



Safe Routes to School Workshop

Final Report

On May 10, 2002, the Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS)¹ hosted a Safe Routes to School Workshop. Approximately 100 planners, engineers, school officials, parents, public health professionals, students and advocates gathered to discuss ideas for community initiatives, traffic calming projects and school-based promotion programs to get more children walking and biking safely to schools in northeastern Illinois. This report provides an overview of the event. For more information and for copies of workshop materials, visit: www.catsmpo.com/bikeped or contact Melissa Smiley at 312.793.0119 or m-smiley@catsmpo.com.

Forty years ago, school bells rang and neighborhood streets filled with the sounds of children walking, running, meandering and biking to playgrounds, home, or an after-school job. Today's scene is often different: buses and caregivers jockey for position and idle their engines as they wait to whisk kids away to their after-school destinations.

Community and family structures have evolved: car use has increased, fewer parents stay at home, development is spreading into the countryside and concern about traffic safety and personal security is growing. These changes have affected children's transportation habits. The Center for Disease Control estimates that the percentage of children walking and biking to school has dropped from 50 to 10 percent in the last four decades.

Although most children are now spared the proverbial "mile walk to school through a blizzard," there is growing concern that this change is contributing to problems, such as:



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- **Increased sedentary lifestyles and health problems in young people.** This includes significant increases in asthma rates and childhood obesity.
- **Increased traffic congestion.** Some studies attribute up to 27% of morning traffic to school-related trips.
- **Increased stress on caregivers.** Women with school-aged children average 20% more daily auto trips than all other women.
- **Decreased independence and interaction with communities by children.** Concern about traffic and personal safety keeps many young people indoors or reliant on others for travel, depriving them of opportunities to explore their communities and gain independence.
- **Irreparable loss of a way of life.** In 2000, the National Trust for Historic Preservation responded to increased school construction on suburban peripheries by listing the traditional neighborhood school as one of America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places.

¹ CATS, as the metropolitan planning organization for northeastern Illinois, is responsible for developing the region's long-range transportation plan and five-year program of federally funded transportation projects. See www.catsmpo.com and www.catsmpo.com/bikeped for more information.

Reversing the Trend

Communities across the country and around the world are working to make it easier and safer for children to get around under their own power. California and Texas recently created funding mechanisms for calming traffic on streets near schools. Thousands of American schools participated in International Walk-to-School Day last fall. In our own backyard, the Chicago Department of Transportation provides bicycle education in elementary schools. Naperville provides parents with maps of "safe routes" to local schools. By coupling promotion programs and pedestrian friendly street design, areas such as Marin County, CA have increased the number of children getting to school on foot or by bike. To learn more about these and other efforts, CATS organized a workshop on Safe Routes to School.



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The Safe Routes to School workshop was held at Harold Washington Library in downtown Chicago on May 10, 2002. Nearly 100 planners, engineers, school officials, parents, public health professionals, students and advocates gathered with national and local experts to discuss the importance of providing children opportunities for physical activity, as well as strategies for designing communities and streets that are safe for children. Presentations by both speakers, a discussion by a panel of local experts, and break-out sessions are summarized below.

Richard Killingsworth, Active Living by Design

Rich_Killingsworth@unc.edu

Mr. Rich Killingsworth, a nationally recognized expert on the connections between transportation options and children's health, gave the keynote address. He described the development patterns that have increased automobile traffic and commuting times, decreased water and air quality, and created a society that is less active and healthy. He cited the following statistics to emphasize the need to address the public health implications of urban and suburban development:

- Physical inactivity, which results in 200,000-250,000 deaths every year, can increase the risk of stroke, high blood pressure, colon cancer and diabetes. Recent reports show an alarming increase in children diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes, a disease that was rarely seen in children until the early 1990s.
- One in seven children between the ages of 6 and 19 is overweight. At the same time, budget cuts eliminating recess and physical education classes mean that most American youth do not meet the Surgeon General's recommendation to accumulate 60 minutes of moderate activity, five or more days a week.
- Roughly 15 percent of the U.S. population is obese. In some states, more than 20 percent of the population is obese.

Mr. Killingsworth urged planners, municipal leaders, engineers, and advocates to pay attention to the public health implications of their decisions and use their influence to help create more active and healthy communities. They can do this by consciously providing destinations that people can walk or bike to, and encouraging people to combine physical activity with everyday activities like shopping and commuting.

Ms. Wendi Kallins, whose work has increased walking and biking trips to schools in Marin County by 57%, also outlined recent changes in American children's travel patterns. Though numerous studies show that students who walk or bike to school are more alert and creative throughout the day, fewer students are walking or biking to school today than in the past. This decrease results from concerns about faster moving automobile traffic, lack of sidewalks, lack of time, and unsafe street crossings. Ms. Kallins addressed safety issues with examples of tools that can increase the safety of students walking to school. These included enhancing sidewalks and crosswalks to improve visibility, creating signs and banners to be carried by groups of walking children (especially in a "walking school bus"), and traffic calming measures that impact both flow and volume of vehicles on particular roads around schools.



www.walktoschools.org

Ms. Kallins said individual safe routes to school programs should seek to increase the number of kids safely walking and biking, decrease the number of vehicle trips, and involve the community in walking and biking activities. She outlined six key steps in the process.

- Create a team of parents, teachers, kids, and interested neighbors.
- Obtain baseline data of current behavior and safety hazards. This information is vital in order to measure successes.
- Involve the community through focus groups and meetings.
- Analyze the routes for safety improvements.
- Inform both the kids and the parents through fun and educational activities.
- Organize both a kick-off event and regular events throughout the year, such as contests between classrooms or a cooperative effort by the entire school to bike and walk a set number of miles.



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Six local experts with different specialties and experience with encouraging walking and biking in northeastern Illinois participated in a panel discussion.

- **Heather Convey** of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation described her work to promote cycling in the Chicago Public Schools. She has found that many children want to bike to school, but that fear of crime (including bike theft) is a deterrent. heather@biketraffic.org
- **Al Schorsch**, a student at St. Ignatius High School, described the pleasures of bike-commuting and offered suggestions for promoting biking to teens: emphasize that it is a cheap way to exercise independence. . . and don't let them borrow the family car until they're 18. wowiezowie@aol.com
- **Dr. Matt Longjohn** of Children's Memorial Hospital explored the link between transportation choices and health problems related to poor air quality and physical inactivity. Mlongjohn@childrensmemorial.org
- **Maryann Romanelli** described how she raised community awareness about walking and organized a successful walk to school day in Hinsdale. greenonetoo@aol.com
- **John Lomas** spoke about Naperville's program of distributing maps of safe walking routes to parents and students. lomasj@naperville.il.us
- **Tom Samuels**, of Chicago's 48th ward, urged residents to work with engineers to improve the walking environment. He explained that there are many road design strategies that can increase pedestrian safety and comfort without causing problems for motorists. alderman48@ameritech.net

The workshop concluded with small group discussions about "next steps" for creating safe routes to schools. Ideas included: establishing partnerships, obtaining baseline statistics, identifying leaders for Walk-to-School day events, improving subdivision review, including bicycle/pedestrian education in general school curriculum and tapping into funding sources, such as the Hazard Elimination Program.

What can I do?

Get informed. The websites listed below will connect you to more specific information on children's transportation needs and strategies for meeting them. All of the resources handed out at this workshop are available at www.catsmpo.com/bikeped/saferoutes.htm.

Get involved with a school. International Walk to School Day is October 2, 2002. Contact your local school and find out what they're doing. If they don't have a plan, volunteer to organize activities for the day. If you have a question or a great idea, or if you want to let us know what your school is doing, contact Maryann Romanelli, who has volunteered to act as a resource person for Safe Routes efforts in the Chicago area: 630.323.0868 or greenonetoo@aol.com.

Get involved with the planning process. Decisions are made every day by villages, cities, and transportation providers. These decisions often influence how safe, feasible and pleasant it is for children to walk or bike to schools. Your opinion counts, so contact your elected officials to find out how to get involved with local planning efforts. To participate in the regional transportation planning process and connect to other transportation agencies, contact CATS at www.catsmpo.com or 312.793.3456.



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For More Information on Safe Routes to School Initiatives:

www.saferoutestoschools.org

www.walktoschool-usa.org

www.4saferoutes.org