Local schools encouraging active modes of transportation

By Dina Weinstein

Health organizations are initiating a walking school bus campaign to help make travel to school more active and safe.

The national Safe Routes to School organization describes a walking school bus as a group of children walking to school with one or more adults. It can be as informal as two families taking turns walking their children to school or as structured as a planned route with meeting points, a timetable and a schedule of trained volunteers.

Through this initiative, parents will learn traffic safety skills, how to map safe routes and how to organize the walking school bus. The number of students walking to school has dropped considerably. The U.S. Department of Transportation reports that in 1969, about half of all schoolchildren walked or bicycled to or from school, and 87 percent of those living within one mile of school walked or bicycled. Today, fewer than 15 percent of children use active modes of transportation.

Fewer kids get that recommended 30 minutes of daily exercise. People these days tend to live farther from schools, and parents chauffer children to school.

Parents at two Miami-Dade County schools are initiating a walking school bus out of frustration with the dangerous conditions in their neighborhoods.

"This came out of a community meeting where parents expressed interest in this," said Christine Stinson, of WalkSafe, a pediatric safety program at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. "This came out of parents' concerns for their children's safety and them not wanting to rely on the powers that be [to remedy the problems]. They wanted to do something immediate."

Parents from Miami's Riverside Elementary School in Little Havana and Morningside Elementary School in the Little Haiti think there should be more crossing guards and infrastructure on their children's walk to school.

"They wanted to be empowered with something they could do immediately," Stinson said.

Florida Department of Health staff are reaching out to schools throughout the state that have a large number of students living within one mile of the institutions to organize similarly. FLDOH staff hope parents will volunteer to lead walking school buses once a week to make students safer, increase physical activity and decrease traffic.

Walking school bus programs have being going on for years. The town of Largo helps its residents organize walking school buses. This year in Broward County, the FLDOH will pilot a walking school bus program at Hallandale Elementary School.

Parent escorts will serve as a "driver" at the front of the line and a "conductor" at the end. School districts across the state will host kickoffs on International Walk to School Day, Oct. 6.

Parents and schools interested in starting a walking school bus can contact Sybil John Cherian at 954-

260-3485 for Miami-Dade and Monroe counties; Pam Santucci at 954-648-1265 for Broward and Palm Beach counties; or WalkSafe at the University of Miami at 305-243-8115.

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