



# Safe Routes to School

## SEWARD MONTESSORI 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 Seward'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 Seward. A total of nine 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 Seward's Safe Routes programming was gathered from school district level Safe Routes staff.



## *Safe Routes at Seward Montessori School: A collaborative effort*

Seward Montessori School is a PreK-8 public school in south Minneapolis with an enrollment of about 870 students in the 2009-2010 school year.

Safe Routes programming at Seward Montessori School is mostly parent-led with strong support from school district staff and community businesses. These partners collaboratively work to support a safe and healthy environment for students to walk and bike to school. They distribute information, build community partnerships, coordinate Safe Routes activities and events, and engage participation from students and families.

During the 2008-09 school year, parent Kathy Kurdelmeier helped the school apply for and receive a \$1,000 city-funded mini-grant through the school district. Thanks to the grant, the school was able to host multiple events and activities around walking and biking, such as “Walk/Bike to School” days, training sessions on helmet safety and head trauma, bike safety inspection and repair days, a bike give-a-way, and a bike helmet program in which families could purchase helmets at a reduced price.

In addition, Seward has received generous donations from local businesses, including the Dero Bike Rack Company, Free Wheel, the Hub Bike Shop, and Seward ReDesign, to support Safe Routes programming.

The Dero Bike Rack Company played a key role this past year by donating bikes, bike racks, and the Boltage system to Seward. The Boltage system (previously known as the “Freiker” system) is a solar powered radio frequency system that tracks how many miles students walk or bike to and from school each day. The system motivates participating students by beeping to let students know their miles have been registered.

### **Accomplishments**

Safe Routes programming at Seward has achieved several noteworthy accomplishments.

#### **Increase in walking and biking to school**

Parents and school staff involved in Safe Routes have observed an increase in the number of students walking and biking to school. One school staff member said, “More children are walking and biking to school than before – the bike racks are full and there are still bikes scattered around.” Typically, most students who walk and bike live within the walk zone of the school; however, Safe Routes has reached out to some families outside the walk zone as well. A school staff member notes that some middle school students who live outside the walk zone started biking to school this past spring.

Students are motivated by Safe Routes and are enthusiastic about walking and biking to school. The Boltage system and incentives are successful in generating participation and excitement in Safe Routes events and activities. The number of miles that students have tracked with the Boltage

### **Walking to school as a “rite of passage”**

Sarah moved about three blocks from Seward Montessori so her three children could be in easy walking distance. She said, “Walking can be a rite of passage. At first, you walk with them and hold their hand—making sure you can get them to stop before you cross the street. Eventually, you don’t have to hold their hand anymore, but you still cross with them. As they get older, you let them walk to school and just watch them from the corner—they get more and more independent as you go.”

Sarah accompanies son Jack to school, who rides his bike or scooter doing tricks on the way. Daughter Lauren enjoys walking and socializing with friends and also feels walking is an eco-friendly way to save energy and reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Oldest daughter Katie is a school patrol, and values her fellow students’ smiles and thank yous. She especially looks forward to the annual school patrol field trip to Nickelodeon Universe. All three agree walking, biking, or riding a scooter to school helps them get daily exercise.

To parents interested in having their kids walk to school, Sarah says, “It’s a safe city. You’re not alone—we’re always there every day, and there are others who walk to school.”

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

system throughout the school year is a notable achievement. Students set a goal of accumulating enough miles to walk and bike to the Golden Gate Bridge, approximately 2,000 miles from Minneapolis. Students reached their goal less than half way through the school year in mid-December! By the end of May, they racked up a total of over 4,800 miles – more than enough miles to walk and bike to the Golden Gate Bridge and back!

Students and parents play an important role in motivating each other and other families to walk and bike to school. One parent said, “People are really excited about walking/biking to school – it’s very contagious. The more kids see other kids walking/biking, they want to be part of it too.”

### **Community involvement and support**

Parent and school staff involved in Safe Routes appreciate the support of school neighbors and community members. Neighbors and community members have noticed the increase of student walkers and bikers and have also participated in Safe Routes events. For example, in the fall of 2009, students, parents, school staff, neighbors, and community members celebrated the debut of the Boltage system together at a kick-off event for Safe Routes.

The success of Safe Routes at Seward has even captured the recognition of Mayor R.T. Rybak. In September 2009, Mayor Rybak awarded the Mayor’s Healthy City Award to parent Kathy Kurdelmeier for her work in coordinating Safe Routes activities and events around bike safety. School staff and parents report that the mayor is very supportive of the efforts and has participated in several Safe Routes events at Seward.

### **Challenges**

While Safe Routes has enjoyed great success, there are some challenges that present opportunities for increasing its impact.

### **Communication**

Disseminating information and engaging students and parents can be difficult, especially when there are language barriers. Parent and school staff involved in Safe Routes at Seward acknowledged that reaching out to families and engaging participation is not easy, and recognize it is an ongoing process. However, Seward makes efforts to communicate Safe Routes information in many different ways, including sending home fliers, calling and/or emailing parents, promoting Safe Routes at school events, and featuring Safe Routes in SPLASH, the school newsletter are beginning to pay off. More families are becoming involved and aware of Safe Routes as enthusiasm and excitement grows.



### **Learning responsibility and gaining independence**

Maria watches her young daughter, Lucia, walk to school every day. Sometimes the winter cold makes walking to school a little difficult, but Lucia is motivated to get to school. Maria said, “Lucia likes school so much! She doesn’t want to miss a day!”

In the spring, Lucia likes riding her bike to school because it helps her get to school faster, and she is learning to ride her bike better.

Maria feels walking and biking to school has helped Lucia be healthier and more independent. She said, “Lucia gets exercise – walking helps her wake up and get ready for the day. It also helps her be more responsible – to learn how to take care of herself.” Lucia is quite proud of herself for being able to walk four blocks and cross streets. She proudly exclaimed, “I learned how to get to school by myself!”

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

## Building a sense of community

Walking to school has helped David's sons, Cameron and Luke, feel part of their community. David said, "It's good for them to meet up with their friends along the way. We live close to the school and have a fairly tight knit block. It's nice for them to see everybody who lives on the block in the morning – getting to know people and seeing the same faces every day. It helps give them a sense of being part of their neighborhood."

Cameron and Luke walk with their dad everyday to school. They prefer walking rather than "hustling into a car every morning." They think walking is "fun" and helps keep them healthy by getting daily exercise. They also like walking because it helps them do their part in keeping the environment healthy. On the way to school, Luke enjoys talking with his friends, while Cameron – a school patrol – enjoys helping his fellow students be safe. Cameron said, "I'm a school patrol – so I am the safety."

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



## Safety concerns

Parental safety concerns around traffic, the weather, and crime are common barriers to engaging students to walk and bike to school. While there were some concerns around bullying, the risk for kidnapping, and not knowing if children reached school safely, the most prevalent concerns voiced by parent focus group participants were around traffic safety and weather conditions. Parents were mostly worried about their children crossing busy intersections and speeding traffic. They were also concerned about the whether being too dark and cold for their children to walk to school in the fall and winter.

A couple of parents handled safety concerns by walking with their children to and from school, and teaching them how to safely cross streets. A father said, "I've been having my son cross the street in front of me so he can show me when he wants to cross. If he tries to cross before I'm comfortable – I have the ability to tell him to get back on the curb. It gives him a sense of independence, and I'm gaining confidence in his ability to cross streets."

Furthermore, several parents were appreciative of student and adult crossing guards at busy intersections near the school. They felt that school safety patrols are an effective way to make sure students are safely crossing streets. Safe Routes to School staff reported that they are currently working with the Minneapolis Police Department and the American Auto Association (AAA) to strengthen the safety patrol.

## Sustainability

Findings ways to support the coordination of Safe Routes and to continue programming was a concern for parents and school staff involved in Safe Routes at Seward. Parents and school staff involved in Safe Routes felt partnerships between the school and parents could be strengthened to increase the involvement of parents and school staff in coordinating Safe Routes. To do so, they suggested identifying school– and district-level point people for Safe Routes programming and forming a Safe Routes committee to distribute coordination responsibilities. They also felt it was important to look for additional resources and funding to ensure that Safe Routes programming continues.

## Impact of Safe Routes

School staff and parents alike felt there were positive impacts of walking and biking to school for students. They felt students were happier and healthier and, as a result, better able to concentrate and behave in school. School staff especially liked that students are learning more about being safe, and about the health and environmental benefits of walking/biking to school.

By walking to school, parents felt students started their day "on the right foot." A father said, "Our mornings aren't always smooth – so the extra ten

minutes of time walking to school quietly gets my child settled and ready for the day.” Some parents who walked with their children to school felt it was quality time for them and their children to talk to each other – several parents also felt it was an opportunity for their children to gain independence and socialize with friends.

Safe Routes also has a positive impact on the community and school district. School staff informants and parent focus group participants felt walking and biking to school helped build a sense of community. School staff, students, families, and school neighbors get to know each other and work together in creating a safe environment for walking and biking. Students socialize with each other, as do parents and neighbors while they are walking to school. In addition, school staff and parents felt having kids walk to school saves the school district money on gas and busing – one of the biggest expenses for the school district.

### **Ideas for expanding Safe Routes to School at Seward Montessori School**

Parent focus group participants had a variety of ideas for expanding Safe Routes programming next year. Many parents were interested in establishing a “Walking School Bus” or a “Biking Bus,” in which a group of students and parents/adults walk or bike to school and pick up other students along the way. Additionally, some parents were interested expanding Safe Routes to include an afterschool bike club, starting with the middle school students first. Other ideas from parents to increase walking or biking to school include expanding the walk zone or having buses drop kids off at the far end of the school.

### ***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>).



### **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.



**MINNEAPOLIS  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
Urban Education. Global Citizens.



**City of Minneapolis**  
Department of Health & Family Support



### **Wilder Research**

Information. Insight. Impact

451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700; FAX 651-280-3700

AMHERST H.  
**WILDER**  
FOUNDATION  
ESTABLISHED 1906

Here for good.

#### **For more information**

This summary presents highlights from the evaluation of Seward'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.

Author: Mao Thao  
DECEMBER 2010