

Active Facts:

Community Schools = Healthy Children

Making sure our schools contribute to active communities and healthy children

When I was your age....” It has long been a tradition for each generation of parents to share with their children the much greater challenges they themselves faced when they walked or biked to school... up hill, into the wind, through the snow, for mile after mile.

But, over the past 20 years, the trip to school has changed. When asked how they traveled to school as children, most adults over the age of 35 answer that they biked or walked. Then, when asked if they are comfortable with the idea of their kids, grandkids, or neighbor children walking or biking to school, typically fewer than 10 percent say “yes.”

These responses are confirmed by the data: about half of America’s school children aged 5-15 go to school as passengers in private vehicles, while another third take the school bus. Only about 10 percent walk, and only 2 percent ride a bike.

And, it is not just the trip to school that’s shifted to the car: almost 75 percent of all trips made by 5-9 year olds – and 65 percent of all trips for 10-15 year olds – are made as a passenger in a private vehicle. The bottom line: the number of bicycling and walking trips made by children in the US declined by 63 percent from 1975 to 1995. Our children have become “mobility-dependent” – they’ve lost independent access to their community.

There are serious consequences associated with this change. Today, nearly one in four children is overweight. Physical inactivity has reached epidemic proportions among children (and all other age groups). These factors translate directly into increased risk for chronic disease.

And, there are other negative impacts on the community: approximately 20 percent of morning rush hours trips involve driving kids to school, a major contributing factor to traffic congestion and air pollution, on traffic safety, and on energy consumption.

Perhaps the most disturbing consequence of this travel pattern is that our children are growing up with little or no direct connection with their community, with few opportunities to explore parks on their own, to gather on their own with their peers and create their own games, or to go to the library by themselves. These are opportunities that most of today’s adults had and took for granted, but now hesitate to allow their children.

This is a trend that must be reversed. We must commit ourselves to reclaiming our neighborhoods, our streets and highways, our parks and recreation areas – our communities – for our children. And, one place to start is to make sure we get our schools “right.”



PHOTO BY SHARON ROERTY



Active Living RESOURCE CENTER

Providing technical assistance to create active communities

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What Are Healthy Schools?

The goal is to make it possible for virtually every child to walk, bicycle, or take a bus to school. We must reverse the trend of driving kids to school. The benefits for children in terms of health and independence would be tremendous, and people of all ages would benefit from improved public health, transportation safety and efficiency, environmental quality, and energy conservation. For this to work schools should be of moderate size, be located in the neighborhoods they serve, and be easily accessible by kids walking and bicycling.

Here are a set of objectives you can share with your local school board and elected officials to let them know what you want and what children need:

- **Size:** plan, design and maintain schools to “fit” in the neighborhoods they serve. We need to stop building mega-schools that “warehouse” kids and require virtually all of them to be driven to school.
- **Location:** schools should be located within walking and bicycling distance of the children who will attend them.
- **Access:** neighborhood streets around schools should be designed to make it safe and easy for kids to walk and bike to school as well as to other destinations.
- **Site design:** school sites themselves should be compact; the building(s), driveways, parking, sidewalks, and bike parking should be laid out to give top priority to making it safe and easy for pedestrians and bicyclists.
- **Motor vehicle operation:** motor vehicle use along routes to schools should be strictly controlled to make sure that speeds are slow enough to not endanger children.
- **Encouragement:** local school transportation policies and programs should be designed to encourage bicycling and walking, and to discourage or restrict driving kids to school.
- **Center for the neighborhood:** schools should be planned, designed, and operated to serve a broad range of community needs such as community and/or senior center, park and recreation facility, library, etc.

Indicators

Here are some questions you can ask to help assess how well your community is doing on creating and maintaining “Community Schools for Healthy Children.” Ask the questions and get the answers. If you don’t like what you see and hear, ask the Mayor, City Council, Superintendent, or School Board to make some changes.

- Do my local government and school board have policies that favor providing neighborhood schools, retaining neighborhood schools and building new, small schools in neighborhoods?
- How many of the school sites in my community are located in neighborhoods?
- What percentage of the children in my neighborhood live within walking or bicycling distance from their school?
- Do the schools that serve the kids in my neighborhood have sidewalks connecting them to the homes of the kids that attend them?
- Do our schools provide good bicycle parking?
- Are cars driven slowly and carefully along the roads near neighborhood schools?
- Does the school board have a transportation policy that encourages bicycling and walking?
- Are the schools that serve my neighborhood routinely used for other community functions?
- Do I encourage my children to bike or walk to school?



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Living RESOURCE
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www.activelivingresources.org
National Center for Bicycling & Walking
8120 Woodmont Ave., Suite 650
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: 301.656.4220
Fax: 301.656.4225