

LACEY: WALKING TO SCHOOL WITH NEWTON CLASSMATES BUILDS HEALTH, COMMUNITY AND MEMORIES

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Wicked Local Newton

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Newton — I remember walking home from kindergarten when an older child ran up to us to tell us that a couple of 4-year-olds had mixed gasoline and chlorine in a shed and blown it clear to smithierines. (Thankfully, no one was hurt.) I also remember walking back from school and my best friend in 7th grade announcing her mother's shocking pregnancy. (Shocking because the moms in the homogenous 1970s neighborhood stopped having babies a decade prior.)

Exploding sheds and alternatively-timed pregnancies aside, walking to school occupies many of my childhood memories – and probably many of yours. Many children today will not have those memories, since fewer of them are walking or bicycling to school. In 1969, 42 percent of all children between the ages of 5 and 18 walked to school. By 2001, that number had dropped to 16 percent. The decrease is caused by various changes ranging from neighborhood schools closing to parents' safety concerns.

Fortunately, here in Newton we have 15 neighborhood elementary schools, so many children should be able to walk or ride their bikes to school. Take a look at the congested traffic around many of those schools, however, and you will find that many parents in Newton are driving their children to and from school. This congestion can frustrate commuters and parents, and make school arrival and dismissal times unsafe.

So as you are getting the backpacks and school supplies together and gearing up for another academic year, think about a new mindset when it comes to getting your children to and from school. Think about getting your kids walking there and back. Chat with other parents to see if they are interested too, and you can get a gang together.

Children who walk to school have started off their day with a little exercise, and hopefully some socializing. Walking to school is a great way to meet other people who live in the neighborhood. One less car on the road means less air pollution, too. Plus, as a mom who spends a lot of her time shuttling between dance, piano, and gymnastics, I can attest to the benefits of two less car trips a day.

On the first day of school, all Newton elementary schools will have a large, mounted map on an easel in the front hallway that will show the area of the school where the students live, and color-coded dots indicate, in general, student locations. These maps are not only really cool to see, but will help you map the best walking route for your child, and if there are other children with whom he or she can share the walk.

Oct 7. is International Walk to School Day. Safe Routes to School volunteers in your child's elementary school can help you join a "walking school bus." A walking school bus is a group of children walking to school together with an adult. If it sounds super simple, that is because it is. A mom or dad starts walking with their child and picks some other children up on the way. Voila! You have a walking school bus.

Many city departments here in Newton are working together to help enable more children to walk and bicycle to school. The four Es of increasing walking to school are: Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, and Engineering. Various city departments including Planning, Police, and Schools are working together on these things to achieve the common goal to increase the health and safety of Newton residents.

If you would like more information on how to get involved the effort to get more children in Newton walking to school, contact me at ChristineLacey@gmail.com.

In 2008, WalkBoston received funding from the Harvard Pilgrim Foundation, the Executive Office of Transportation and the Massachusetts Department of Health to initiate pilot Community Safe Routes to School programs in four Massachusetts communities. (Newton is fortunate to be one of those communities.) WalkBoston, working with part-time local program coordinators, has created community-wide programs drawing upon the support of parents, local activists and community businesses.

Christine Lacey is the Newton Schools Coordinator for Safe Routes to School.