

Where the Sidewalk Ends, There's a Walking School Bus



Walking to school is a great way to get physical exercise and start the day off right. But what's a parent to do when the walk is along traffic-filled streets with distracted drivers and few sidewalks or crosswalks?

In Ceres, a small community in rural Stanislaus County, the answer was to band together and start a walking school bus. Under this model, volunteers and students meet up at designated intersections and walk together, picking up more parents and students along the way.

The idea for the Ceres walking school bus started with a group of parents who participated in a leadership program sponsored by the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP). These parents mobilized other parents at their own schools and others in Ceres, and soon, the overwhelming interest made it clear that being able to get kids safely to and from school was a priority for many parents.

The next step was to work with school officials

to identify possible routes, schedules, and rules for the walking school bus program. Parents were trained in CPR, First Aid and pedestrian safety. All materials were translated into Spanish to encourage wide participation. With routes chosen, bright orange vests purchased and parent volunteers committed, the program was off and running.

To date, close to 100 parents and over 500 students from five elementary schools have participated in the walking school bus program. But the parents didn't stop there – they advocated for more permanent solutions as well. Among the first parent volunteers was Martina Garcia. Explains Martina, "other parents and I did walking assessments to note where the sidewalks ended, where trees were blocking the view, and where drivers were particularly distracted." The parents then took this information to city officials and advocated for infrastructure improvements.

Martina is most comfortable speaking Spanish; at first, she was worried that a language barrier



would prevent public officials from paying attention to her concerns. But thanks to the CCROPP parent leadership program, Martina says, "I've learned how to communicate with people in power." City officials were eventually able to get funding for sidewalk and crosswalk installations, though more improvements are needed.

Martina sees many benefits to the walking school bus – such as increased physical activity and more involvement with her community. But what makes her happiest is the impact on her 4th grade son's day. "He goes to school relaxed because he's had time to talk along the way," Martina says. "That's true for other parents too. It's a way to build our relationship."

Martina and others have taken what they've learned beyond Ceres, to give presentations to groups of parents in Fresno and Merced. She finds parents receptive and eager to learn from the Ceres success. "Anyone can talk to parents about a walking school bus program," she says, "but it makes a difference when it's someone who's living it and can share their stories."

What's more, the Ceres parents have joined with California Convergence at ENACT Day, a yearly event where residents from around the state gather in Sacramento to talk with legislators about their priorities for creating healthier and safer communities. Lourdes Perez of the Ceres Partnership for Healthy Children credits California Convergence with helping parents to make these wider connections – connections that they hope will eventually lead both to more walking school buses and more safe streets.

CALIFORNIA CONVERGENCE

californiaconvergence.org

The California Convergence Coordinating Office is a project of the Public Health Institute