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School to parents: Keep car at home Officials cite jams, urge kids to walk

By Megan Woolhouse, Globe Staff | October 25, 2007

It sounds simple - getting more kids to walk to school.

The reality is something quite different. Just ask the folks at Cabot School in Newtonville, which serves 422 students.

School officials have organized walking groups, created special "independence zones" for students, and held safety training class for second-graders in their efforts to get parents to trade driving for walking.

"We found hardly anybody walking or riding the school bus," said Cabot principal Marilynne Quarcoo. "Oh my gosh, last year, on some days, we'd have only eight or nine riders" on school buses.

The fact that most children were individually chauffeured to school by parents caused far-reaching problems and headaches, and still does, Quarcoo said. The school entrance is not designed to accommodate such traffic, and the cars form what Quarcoo calls "an ugly sea."

Adding to the problem, many parents insisted on parking and escorting their children into the classroom. That wreaked havoc, as parking spaces at the school have been in especially short supply since trailers or modular classrooms were installed in the school's parking lot.

Wendy Landman, executive director of Walk Boston, said the problems at Cabot aren't unusual. Walk Boston has been offering safety seminars in 70 schools across the state through a grant from the Executive Office of Transportation.

Some communities don't even have sidewalks.

"A lot of the kids don't walk much, so they've gotten out of the habit of walking," she said. "They're not used to it."

Last week, a program representative worked with a group of second-graders and volunteer parents, teaching safety skills.

But the real test is getting them to walk, day in and day out.

Archana Valalia, copresident of the Cabot Elementary School Parent Teacher Organization, said most parents see drivers ignore the speed limit on side streets around schools, and it makes them afraid to send their kids out on city sidewalks. Word also spread recently about a student who was hit by a car, although not seriously injured, near Brown Middle School.

"It is very frustrating," she said. "And the city doesn't have the funding for raised crosswalks."

Such crosswalks slow traffic, much like a speed bump. They're common in Brookline, she said.

But Quarcoo said she has learned the hard way that crosswalks, even fancy raised ones, don't always help. Parents frequently park in them, she said.

The problem reached such proportions that school officials began counting the number of parents escorting their children into the classroom daily. The school logged about 80 each morning. Quarcoo said so many parents were accompanying their children into the classroom that teachers were forced to pay attention to them at the expense of students.

"You're 6 and you want attention, but all the adults have all the attention," she said. "We needed to get parents to think of the children's needs, rather than adult needs."

School officials responded by creating "independence zones," where parents say goodbye to their children outside the school. And Quarcoo said the results have been encouraging so far. More students and teachers appear to be walking, or riding the bus. School officials routinely send out reminders via e-mail, through teachers and packages sent home with students.

"We need to change the culture," she said.

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