



S U C C E S S

STORIES

Westfield, New Jersey

Westfield Develops a Priority List of Roadway Improvements to Improve School Safety

In 1997, Sara Strohecker Clarkson, concerned with the number of children who were being struck by cars even when crossing at an intersection, founded a pedestrian advocacy organization called BRAKES (Bikers, Runners And Kids are Entitled to Safety) with the help of her neighbors.

BRAKES is a local non-profit organization working in Westfield, New Jersey. Westfield is located in Union County, in the northeast region of New Jersey.

Westfield is a very walkable town for students because the schools are located within neighborhoods and most streets have sidewalks. When students from one elementary school were redistricted to a neighboring elementary school, the change was facilitated by the painting of blue footprints on the sidewalks. These footprints led the children to their new school along a route marked with crosswalks and crossing guards.

However, there are issues and concerns that affect children walking to and from school. Speeding and other traffic violations, traffic congestion and crossing major intersections are some of the concerns related to vehicular traffic. Also of concern is the security of students as they travel to and from school.

After attending a conference regarding pedestrian issues, in 2000 the BRAKES Group organized a local Walk Our Children to School Day event.

Walk Our Children to School Day is an international event held each year in early October that encourages young people to walk or bike to and from school. The program sets out to promote better health through greater physical activity. Also, the program advocates the building of partnerships in communities, including the school, PTA, local police department, department of public works, civic associations, local politicians, and businesses to create an environment that is supportive of walking and bicycling to school safely. By creating active and safe routes to school, walking to school can once again be a safe, fun, healthy and pleasant part of children's daily routine.

To help with interest in the first year of the Walk Our Children to School Day, BRAKES contacted the mayor and the principals of the six elementary schools and requested their participation. All six public elementary schools participated in the first year. The mayor and principals were "auctioned off" to walk with a child from their neighborhood. BRAKES reps provided refreshments at the schools for the walking kids and parents. Local businesses assisted by defraying the cost of rolls of film and developing of pictures of the event. Stickers worn on the clothing of the walkers were donated by a local business in exchange for publicity, and local newspapers were asked to send reporters. A letter was sent home with students to inform parents that large groups of children would be walking through neighborhoods, and to encourage them to watch for hazards along the route to school. Parents were asked to sign the attached

Key Facts

- Annual walk-to-school event organized by a neighborhood group
- Developed partnerships with principals, the Mayor, businesses, police & firefighters

Innovative Ideas

- Auctioned principal, mayor and firefighter
- Issued warning tickets to illegally-parked cars
- Developed priority lists of safety concerns
- Organized walkpools (vs carpooling) for several neighborhoods





permission slips, which placed the responsibility of their child's safety with themselves or their chaperone. When the parents and kids reached the school, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire detailing their travel route and where potential dangers exist.

In 2000, the event's inaugural year, between 800-1,000 students, parents and teachers participated; in the following year, 2001, approximately 1,800 people participated, and in 2002, nearly 2,800 people participated. The participation was estimated based on sign-up sheets and the number of stickers handed out. In 2001, a firefighter was "auctioned off" to walk kids to school after the principal became sick. Due to the events of September 11, 2001 the firefighter was extremely popular and for the 2002 event each school was provided a firefighter to walk kids to school.

There is no hard data, but the number of children regularly walking to school has

increased since 1997 when BRAKES began efforts to raise awareness and educate the community about walking. Other benefits for children walking to school have occurred, such as one school's choice to revise on-site traffic circulation, another school's decision to prohibit parking or standing in front of the school, and a district-wide effort to place warning tickets on illegally-parked cars. The warning tickets were printed by the police, who gave representatives of the BRAKES Group permission to ticket the illegal vehicles.

In order to help the local government implement physical infrastructure improvements within the Township, BRAKES has identified and prioritized a list of safety concerns throughout the Township. This list was partially based on input from the student and parent surveys that were completed as part of the Walk To School Events as well as input from the local police and Township engineer. This list has been reviewed with

the Mayor and town administrator and has been used to fund projects that have improved safety. The list also provides a mechanism for feedback to the schools and parents as to the progress of the improvements.

BRAKES has also promoted and helped to organize walk pools for several neighborhoods. A walk pool is the same as a carpool except that on all but the worst weather days, the children walk instead of driving to school; with or without a parent. Different parents walk with the same group of children from their neighborhood each day. It means that a working parent only has to inconvenience themselves by walking their own and their neighbors' kids to school and back once or twice a week, while the days that other neighborhood parents are in charge of the walking pool, they are free from the worry of getting their kids to school. Since Walk Pools are a year-round program, it helps to reinforce the benefits gained from the annual Walk to School event.




For more information:
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To register a "Walk to School Day Event"
 on-line see:
www.walktoschool-usa.org

"International Walk Our Children to
 School Day"
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/

Westfield, Union County

Population (2000)	.....	.29,644
Area	.....	.673 square miles
Density	.....	.4,405 people/sq. mile
Public School System:		
6 Elementary Schools (Grades K-5)	.....	.2,709 students
2 Middle Schools (Grades 6-8)	.....	.1,183 students
1 High School (Grades 9-12)	.....	.1,357 students
Private/Parochial School:		
.....		.Holy Trinity Interparochial School
.....	Redeemer Lutheran School



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NJ Department of
 Transportation



Research Confirmed:

Walking students to school reduces stress, decreases fat & improves the health of child & parent

Walkpools are a great way to share the benefits of walking while reducing the traffic and congestion around school.

What is it? It is the same as a carpool except that on all but the worst weather days, the children walk instead of driving to school; with or without a parent.



Principles of A Walkpool:

1. the kids aren't expected to become best friends; they are there to provide safety and support to each other.
2. no walkpools leave school campus until all members are present.
3. if your child will not be in the walkpool on a given day, notify the adult whose day it is so they know not to wait. No children may walk home or to school alone.
4. since there are many after-school activities, please don't let the kids linger on the playground or on other distractions.



How Does It Work?

1. choose two or three families on your block who are interested in forming a walkpool.
2. adults agree on which days they will be responsible for and get agreement from everyone. A parent may take particular day(s) or a month at a time or just mornings, etc. As long as it works for the group, it works
3. adults agree on rules of the walkpool. For example, children stop at all corners until parent agrees it is ok to cross, younger children must hold hands across streets, kids walk on left hand side of road where there are no sidewalks, kids walk home in light rain but get rides to school in the morning, etc.
4. all parents must feel comfortable that walk-pool kids are responsible enough to walk without chaperone before they are allowed to do it.



How Will We Know when the Kids are Ready to be on their Own?

1. younger children can be accompanied by more than one parent until each child feels comfortable walking alone with the group.
2. older children can be walked a portion of the way until the parents observe that their walking skills are safe.
3. older children can be met along the route on the way home to help foster their independence. That point of meeting can be extended as time goes on.
4. most children are completely capable of walking by the beginning of third grade. Developmentally they are able to judge distance and speed of cars and make safe decisions about when to cross. Many children are able to do this at a younger age but it also may be determined by whether your route has sidewalks and if there are crossing guards at all the intersections they have to cross.



What are the Benefits to My Family and Me?

1. kids are healthier. Research shows that children who increase their level of exercise and outdoor time have fewer respiratory ailments. Increased exercise increases body chemicals that elevate mood and decreases fat.
2. parents who walk with their children experience the same health benefits.
3. if your children walk unaccompanied by an adult it gives you up to an extra half hour of time on each end of the school day to get things done.
4. you are *improving the environment* around the school by leaving your car at home. Reduced numbers of cars mean lower levels of pollution that our kids breathe and diminishes traffic safety hazards that exist with every car that clogs the campus.



Have Questions or Need Help on Forming a Walk Pool?

Contact your Westfield school BRAKES representative at thebrakesgroup@aol.com