

ALL KIDS DESERVE SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

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Most school children in the U.S. get to school by bus or single occupancy vehicle, with only a small percentage walking or bicycling. In Colorado, less than 18% of children actively commute to school based on the 2016 Child Health Survey, while 20% take a school bus and more than 54% are driven to school in a single occupancy family vehicle, which is likely to be higher at choice and charter schools. All of these vehicles add to increased traffic congestion and air pollution at drop off and pick up times. Add to this vehicle speeds in school zones that impact both the likelihood and severity of crashes, whether between vehicles, bicyclists or pedestrians.

But besides congestion, air pollution, and higher vehicle speeds, why should we be concerned about how our children are arriving at school? In 1969, nearly 50 percent of all children in the United States (and nearly 90 percent of those within a mile of school) walked or bicycled to school. By 2009, that number had plummeted to fewer than 15 percent. We have seen a slight rebound in that number in Colorado, but we still have less than 18% who are actively commuting to school. In addition, during the morning commute, driving to school represents 10-14 percent of traffic on the road. Kids today have become less active, less independent, and less healthy. Activity levels for many children have declined, due in part to a built environment that is unsafe for walking and bicycling, reduced physical education in school, increased popularity of sedentary leisure-time activities, and schools that are situated longer distances from the homes of their students due to school siting or because of school choice options.

Concerned by the long-term health and traffic consequences of this trend, Congress approved funding in 2005 for implementation of Safe Routes to School programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Colorado has had an active Safe Routes to School beginning in 2004 and continues to support communities' efforts to get more children walking and bicycling to and from school.

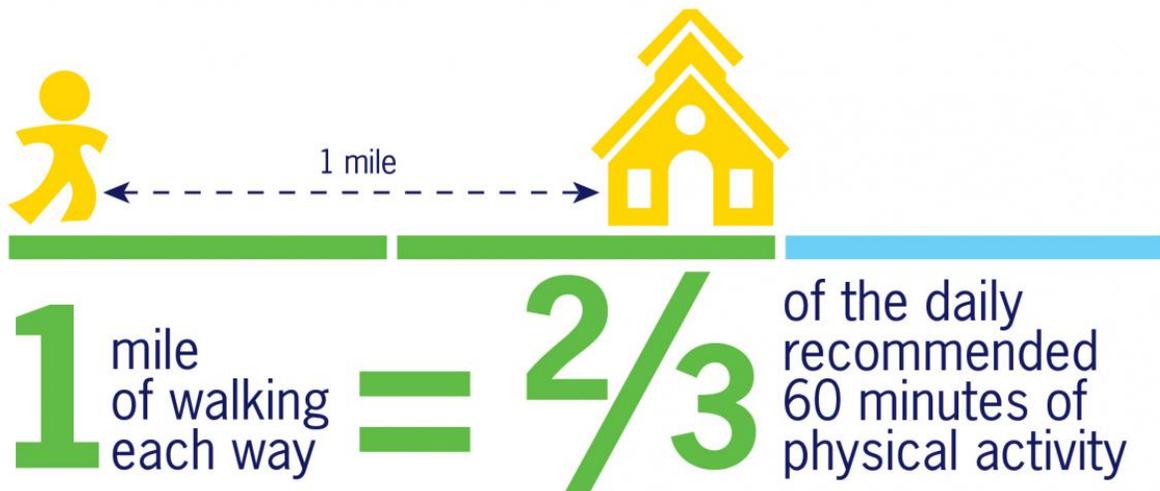
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF GETTING MORE CHILDREN ACTIVELY COMMUTING TO SCHOOL, AND AROUND THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS?

HEALTH AND OBESITY

Children today are simply not getting enough physical activity, contributing to growing rates of obesity and obesity-related health problems, such as diabetes and hypertension. Over the past 40 years, rates of obesity have soared among children of all ages in the United States, and approximately 25 million children and adolescents—more than 33%—are now overweight or obese or at risk of becoming so. In Colorado,

19% of adolescents were overweight or obese in 2013. Kids are also less active today, and 23% of children get no free time physical activity at all. People living in auto-oriented suburbs and rural areas drive more, walk less, and are more obese than people living in walkable communities. For each hour of driving per day, obesity increases 6 percent, but walking for transportation reduces the risk of obesity.

Walking is one of the simplest, most effective, and most affordable strategies for kids and adults to build physical activity into their lives. One mile of walking translates to 2/3 of the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day.



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

There is a growing body of evidence showing a positive relationship between physical activity and measures of academic achievement, including grand point average, rate of learning, and classroom behavior, as well as cognitive, social, and motor skill development.

Most parents and educators are aware that physical activity and fitness boost learning and memory in children but may not be aware that fitness-associated performance benefits are largest for those situations in which initial learning is the most challenging. Lower performing students appear to derive particular benefit from physical activity. In addition, studies have shown that short bicycling exercise periods resulted in enhanced neuronal activity and increased cognitive performance for teenagers with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

And one of the benefits that teachers report is that when children get physical activity before class, they are more on task and fidget less. This is true for both girls

and boys, and has been shown to be particularly beneficial for children who have the most trouble paying attention and those with attention deficit disorders.

ENVIRONMENT

Safe Routes to School projects increase the number of children walking and bicycling to school, which also cuts down on the number of cars. As cars emit pollutants for each mile traveled, reducing traffic can improve the quality of air that children breathe in and around their schools. Children exposed to traffic pollution are more likely to have asthma, permanent lung deficits, and a higher risk of heart and lung problems as adults. Over the last 25 years, among children ages 5 to 14, there has been a 74 percent increase in asthma cases. In addition, millions of days of school are missed every year due to asthma. Schools that are designed so children can walk and bicycle have measurably better air quality. Research has also shown that a 5% increase in a neighborhood's "walkability" reduces vehicle miles traveled by 6%.

Returning to 1969 levels of walking and bicycling to school would save 3.2 billion vehicle miles, 1.5 million tons of carbon dioxide and 89,000 tons of other pollutants—equal to keeping more than 250,000 cars off the road for a year

TRAFFIC CONGESTION

Neighborhoods are becoming increasingly clogged by traffic. By boosting the number of children walking and bicycling, families can play a role in reducing traffic congestion not only around their schools but also in their neighborhood and community. While distance to school is the most commonly reported barrier to walking and bicycling, private vehicles still account for half of school trips between 1/4 and 1/2 mile—a distance easily covered on foot or bike.

A study of more than 800 schools in DC, FL, OR, and TX found that Safe Routes to School interventions resulted in an average 31% increase in walking and bicycling to school over a five-year period, with up to 43% for comprehensive approaches with infrastructure and multi-year programs.

In 2009, American families drove 30 billion miles and made 6.5 billion vehicle trips to take their children to and from schools, representing 10-14 percent of traffic on the road during the morning commute.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS AND PARENTS DO?

At the local level, schools, parents and communities can run education and encouragement programs with families and schools and push for strong municipal and district policies to support safe walking and bicycling. The most successful Safe Routes to School programs incorporate the Five E's: evaluation, education, encouragement, engineering, and enforcement, and while also emphasizing equity.

Some ideas include modifying schools' arrival and departure policies like staggering pick-up and drop-off times to give students who are actively commuting time to get clear of car traffic. Schools can also designate a place near school where students can be dropped off or picked up, reducing traffic congestion while encouraging children to be physically active. Many schools incorporate bicycle and pedestrian safety education into our physical education program.

Take a look at your school to see if they have adequate bicycle parking and security and they support storage for other forms of active transportation like skateboards and scooters. Principals can play an active roll in encouraging groups of students to walk or bicycle to school together and how the school supports walking and bicycling.

School communities should work with their town, city, or county to look at policies and plans that support crossing guard programs, creating safer school zones especially around arrival and departure times, adopting complete street policies on how streets and trails are designed and helping ensure that bicycle-pedestrian-trail plans are enacted that support bicycling, walking, trails, and safe routes to school.

Whether it's to school, the park, the library, or the rec center, let's get our children safely walking and bicycling around town.