



Safe Routes to School

NELLIE STONE JOHNSON 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 Nellie Stone'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 Nellie Stone. A total of three 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. Additional information about Nellie Stone's Safe Routes programming was gathered from school district-level Safe Routes staff.



Safe Routes at Nellie Stone Johnson Community School: A collaborative effort

Nellie Stone Johnson Community School is a PreK-8 public school in North Minneapolis with an enrollment of about 650 students during the 2009-2010 school year.

Safe Routes programming aligns with and helps to advance one of Nellie Stone Johnson's core values to help students learn behavior that is safe and respectful. Safe Routes also fits with the school's efforts to build a safe school neighborhood and address crime and violence concerns among families.

Safe Routes at Nellie Stone Johnson has been implemented since the 2007-08 school year. Safe Routes is primarily coordinated by the family liaison, Nicole Randolph. However, students have taken ownership of the efforts and have helped integrate Safe Routes within the school. The School Resource Officer and school safety patrols have been key supporters and help monitor student walkers and ensure that the streets are safe for crossing. Together, school staff and students work to promote Safe Routes, engage participation, and make walking and biking safe for students.

Nellie Stone Johnson school staff also work with community organizations and school district level staff to implement Safe Routes. Nellie Stone Johnson shares Safe Routes information with community partners, including a neighborhood community council called the Hawthorne Huddle and the Minneapolis Police Department's 4th precinct, to alert them about the common routes that students are walking and biking. Community partners use the

information to help keep an eye out for students before and after school.

Support from the school district is valuable in the implementation of Safe Routes programming as well. Nellie Stone Johnson receives support and technical assistance from the district level Safe Routes staff, who connect Nellie Stone to Safe Routes resources. The Department of Transportation and the Department of Emergency Management, Safety and Security were also involved in developing a "Walk-Bike Map" that identifies common safe routes for walking and biking to school.

Nellie Stone Johnson began Safe Routes by gathering information from and building interest among students and parents in the first year. Safe Routes was promoted using a variety of methods, including fliers, phone calls, emails, and in-person contact with school staff. In addition, several discussion groups were held with students and parents to learn about their concerns and needs with walking and biking to school. Parent and teacher volunteers were also recruited to walk with and monitor students as they walked or biked to and from school.

To encourage participation in walking to school, Nellie Stone Johnson has hosted multiple Safe Routes events and activities. In each year of programming, the school had two "Walk/Bike to School" days and raffled off bikes and helmets to students. In the 2008-09 school year, the Lead Peace student leadership group coordinated a "Safety Message" poster contest for the elementary age students, as well as a poetry slam about safety. They also used Safe Routes funding to buy and raffle bikes from Full Cycle, an organization that works with homeless



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- Nellie Stone Staff member

youth to build and repair bikes for sale. During the 2009-10 school year, an assembly about recycling called “Trash Talk” was presented to students as part of Safe Routes.

Accomplishments

After implementing Safe Routes for three years, Nellie Stone Johnson has much to be proud of.

Integration of Safe Routes into the school

For one, Safe Routes has been successfully integrated into the school using feedback from students and parents themselves. Safe Routes has inspired active leadership from the Lead Peace student leadership group, who organized Safe Routes activities and events and successfully promoted safety within the school neighborhood. A school staff member said, “Programming is student led and community based – it’s built on the school’s core values of safety and respect. Safe Routes to School programming promotes physical activity, which will lead to healthier children having healthier lifestyles.”

The development of the Walk-Bike Map

The development of the “Walk-Bike Map” is a great tool for parents. The map shows locations of primary walking and biking routes, school safety patrols, and marked street crossings. It will be distributed in the fall of 2010 to students, parents, and the community.

Increased knowledge about safety

School staff felt Safe Routes has helped students feel more comfortable and be more knowledgeable about being safe while walking to school. Safe Routes is viewed by school staff as a plan for building a safe environment for walking and biking to school. Through Safe Routes, students learned safety tips that helped them build confidence in walking to school, such as walking in groups. Programming also assured families that school administrators and staff are working to keep students safe and are being responsive to safety concerns. As a result, school staff are building trusting relationships with students and parents.

Challenges

Several challenges have emerged in implementing Safe Routes. However, in most cases, solutions to work through challenges are in place.

Communication & participation

Language barriers have made it difficult to engage Hmong and Spanish-speaking families; however, Nellie Stone Johnson has worked with school translators to help get information out to non-English speaking families. Sustaining momentum in walking to school and engaging parents to walk with their children has been somewhat difficult as well. The two “Walk/



Bike to School” days are successful and many students and parents walk to school together on those days, but school staff would like to see more families walking year round.

Safety concerns

Parents’ safety concerns are common barriers to engaging participation in walking to school. Crime safety was the primary concern among parent focus group participants and school staff. They were uncomfortable with children walking alone, especially young children. Parent focus group participants expressed concerns about suspicious cars, abandoned houses, pit bulls, and sex offenders in their neighborhood. However, they reported that school staff have been responsive to these concerns by reporting suspicious cars, having volunteer teachers and parents stand on street corners to help monitor student walkers, and knocking on doors to ask residents to keep their pit bulls inside during arrival and dismissal times. One parent said, “The school respects parents and that makes a difference! They have an open door policy; you can go into the school at anytime if you are concerned about anything.”

One parent focus group participant also expressed concerns with traffic safety and the weather. The parent was worried about heavy traffic on Lyndale Avenue, as well as a particularly slippery intersection in the winter. In response to this concern, the parent said school staff assigned school safety patrols to that slippery intersection which helped slow down cars. In addition, new lighted, overhead safety crossing have been installed near the school. The parent also expressed concern over unshoveled sidewalks which make it difficult to walk to school. According to Safe Routes staff, they continue to work with law enforcement, public works, and other agencies to address family safety concerns.

Impact of Safe Routes

Safe Routes programming at Nellie Stone Johnson has had positive impacts on students and the school neighborhood. School staff members were especially enthusiastic that students were learning more about safety. Safe Routes has helped students know more about how to be safe while walking and to be familiar with common walking routes.

Parents noted the physical health and relationship-building benefits of Safe Routes. The three parent focus group participants agreed that walking to school helped them and their children get daily exercise. “Kids walking – especially with the obesity rate – is a great idea!” commented a parent. Also, one parent noted that walking to school with her children was quality time for them to talk to each other. The parent also felt walking was an opportunity for her son to socialize with his friends and peers. Another parent felt walking to school helped her middle school daughter be more independent.



Safe Routes programming has also helped build community involvement and support within the school neighborhood. A parent observed a couple of school neighbors keeping an eye on student walkers to make sure they got to school safely. The parent felt having the support of school neighbors and other parents watching or walking with student walkers helped parents who were unable to do so due to work commitments. The parent said, “Safe Routes is a blessing – people are more aware of when and where kids are walking. They’re getting to know their neighbors and neighborhood,” said a parent.

Ideas for expanding Safe Routes to School at Nellie Stone Johnson Community School

Several Safe Routes activities are coming up in the next school year. Nellie Stone Johnson will continue to hold two “Walk/Bike to School” days, in addition to a fall Safety Fair coordinated by Lead Peace students on walking and biking safety, bike repair, and active living. Plans are also underway to distribute the “Walk-Bike Map” to help students, parents, and the school neighborhood be aware of the common safe routes that students are walking.

School staff involved in Safe Routes also plan on increasing parent involvement throughout the next year. There is interest in forming a Safe Routes committee of students, parents, school staff, and community members to expand and coordinate Safe Routes programming.

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.

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

Please note: Pictures included in this brief are not of actual Nellie Stone students.



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.



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For more information

This summary presents highlights from the evaluation of Nellie Stone's Safe Routes programming. For more information, contact Melanie Ferris at Wilder Research, melanie.ferris@wilder.org or 651-280-2660

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