



CASE STUDY: GREATER WASHINGTON DC REGION

Planning for sustainability Alexandria, VA

The Alexandria City Public Schools Safe Routes to School program was one of the first established in the region. Utilizing local organization TrailsforYouth.org (TYO), the schools are able to implement Safe Routes to School programs with specialized expertise. TrailsforYouth.org works to institutionalize Safe Routes to School in each individual school so that walking and bicycling is encouraged as part of the school culture. A sustainability plan is now being written to ensure activities continue with internal school and parent champions.

Background

In 1999, the City of Alexandria made infrastructure improvements around schools. In 2007 a successful Safe Routes to School application brought the City, school district and school PTAs together. Education and encouragement was added through grant funding in 2008 and the program has continued ever since. The city dedicates its own funds as well as grant funds for infrastructure improvements. TrailsforYouth.org (TYO) coordinates the education and encouragement pieces of the program.

The district school wellness policy encourages Safe Routes to School: “The school community is encouraged to utilize city resources to develop safe routes to school that promote physical activity.” TYO education and encouragement activities operate in 11 elementary and middle schools to promote healthy active transportation reaching nearly 5,000 students annually.

Program Implementation

TYO implements Safe Routes to School through a variety of methods including:

- International Walk and Bike to School Day: A location 1/4 -1/2 mile from school is designated as a common meeting place for the walk or ride to school. School administrators, favorite teachers and families are all involved to get students excited.
- Bike rodeos: The protected course stimulates street markings and teaches students bike skills. Students also learn the rules of the road in a safe environment.
- Year round TYO and ACPS host lunch time and recess walking campaigns, after school clubs, Walking Home School Bus, Walking Wednesday, Fitness Fridays, Winter Walking and school versus school challenges and poster contests.

TYO has five minute safety video with Spanish subtitles shown at PTA meetings and during morning classroom meetings to educate parents and teachers about Safe Routes to School.

From their experience, TYO has realized that as an outside contractor for Safe Routes to School they are a neutral liaison with parents, administrators and the local community. Additionally, they provide Safe Routes to School expertise and staff dedicated only to Safe Routes to School. TYO has been able to cultivate diverse teams within the school and their perspective allows one person to look at the entire school system versus individual programs at each school. TYO states Safe Routes to School is ingrained in schools within three years of starting the program.

Year 1: kids/families get to understand program

Year 2: increase participation and ingrain in school culture

Year 3: sustain with quarterly encouragement and in-school reminders

Parent surveys and student tallies are done in conjunction with back-to-school packets. This increases success because at that time, parents are prepared for paperwork versus later in the year when the tally feels like an extra task.

Sustainability

Through these efforts, TYO has created a locally focused Safe Routes to School how-to manual that provides interested teachers and parents the tips, tricks and step-by-step instructions to lead Safe Routes to School efforts within their schools. The manual allows teachers and or parents to replicate successful events and strategies on their own. TYO's executive director, Julie Childers, states, "in the first two years of a Safe Routes to School program, the focus is on changing the culture, getting the kids excited and helping the parents to realize walking and bicycling to school is possible and safe. By year three, the parents, kids and the school are in a routine, expect events and want to participate. This makes sustainability easier and obtainable." A key to success is community support from the school, parents and supporters of TYO who implement youth bicycle-related programs year round for local students.

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