh the time commitment.

*(Names have been changed to protect privacy.)*

during the last week of school, Safe Routes was promoted and yielded much success in getting new students and families to sign up next year.

Parent and school staff involved in Safe Routes are proud of how programming has motivated students to walk. A staff member has observed that more students were walking to school from outside the half mile walk zone of Lyndale. The staff member said, “Having kids out of the walk zone that want to walk is a big deal! It’s fun for them!”

### **Local and national recognition of Safe Routes**

Lyndale’s Safe Routes programming has also received positive local and national recognition. The Earth Day kick off event was publicized in local newspapers and a nightly news show. City Council Member Elizabeth Glidden and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak have walked with students on some occasions and have been great supporters of Safe Routes. Additionally, the National Center for Safe Routes to School featured Scott Borden’s work with implementing Safe Routes in a recent webinar about making the most of its mini-grants. The National Center for Safe Routes to School will also feature Lyndale’s Safe Routes programming in their national marketing campaign called, “Every Step Counts.”

### **Challenges**

While Lyndale has experienced some challenges in encouraging walking and biking to school, there is progress in overcoming these challenges as excitement and recognition of Safe Routes grows.

### **Communication and engagement**

Parent and school staff involved in Safe Routes felt it was difficult to engage families to walk to school. Engaging Spanish-speaking and Somali families has been particularly challenging due to language and cultural barriers. However, bilingual school staff have been very helpful in getting information out to non-English speaking families through translating materials and calling parents to promote the Walking School Buses. Furthermore, some parents are reaching out to other parents to promote walking to school and engage leadership. For example, parent and school staff members involved in Safe Routes noted that Somali parents have helped engage Somali students and families to walk to school. Overall, parents and school staff feel increasing communication about Safe Routes and building relationships will help encourage more participation and leadership.

### **Safety concerns**

School staff and parents acknowledged traffic, crime, and weather safety concerns as challenges to walking and biking to school. Parent focus group participants reported concerns about busy intersections, the overall flow of traffic during morning rush hour, stranger danger, and the winter cold and snow. Most parents were uncomfortable allowing their children to walk to school alone, especially young children. They were concerned about their



### **The “Walking School Bus”—a safe way to make walking fun**

Alice’s grandchildren enjoy walking to school with the Walking School Bus. Waiting for the Walking School Bus is an exciting time for her grandchildren. She believes it is a safety net for her grandchildren—in addition to making walking fun! She said, “Tuesdays and Thursdays are big days for us. We get ready, have snacks, and wait for the Walking School Bus to come. My grandchildren get exercise and walking really rejuvenates them. It also invigorates me as a grandmother.”

Albert, Alice’s grandson, walks to school every day with his three siblings and friends. He thinks walking is good for his health and the environment. He likes talking with his friends on the way to school and playing kickball when he gets to school early. He says, “My friends are in (the Walking School Bus) so I wanted to be in it too! I can walk and talk with my friends at the same time!”

*(Names have been changed to protect privacy.)*



## The benefits of walking: exercise, family time, and learning to be responsible

Mohammed said, "It's more convenient for my children to walk to school – it seems like a waste to drive when it takes just as much time to walk." He likes walking with his son, Abdi, because it helps both of them get exercise. Abdi understands the health benefits of walking, he said, "Walking makes children more fit, healthier, and happier."

In addition to getting exercise, walking gives Mohammed and Abdi quality time to talk to each other and socialize with other families. Abdi said, "I'm excited when I can look forward to walking to school with my friends and family." Abdi is motivated to walk to school when he sees other kids walking as well.

Mohammed feels walking to school helps children to be responsible and understand safety rules for crossing streets. He said, "It is a lesson worth learning for children to be responsible." He also feels it is important for parents to be well-informed of safety rules so they can teach their children to cross busy streets safely as well.

*(Names have been changed to protect privacy.)*



children not paying attention to traffic and encountering strangers. Some parents felt their children were not old enough or responsible enough to walk and bike to school because they lacked knowledge about safety, such as understanding street signs and knowing how to bike safely on streets or sidewalks. A couple of parents also noted a lack of bike safety equipment, such as helmets and knee pads. The winter weather was a concern because some parents felt it was difficult for their children to walk in the cold and unshoveled sidewalks. When sidewalks were not kept clear, children walked in the streets.

Generally, parents felt more comfortable with their children walking to school if their children were older, and if there were other students and adults walking to school as well. Many parents reported walking with their children to school, while other parents allowed their children to walk to school with neighbors or they drove their children to school. While a few parents were concerned about who would be responsible if something were to happen to a child on the Walking School Bus, most felt an adult presence or supervision was key to ensuring that children got to school safely. A parent acknowledged that the role of adult walkers is very important and helped those parents who were unable to walk to school with their children.

In acknowledgement of parents' safety concerns, Lyndale hosted a listening session in May 2010 to hear about parents' concerns and ideas regarding walking to school. Another listening session is scheduled for next year. Parent and school staff members felt communication and parent leadership were key in promoting the safety of students who walk and bike to school. Safe Routes to School staff report they continue to work with law enforcement, public works, and other agencies to address family safety concerns.

## Impact of Safe Routes

Safe Routes has positively impacted students, the school, and the community. School staff and parents felt students were very excited about walking to school. They felt walking to school helped give students opportunities to exercise and learn healthy habits. In addition, they felt walking helped students be alert, energetic, happy, and active, which is beneficial for preparing students to do well in school. A parent said, "Walking helps get them awake and charged for the day."

Walking has also helped students and parents build relationships with other families and make connections with the school and neighborhood. Parents felt walking was a chance to spend quality time with their children, in addition to being an opportunity for them to socialize and meet new people. Many parents said socializing with friends on the way to school was the highlight of walking for their children. Parents who walked with their children were also meeting and building relationships with other parents. Parents felt building relationships helped to create a sense of



community. A parent said, “Walking can be a real benefit because it is a sign of a vibrant and safe neighborhood. Walking together makes a good school. It is a way for us all to bridge cultures.” School staff also enjoyed seeing families make connections with each other and walk together. A school staff member said, “We had many parents that were opposed to walking to school, but are now walking with their children. We see them laughing and having a good time. They are really connecting with other parents within the school. It is a great experience for everyone.”

A couple of parents and a school staff member also felt encouraging students to walk to school was a way to help the school district save on transportation costs, which means more resources can be invested in student learning and education. They also felt Safe Routes supported the school district’s efforts to move towards community schools.

### *Ideas for expanding Safe Routes to School at Lyndale Community School*

School staff and parents had a variety of ideas for expanding and sustaining Safe Routes at Lyndale. Parent and school staff members involved in Safe Routes look forward to increasing student and parent participation, expanding the Walking School Buses, recruiting parent walkers to take leadership of the routes, and engaging the school neighborhood and community. With more parents and partners involved, everyone can work together to keeping students safe.

Parent focus-group participants also had some suggestions for expanding Safe Routes, such as working with the city and school district to put up more safety signs and keep streets clear in the winter; increasing the number of school safety patrols; providing safety training for students and parents in school; providing students with more incentives for walking; providing student and adult walkers with matching Lyndale t-shirts so they would be easily recognized within the neighborhood; and possibly doing a project called, “Paint the Pavement,” in which artwork is painted on the streets and sidewalks as a strategy to slow down traffic.

### *Want to implement Safe Routes to School at your school?*

Here’s some advice from staff leading Safe Routes to School within Minneapolis Public Schools:

- Start with a small group of interested individuals to learn about Safe Routes and identify programming strategies of interest.
- Build partnerships with the city, school district, parents, students, and the community to work together in implementing and promoting Safe Routes.
- Encourage participation and leadership from students, parents, and the community.
- Identify and assess common walking and biking routes, and promote designated safe routes to students, parents, and the community.



### **What’s next for Minneapolis Public Schools?**

In the 2010-11 school year, Minneapolis Public Schools will continue Safe Routes programming by:

- Expanding Safe Routes programming to at least 10 additional schools.
- Expanding the role of school safety patrols and piloting adult crossing guards.
- Expanding “Transportation Safety Week” to include lessons on walking and biking.
- Working with schools to develop maps that identify primary walking and biking routes for students and families.
- Publishing a toolkit on how to implement Safe Routes programming.
- Translating Safe Routes information into Spanish, Hmong, and Somali.
- Continuing to provide technical assistance to schools.
- Strengthening the network of resources and integrating Safe Routes into the school district and community.

## *The Safe Routes Workgroup*

The Safe Routes Workgroup is an interagency group consisting of city and school district partners. Partners collaboratively coordinate Safe Routes to School efforts within Minneapolis Public Schools by addressing obstacles to walking and biking to school and leveraging resources to support programming.

### **The City of Minneapolis partners**

- **The Department of Health and Family Support.** Provides funding for Safe Routes to School within Minneapolis Public Schools, and has worked on strategic planning for Safe Routes within the school district.
- **The Department of Public Works.** Works with schools to improve infrastructure to ensure a safe environment for walking and biking.
- **The Bike Walk Ambassador Program within the Department of Public Works.** Provides students and school staff with education and safety training on walking and biking. Bike Walk ambassadors, including youth ambassadors, have also helped schools to implement and promote Safe Routes programming.
- **The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD).** Patrols school neighborhoods during arrival and dismissal times, and provides schools with crime data to identify safe routes. The MPD also coordinates the School Resource Officer program, where every school has an assigned police officer to assist with crime-related issues.

### **Minneapolis Public Schools district partners**

- **The Department of Student Support Services.** Has district-level Safe Routes staff, who provides technical assistance to schools with Safe Routes programming, and convenes the Safe Routes Workgroup.
- **The Department of Transportation.** Provides schools with information on where students live, establishes walk zone boundaries, and helps identify safe routes.
- **The Department of Emergency Management, Safety and Security.** Coordinates the school safety patrol program and collaborates with the American Auto Association (AAA) to provide school safety patrols with safety training.

For more resources and technical assistance about Safe Routes to School within Minneapolis Public Schools, call the main phone number (612-668-0000) or visit the Healthy Kids Focused Students website (<http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/HKFS.html>).



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#### **For more information**

This summary presents highlights from the evaluation of Lyndale's Safe Routes programming. For more information, contact Melanie Ferris at Wilder Research, [melanie.ferris@wilder.org](mailto:melanie.ferris@wilder.org) or 651-280-2660.

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