Talking Points

The following talking points can be helpful in communicating with the public and media during International Walk to School Day and Month. Topics include:

- Trends in school travel
- Reasons for walking: Safety, physical activity and concern for the environment
- Safe Routes to School
- Background on the event and a list of participating countries

Trends in school travel

Fewer children walk or bicycle to school than did so a generation ago.

- In 2001, 16% of students between the ages of 5 and 15 walked or bicycled to or from school. (The 2008 National Household Travel Survey, which is currently being conducted, will highlight the newest trends in school travel.)
- In 1969, 42% of students walked or bicycled to school.1
- Less than half of students who live within a mile of school walk or bicycle to school even once a week.2
- This is an opportunity lost. Walking or bicycling to school gives children time for physical activity and a sense of responsibility and independence; allows them to enjoy being outside; and provides them with time to socialize with their parents and friends and to get to know their neighborhoods. The entire community benefits when there is less traffic congestion and improved air quality as a result of fewer vehicles on the road.

Changes in school size and location have affected children's ability to walk or bicycle to school.

- Over the past several decades schools have been moving out to the edges of towns where land is less expensive and more available.
- In 1969 about 45% of students lived less than a mile from school. By 2001 only 25% of students did.3
- School consolidation and more distant school locations tend to go hand in hand - bigger schools require more land.
- In addition to creating more conducive conditions for walking and bicycling to school, smaller, neighborhood schools have other documented benefits for students and the community. Neighborhood schools encourage civic engagement and help strengthen sense of place in communities. Students at these schools perform better academically and have higher graduation rates.4,5
- Increasing distances between school and home can cause significant impact on a school's transportation budget. For example, the state of Maine saw its school transportation costs increase six-fold between 1970 and 1995, despite decreases in enrollment. This increase has been attributed to school construction patterns and school locations.6

Steady increases in gas prices are straining school transportation budgets across the country.

- Average cost per student transported using bus service in 1980-1981 was $466. In 2004-2005 the average costs was $737.7.
- As of July 2008 average diesel fuel prices in the U.S. were 66% higher than a year ago. ($4.73 dollars/gallon in 2008 vs. $2.85 dollars/gallon in 2007).8

- Walking and bicycling to school can be low-cost alternatives to bus service for some children.

Perceptions about traffic can lead to even less walking or bicycling. As more children are driven, more parents become convinced that traffic conditions make it unsafe for walking or bicycling and they join the line of cars at the school.

- Travel to school accounts for 7 to 11% of non-commuting vehicle traffic. This figure does not include trips during which parents drop their children off on the way to work.9
- Studies in some cities show that 17 to 26% of morning rush hour traffic can be school related.10,11
- If more children walked or bicycled to school, it would reduce the number of cars near the school at pick-up and drop-off times making it safer for walkers and bicyclists and reducing traffic congestion.

It takes about five to ten minutes for children to walk a quarter of a mile or bicycle an entire mile.

- Walking or bicycling to and from school is an easy way for children to get some physical activity each day, which all children need.

Safety

Walking and bicycling need to be safe and accessible transportation options. This means creating safe environments for students of all abilities and teaching safety skills to walkers, bicyclists and drivers.

Safe walking and bicycling environments include:

- Neighborhood schools that are within walking and bicycling distance from homes
- Sidewalks or bicycle-paths that connect homes with schools
- Child-friendly opportunities to cross streets (such as the presence of adult crossing guards, raised medians or traffic and pedestrian signals)
- Slow vehicle speeds accomplished through roadway safety measures (traffic calming) and/or police enforcement where needed
- Pathways that are accessible for students of all abilities.

Vehicle speed is a key element in safety. Driving slower saves lives.

- A pedestrian hit by a car traveling 40 mph has a mere 15% chance of survival.
- At 30 mph, those odds increase to 45%.
- By contrast, a pedestrian has an 85% chance of survival if hit by a car moving at 20 mph.12

Safety education includes working with:

- Children - to provide them with basic safety skills, such as how to choose where to walk and cross streets, obey crossing guards and be visible to drivers.
- Parents - to create awareness of the need for pedestrian and bicyclist safety education and opportunities to walk and bicycle and the importance of practicing safety skills with their children.
- Drivers - to alert all drivers to the presence of walkers and bicyclists and the need to slow down.

- Law enforcement - to enhance pedestrian and bicyclist safety with school zone enforcement.
- Local officials - to identify changes needed to improve walking and bicycling conditions around schools.

Teaching children walking and bicycling safety skills can help create lifelong traffic skills.

- Short periods of skills-based training can significantly improve child pedestrian behavior.13
- Pedestrian and bicycle safety education activities should be done when all students can participate.

Physical activity

Physical activity contributes to overall health.

- Experts recommend that children get at least 60 minutes of age appropriate physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week.14,15,16,17

Many kids are not getting the exercise that they need.

- As age or grade in school increases, physical activity participation drastically declines.**18**
- Less active children are more likely to be overweight.19
- Research shows that overweight children are at increased risk of cardiovascular disease and obesity in adulthood.20,21,22

In 2006, over 17% of children aged 6 to 11 years old were overweight. In Mississippi, 4 out of 10 children K – 8 grade were overweight or obese.

- Between 1976 and 2004 the percentage of overweight children aged 6 to 11 years old almost tripled.
- The most recent nationwide health survey indicates that within the past few years the upward trends in childhood obesity may be leveling off. Data from the 2007-2008 survey will help to better understand the most recent trends in childhood obesity. 23
- Children with disabilities are at a higher risk for sedentary behavior and can therefore benefit greatly from SRTS programs.24

Walking and bicycling to school offers an opportunity for children to get physical activity as part of their daily routine.

- The U.S. public health initiative *Healthy People 2010* recognizes walking and bicycling to school as opportunities to increase physical activity among children.25
- Walking and bicycling to school is associated with higher levels of physical activity throughout the day and greater physical fitness.26,27

Potential benefits of physical activity for youth include28:

- Weight and blood pressure control
- Bone, muscle, and joint health and maintenance
- Reduction in the risk of diabetes
- Improved psychological welfare

Physical activity is associated with improved academic performance in children and adolescents.29,30

Environment and air quality

Private vehicle emissions contribute to air pollution and global climate change, both of which threaten human and environmental health.

- Passenger cars, trucks, motorcycles, and SUVs together account for 62% of transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions.31 The transportation sector is responsible for one third of all carbon dioxide emissions in the US.32

Air pollutants can be especially harmful to children because their respiratory systems are still developing.

- Air pollution has negative effects on lung development in children and can reduce lung function, increase respiratory infection, and aggravate asthma symptoms.33
- Childhood asthma rates more than doubled from 1980 to the mid-1990s and they remain at historically high rates today. Presently, asthma is one of the most prevalent chronic childhood diseases and is a major cause of childhood disability.34
- At least 14 million school days are missed annually due to asthma.35

Walking and bicycling to school provide opportunities for children and families to reduce their carbon usage and contribute to the health of the environment.

- If a family chooses to walk to school (rather than drive a personal vehicle) they can reduce their carbon use by .164 metric tons annually. If half of the students at an average size elementary school choose to walk to school their impact could be a savings of over 39 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year.36 This is the equivalent of the carbon-removing abilities of 1000 trees.37
- Leaving the car at home just two days a week will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 1,600 pounds per year.38

Schools placed in neighborhoods near residential areas with a good street and sidewalk network have more students arriving by bicycle and on foot. Air quality is measurably better at such locations.39

Exposure to nature and time for free outdoor play can have multiple health benefits including stress reduction, relief of ADHD symptoms in children, and increased cognitive and motor functioning.40,41,42,43

The daily walk to school offers children an opportunity to spend time in the natural environment. When appropriate and safe, walking and bicycling to school is an experience that can help children develop a sense of independence that is important for development.

About Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are sustained efforts by parents, other community members, community leaders and local, state, and federal governments to enable and encourage all children in grades K - 8 to safely walk or bicycle to school.

- In July 2005, Congress passed federal legislation that established a national Safe Routes to School program, www.saferoutesinfo.org.
- In May 2006, the National Center for Safe Routes to School was established to assist communities in enabling and encouraging children of all abilities to safely walk and bicycle to school.
- Many communities launch SRTS programs as a result of Walk to School events.
- More than 50% of schools that hold registered Walk to School events conduct walking and/or bicycling promotional activities throughout the year.

- Nearly 50% of Walk to School events are part of SRTS programs.

About Walk to School Day

- In 2009, Mississippi saw a 300% increase in the number of Walk to School events held in October. 55,000 students participated.
- In 2008, more than 6,500 schools in the United States are estimated to participate in International Walk to School Day. Approximately 4 million people from 42 countries will participate (see next section).
- Since 2006, the National Center for Safe Routes to School of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center (UNC HSRC) has been the National Coordinator for Walk to School events in the USA.
- In 2007, registered participation in International Walk to School Day increased by 35% compared to the previous year, reaching a record high of 2,755 registered events.
- Walk to School events extend beyond the recognition of a single day. More than 60% of 2007 event organizers reported that their Walk to School events resulted in policy or engineering changes that would improve safety for walkers and bicyclists, such as increased traffic enforcement near the school or the addition of walkways.
- Organizations supporting International Walk to School Day in the U.S. include America Walks, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Highway Administration, the Institute of Transportation Engineers, the National Center for Bicycling and Walking, the National Center for Safe Routes to School, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Safe Kids Worldwide, and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership.
- The Partnership for a Walkable America founded Walk to School Day in the United States in 1997 and began with two events in two cities: Chicago and Los Angeles. Canada and Great Britain already had Walk to School events in place.
- Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States joined together in 2000 to create International Walk to School Day. Over 2.5 million walkers were estimated to have participated.
- International Walk to School Day received the Stockholm Partnership for Sustainable Cities Award in June 2003 from the King of Sweden.

Participating Countries

Africa
Kenya
Namibia
Nigeria
South Africa

Asia
China
India
Nepal
Philippines
South Korea
Taiwan

Australasia
Australia
New Zealand

Europe
Belgium
Croatia
Cyprus
Czech Republic
France
Germany
Greece
Iceland
Ireland
Israel
Italy
Liechtenstein
Malta
Norway
Spain
Sweden

South America
Argentina
Brazil
Chile
Colombia

North America
Canada
Mexico
United States

Central America
Cuba

Fiji

Switzerland
Turkey
United Kingdom
(Scotland, England,
Wales)

New countries join International Walk to School throughout the year. See www.iwalktoschool.org.

Please visit http://www.walktoschool.org/resources for additional resources.

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