



## Safe Routes to School in Action

Borough of Mt. Penn, Pennsylvania

### Background

The Borough of Mt. Penn's Wellness Coordinator, Michele Bleacher, started a walking program for the teachers at Mt. Penn Elementary School in 2007. As the teachers and administrators began to focus on fitness and wellness, Superintendent Dr. Larry Mays suggested the walking program be extended to the students. So, Bleacher and her team applied for Safe Routes to School funding to support a walking encouragement program at Mt. Penn Elementary School and received a 2-year grant of \$5,000 for 2008-2010 from PENN DOT. Mt. Penn Elementary School is home to approximately 430 second through sixth grade students each year.

### Details

Prior to beginning the SRTS program at Mt. Penn Elementary School, a survey was distributed to parents in the district. A question on the survey asked the parents to identify reasons why parents would not want their children walk to school. Most parents expressed that they wanted supervision for their child and that they didn't have the time to walk their children to school and still get to work on schedule.

The Mt. Penn SRTS program addressed the parents concerns and put \$2,500 of grant funding during the 2008-2009 school year to create program awareness and provide encouragement. SRTS programming was kicked off on October 8<sup>th</sup>, National Walk to School Day, with the school's first Walking School Bus. Throughout the year, the SRTS program hosted a total of three Walking School Buses; October 8<sup>th</sup>, December 12<sup>th</sup>, and May 13<sup>th</sup>. Initially, to raise awareness of the SRTS program, 3 large vinyl banners were purchased and hung outside Mt. Penn Elementary School, the Borough Hall, and Redner's Warehouse Market, a host site for the first Walking School Bus.



SRTS Coordinator Michele Bleacher leads the Walking School Bus from Redner's Warehouse Market to Mt. Penn Elementary School, approximately 1.2 miles, on National Walk to School Day.

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On October 8, 2008, parents, officers, school officials, students, and even Mayor Josh Nowotarski met in the parking lot of Redner's Warehouse Market about 1.2 miles from school to participate in the programs first Walking School Bus. The Walking School Bus met the requests of the parents because the children could be dropped off

and walk to school with supervision. With the support of Chief Anthony Garipoli of the Central Berks Regional Police, officers blocked intersections and police on bikes escorted the students to school. All students who participated in the Walking School Bus received a lime green baseball hat for safety.



A successful outcome of the Walking School Bus was the development of community connections. Parents realized that other students lived nearby and began to form their own walking groups.

To expand on the popularity of the first Walking School Bus event, Wednesdays were declared to be "Walking Wednesdays." Any student who walked to school on Wednesdays received a cutout of a sneaker to hang in the Walking Wednesdays hallway. After participating in 4 Walking

Wednesdays, students received a plastic charm for their sneakers. This incentive program turned out to be a great success: Walking Wednesday participation rose from 82 walkers on the first Walking Wednesday in October to 109 walkers on the last Walking Wednesday of the school year in May. Overall, 199 students participated in at least one Walking Wednesday. In fact, Walking Wednesday became so popular that one parent shared that her child refused to get in the car on Wednesdays and insisted on walking!

### **What's Next**

Mt. Penn Elementary will use the remaining \$2,500 of SRTS grant funding to continue to encourage walking to school with Walking Wednesdays and three Walking School Buses. SRTS coordinators are excited to expand the children's wardrobe with more lime green incentives. Additionally, the program plans to host a bike rodeo this year to educate and encourage safe bicycling practices.

### **Contact information:**

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