

Safe Routes to School Program

MARIN COUNTY, CA

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Problem

A low percentage of children were walking or bicycling to school, which contributed to poor physical health in children, traffic congestion, and air pollution.

Background

Marin County is located across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. It has been the home to many well-known bicycle and pedestrian advocacy initiatives, including the Safe Routes to School Program of the Marin County Bicycle Coalition (MCBC). In 1999, the California Legislature passed a significant Safe Routes to School law, Assembly Bill 1475, which established a statewide, \$1,000,000 program which required "...the Department of Transportation, in consultation with the Department of the California Highway Patrol, to establish and administer a Safe Routes to School Construction Program." Marin County has quickly developed a model program that is already yielding significant changes in the mode share of children walking and bicycling to school.

Solution

MCBC's Safe Routes to Schools program combines promotional and educational programs with locally-based design solutions to improve physical conditions for children walking and bicycling to school, provide skills training, and offer mode choice incentives. Developed in nine pilot communities, education/promotion and engineering/infrastructure are the principal components of the program.

Education/Promotion

Throughout the school year, MCBC provides pedestrian and bicycle safety skills training along with curriculum materials to help students understand modal choices and the impact of their choices on the environment. Events such as Walk and Bike to School Day are tailored by each school to meet their needs. Some schools schedule events weekly; others schedule them once a month. Two schools use volunteers as crosswalk monitors on these days.

A significant success of the program is the Frequent Rider Miles contest that rewards students for walking and bicycling to school. Students use pre-made tally cards to keep track of the number of times they walk, bicycle, carpool, or bus to school. Points are earned for each trip, and a raffle is held with prizes at the end of the school year. The grand prize at each school is a new bicycle.

Engineering/Infrastructure

Schools in two communities, Mill Valley and Fairfax, mapped typical routes that students used to walk and bicycle to school and proposed safety improvements along these routes. Using this analysis, Fairfax applied for and received a Transportation Enhancements grant from the County Congestion Management Agency to complete the gaps in the sidewalks along a major school route. Mill Valley has applied for funding to improve access to and from a local bicycle path and to provide enhanced pedestrian crossings throughout the community.



Fairfax children walk and bike to school on International Walk to School Day October 8, 2003.

Results

Significant changes in student modal shares have been documented by MCBC for the 2000-2001 school year. Data collected through student surveys in 2000 show that about 23 percent of students walked or bicycled to and from school. Surveys given at the end of the school year in 2001 found that the mode share for walking and bicycling had increased to 33 percent. This amounts to more than 3,500 children walking or bicycling to and from the nine schools included in the pilot program. Equally significant, the data show that carpooling increased from 12 percent to almost 20 percent, and the percentage of children being driven alone in their parents' cars decreased from about 66 percent to 48 percent.

Advantages favoring Marin County include a climate that is generally mild and conducive to outdoor recreation, a progressive-minded population that is open to change and innovation, the well-organized efforts of MCBC advocates, and the resources provided through the State of California Safe Routes to Schools legislation. The statewide program has received significant support, and was recently re-authorized with a substantial budget appropriation.

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References

Marin County Bicycle Coalition Safe Routes to Schools Web site: www.saferoutestoschools.org.

Source: <http://www.walkinginfo.org>