

Walking UpHill, Both Ways

By Janet Barlow, Active & Safe Routes to School Coordinator, EAC

On Walk to School Day, 2003, Premier John Hamm and former Principal Kim Nadeau cut the ribbon launching the new sidewalk to Sackville Centennial School in Lower Sackville.

“When I was young I walked to school uphill, both ways.” An old saw, but what a shame we don’t hear it more often. As the days of small, local schools fade away, so do the streams of children walking to them. In their place are large, centralized schools to which roll legions of buses and family cars.

A growing movement of parents, school staff, students and community members, however, advocates that kids shun the car and walk, cycle, in-line skate, skateboard or scooter to school instead. The movement brings hope that more children and youth will reconnect with their neighbourhoods as they experience the joys of active transportation.

Implications

Our children’s safety, environment and health are all negatively affected by being driven to school rather than travelling there actively. How our kids get to school also affects their sense of freedom, independence and ability to connect with their neighbourhoods.

According to a 1998 Environics International report, about 68% of Canadian children could walk to school in 30 minutes or less, yet only 36% do so on a regular basis. In our province this number is even lower. For the remainder, we’re not talking about kids living in rural areas where there is no alternative to the bus. These are kids living 3 km or less from school who are driven in the family car.

Barriers

Why don’t kids walk or cycle to school when, in theory, they should be able to? Stopping students in their tracks are often a lack of sidewalks, treacherous street crossings, and speeding and/or congested traffic. It’s no wonder some parents fear for their child’s personal safety. Other parents believe that the walk to school is too far. Still others simply go for the convenience of the car.

Locating large, centralized schools on the outskirts of communities – a worrying recent trend - makes schools less accessible for walking and wheeling students and increases the need for buses. Further, a 2003 study by the US Environmental Protection Agency found that the location of a school affects traffic congestion, air pollution, school transportation budgets and children’s health.

Solutions

At the school level, we need to beef up the safety skills of pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. Schools should provide secure, sheltered bike racks and ideally should be designed with separate access points for pedestrians, cyclists, buses and cars.

At the neighbourhood level, identifying safe walking and cycling routes to school, providing safe crossings and reducing traffic speed will benefit not only school kids but also seniors, those with limited mobility, and those who don't drive a car. Municipalities must work with schools and communities to make sure our neighbourhood streets are friendly not only to cars, but also to people.

The Walking School Bus, where parents supervise a group of students on their way to and from school, is an innovative tool for schools and neighbourhoods. It reduces congestion and teaches traffic safety by encouraging parents to leave the car at home and allow their kids to walk. It also eases parental fears of stranger danger or that their child will be hit by a car. A Walking School Bus offers safety in numbers as well as a great social atmosphere for kids and adults alike. Students arrive at school fresh, full of energy and ready for the day.

On a province-wide level we need to look at where we place our schools in the first place. Schools should be located within or close to high population densities so that at least some students can walk or cycle to school. High-density neighbourhoods tend to have sidewalks, lower traffic speeds and more eyes on the street. Ultimately, a reduced need for bussing means more money for other things.

Maybe we need two or three schools rather than one big one. Research shows that students do better overall in smaller schools, and by partnering with a local recreation or community organization, a smaller school can also serve as an accessible community centre.

Finally, we need new policies that reflect these solutions to ensure that in the future our kids, too, can brag about their trip to school "uphill, both ways."

Action

Take action with Active & Safe Routes to School, a national Go for Green program coordinated in Nova Scotia by the Ecology Action Centre in partnership with the Office of Health Promotion, Sport and Recreation Division (asrts@ecologyaction.ca). Attend this year's Car Free Day festivities: a public forum on Sept. 21 at 7 pm at Halifax City Hall, and a parade and party in Halifax on Sept. 22 (trax@ecologyaction.ca). Get involved with Walk to School Week on October 4 to 8 (www.goforgreen.ca/asrts).

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