

Safe Routes to School comes to Nashville

Remember walking or riding a bike to school? Were you able to go places in your neighborhood without being driven in a car by your mom or dad? There is little doubt that children today have far less mobility than their parents had a generation ago. According to the Center for Disease Control, 70% of children walked or biked to school in the 1960's while today that number is approaching 10%. That is why Music City Moves!, with Walk/Bike Nashville as the lead organization, launched Tennessee's first Safe Routes to School Program at Eakin Elementary near the Vanderbilt campus.



Students at Eakin Elementary school experience various simulated biking riding conditions at one of several Safe Routes training sessions.

Safe Routes to School is a growing effort in communities all across our nation to encourage kids to walk and bike to school as well as to other destinations in the neighborhood. While schools do account for an increasing amount of local traffic congestion, the principle motivation is the health of the students. A recent study at a Nashville elementary school determined that 34% of the students were overweight or obese, and that number is expected to rise. Health experts now say that childhood obesity is the greatest threat to our children.

Our Safe Routes to School Program, entitled *Music City Moves! Kids* began on March 8th with a public meeting where parents, neighbors, and other interested individuals identified barriers to children walking and biking to school. Concerns included incomplete sidewalks, speeding traffic, and dangerous streets crossings. For example children living in the Belmont neighborhood do not have a safe way to cross 21st Avenue unless they go several blocks out of their way.

While safe streets are critical for our children, it is equally important that children learn the skills needed to safely travel in the neighborhoods. As part of the students' PE period, pedestrian safety education was provided for 1st and 2nd graders, a skating session was held for 3rd graders, and 3 sessions of bicycle safety was provided for 4th graders. Students also received a physical activity passport which contains a variety of activities such as walking/jogging, biking, skating, taking stairs, etc. to complete each week over a six week period. Students will receive wristbands and medals for completing the passport activities. A booklet was provided to parents to help them find ways to encourage physical activity and to teach safety skills to their children. Additional financial support was provided by the West End-Hillsboro Neighborhood Association and the Harpeth Bicycle Club. Helmets were also donated by the Cumberland Pediatric Association and the Nashville Predators.

The activities culminated with a one-mile bike ride from Eakin School to West Middle School. About 50 kids were escorted by the bike police and were received by cheering middle school students holding welcoming banners. This program will continue at Eakin next Spring as well as Kirkpatrick Elementary in East Nashville. Although the pilot program was extremely successful, it became apparent that we will need at least a dozen bikes, helmets, skates, and a trailer to transport the items. Jim Deming, executive director of Walk/Bike Nashville, is seeking additional funds that can help expand this program to more Nashville area schools in the future.