

Walk-to-school movement afoot across Mass.

The Boston Globe

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | September 19, 2008

NEWTON - They gathered on the corner with their book bags and lunch boxes, more than a dozen children chatting and kicking leaves as they waited for their trip to school.

But there would be no yellow school bus for them - not even a mother's minivan.

Instead, at 8:10 a.m., one of their parents looked both ways, and then led the children and a few other parents on the 10-minute walk to school. This so-called walking school bus is part of a new citywide campaign this fall that mirrors a growing effort across the state to encourage children to walk to school instead of hitching a ride with their parents.

Just persuading students to put one foot in front of the other, advocates say, could dramatically reduce school traffic jams, slim children's waistlines, and help relieve school budgets of some gas-guzzling buses. And high prices at the gas pump might just jolt parents into giving it a try.

It used to be - as any grandparent can tell you - that many students walked to school. Three miles. Uphill. Both ways. In the snow.

But then the world began changing. Neighborhood schools were abandoned in favor of buildings on the outskirts of town. Schedules got busier. Fears grew about accidents, predators, and other unforeseen threats. And children began catching a ride on a school bus or with their parents.

Just 15 percent of students today make the trip by foot, compared with 42 percent four decades ago, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"I do wonder what the impact on our children will be driving them door to door every day," said Alicia Bowman, one of the Newton parents behind the citywide walking campaign. "My mother walked me to kindergarten and then asked me if I could walk myself home. That was it. There was no question about it."

The current effort is taking root in densely-populated suburbs as well as cities, where elementary schools often serve many pupils who live within a mile walk.

Newton, Brockton, Stoneham, and Watertown this year hired townwide walking coordinators. In Newton, the coordinator helped the 15 elementary schools plot the residence of each child on a map and outline the safest route to school, noting the crossing guards along the way.

Later this year, the state transportation department will issue Abington, Worcester, and several other municipalities its first-ever recommendations about making the walk to school safer, after studying each area's sidewalks, crosswalks, and signage. The locations are among 65 communities vying for millions of dollars in safety funds from the federal Safe Routes To School program, which fosters walking programs.

Walking also is catching on in places such as Randolph and Shirley, where officials have cut bus routes to save money.

These bold steps follow tinier steps in recent years in places such as Arlington, Canton, and Waltham that encouraged travel by foot through weekly or daily walking groups. To encourage children to partake, schools

often offer free pencils or colorful wrist bands, or sometimes promise the appearance of a special guest star - usually the school principal or a teacher - on their walking route.

One major obstacle remains: parents who are fearful of letting their children leave home on their own. In response, school districts have made sure that their walking groups are led by an adult. In Stoneham, one parent who is a walking enthusiast launched a website, www.fearlesswalkers.com.

"A lot of people don't walk because they are fearful, but we have to live and take those steps," said website creator Margaret Prendergast, who has two boys in elementary school. "I feel when they walk the half-mile to school and get the fresh air, they sit more comfortably in their seats in class and are ready to learn."

But even Prendergast imposes limits on walking: Not on days 20 degrees below zero and not when the roads are icy or the rain is heavy.

Walking advocates say the risk of harm to students walking to and from school is low - so long as they remember to avoid strangers, walk with a peer or in a group, and exercise basic safety precautions such as looking both ways before crossing a street.

"The data doesn't show a lot of accidents on school routes or kids being snatched, but if you talk to parents you would think it's an everyday occurrence," said Karen Hartke, a project manager at WalkBoston who works with schools.

The increased number of children catching rides to school has created massive traffic snarls at arrival and dismissal times.

At Newton's 87-year-old Angier Elementary School - as dozens of pupils and parents arrived at school on foot - many other parents pulled up to a sidewalk in an area designated by the school as "live" parking. A school employee there helped children out of the cars as quickly as possible so traffic did not backup at a nearby busy intersection.

"We're hoping the Walking Wednesdays will create a ripple effect: If children see their friends walking, maybe they will want to walk, too," said Theresa Fitzpatrick, who is spearheading the walking movement at Angier.

Nine-year-old Marisa Cohen said she mostly prefers walking.

"If it's a really nice day, you get to be outside, and sometimes at school we don't get much recess," she said.

She does not like walking on cold days, when she has to bundle up in a winter coat, hat, and gloves. But her mother usually makes her and her brother, Evan, walk anyway.

"Once they get going, it's not so bad," said Wendy Cohen, who led the "walking school bus" Wednesday.

While getting programs started is the first step, the real test is when the snow begins to fall.

Central Elementary School in Stoneham established a walking program in 2004, a year after a car slammed into a crowd at dismissal time, injuring 12 children and adults. The walking effort initially led to an 80 percent decrease in traffic at the school.

But a couple of brutal winters pushed many parents and students back into the cars, and many of them did not return to walking when the weather warmed.

This fall, the school is trying to jump-start its program by teaming with the town's other elementary schools and hiring a townwide walking coordinator with grant funding provided by WalkBoston, MassRIDES, and the

Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation.

"It's like going to the gym " said Lawrence MacElhiney, the school's principal, who is on a mission to get more pupils and parents to walk. "You have great intentions but you don't always follow through."

(Correction: Because of a photographer's error, a Page One photo caption yesterday about a walk-to-school movement gave the wrong name for the school the children were walking to. They were headed for the Angier Elementary School in Newton.) ■