



# Safe Routes to School Equal Healthier Kids

By Miranda Ericsson

Imagine a little girl and a boy on their morning walk to school. They step quickly, side by side, wearing colorful backpacks. The girl is a head taller and holds the boy's hand. The image probably brings a smile to your face, but for many Topeka kids the walk to school isn't as nice as it sounds.

Picture those two children stepping carefully on jutting, broken sidewalks, or walking in the street because no sidewalks exist on their route. Imagine them strolling past abandoned buildings, or shying away from loose dogs. An unsafe walk to school is the reality for far too many Topeka children.

In the Quincy Elementary Neighborhood, Shawnee County Health Agency teamed up with USD 501 to take a closer look at the problem with a Safe Routes to School Study funded by the Metropolitan Topeka Planning Organization. A team of volunteers, parents, and school staff hit the streets to walk the route to school, so that they could see the issue through a kid's eyes.

Craig Barnes, Health Promotion Coordinator at the Shawnee County Health Agency, says that a Safe Routes to School Study was needed to identify the barriers that kids face walking to and from school. He was surprised by how bad the sidewalk system in the neighborhood proved to be.

"Sidewalks are either non-existent, damaged, blocked, or completely overgrown by grass and weeds," Barnes said.

27% of Quincy students are already walking to school under unsafe conditions. So if it's so risky to walk to school, why do we want to get more kids walking and biking? The number one reason is exercise—about 40% of Quincy students are overweight. Community liaison Mark Orozco notes that the majority of Quincy's students live within a mile of the school.

"I think that the parents would like to let their children walk to school," Orozco said.



Orozco believes that the condition and lack of sidewalks should be the first thing addressed, and that routes to school should be clearly marked.

"I am sure we would have an increase in walking and biking to school, which would help with family transportation issues and increase student physical activity," he said.

His comment brings up another point: traffic congestion.

Volunteers observed heavy traffic and long lines of cars at Quincy Elementary during the morning drop off at school. There are no crossing guards and a volunteer reported seeing one child wait three minutes to cross the intersection to school because cars were not stopping to wait for her at the crosswalk. Bus loading and unloading zones are not all clearly marked, so cars block bus access, which leads to buses waiting at stop signs for periods of up to five minutes and backing up the traffic behind them the whole time. Drop off time could be quite stressful for working parents who are trying to get to their jobs.

Infrastructure changes are one obvious solution to the problem, but rebuilding sidewalks will take time. What can we do to help increase the number of kids walking and biking in the meantime, while keeping them safe?

The Safe Routes to School Report recommends safety education for elementary students, as well as encour-

agement campaigns such as rewards for frequent walkers or bikers. Adult supervision could also put parents at ease. Families could arrange to take turns walking children to school, for example. In some cases, given the traffic conditions at drop-off time, it could actually take less time for a parent to walk with children and back home again than it would to drive them!

Volunteer Jill Himberger notes that each person in a neighborhood can contribute to the effort to keep kids safe.

"Parents, residents, and businesses in the area should be aware of any potential dangers on their own property, keep animals properly restrained, and speak up when they observe something unsafe," Himberger said.

A daily trip to and from school is a great way to help kids increase their physical activity, and also encourages appropriate independence as a child grows. By supporting efforts to get kids walking and biking to school in your neighborhood, you can help kids develop habits that lead to wellness for life.

*Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods is mobilizing the community to take action on health priorities so that policy, environment and practice influences a culture shift toward health and wellness for everyone in Shawnee County.*



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