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# Students hop on walk-to-school movement

By Chrissie Long/Staff Writer

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Newton -

If you found that crosswalks were clogged with children this morning and that navigating through Newton streets took a little longer than expected, it means the International Walk to School Day was a success.

School children from all 15 elementary schools in Newton were planning to take to the streets on Wednesday to raise awareness of improved pedestrian safety and to be part of an effort that encourages more students to walk.

“What the purpose behind the day is, is to encourage kids to walk to school and more importantly to exercise,” said Mayor David Cohen, an active walker, who planned on joining Newton children and students from around the world in the walk-to-school day. “I am hoping by my walking with them, and by my walking every day, that I am showing that physical exercise is a lifelong activity, and that those who take advantage of that are better for it.”

But the one-day event is only a piece of the walk-to-school movement some parents are looking to set root throughout the city.

“We are hoping to make this more than a one-day event,” said Alicia Bowman, a Mason-Rice parent. “People who live a quarter-mile from school are driving. That’s how kids get to school now, and that is what we are looking to fight. There’s a culture change that needs to happen.”

Bowman, who walks 3/4 of a mile to and from Mason-Rice with her three children, has jumped on the back of the walk-to-school movement when she saw cars double parking, parents swinging U-turns and kids darting between traffic outside of the Newton Centre elementary school.

“I thought someone was going to get killed,” she said. “I got disgusted and decided that I was going to do my best to encourage families to walk to school.”

She’s collaborated with parents across the district to make walking both feasible and safe. They’ve worked with city employees to create safer sidewalks, reached out to neighbors to request better shoveling and recently hired a coordinator under a state grant.

Forty years ago, approximately 50 percent of children walked or biked to school, according to the Executive Office of Transportation. Today, fewer than 15 percent of school children walk to school, which is one of the reasons the state Transportation Department teamed up with the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to provide the grant.

According to local coordinator Jean Fulkerson, a Bowen parent and former city employee, one of the greatest barriers to walking is student safety.

“Parents say that if they are driving their child to school, they have their child in their care until the moment they enter the building,” she said. “But also, people get into the habit of getting in the car. It’s sort of a culture and for some people, they forget that it doesn’t take any longer to walk.”

But the walk-to-school effort has been bolstered by global trends to go green, mounting gas prices and a nationwide effort to reduce child obesity.

“The more people that walk, the greater effect it has on reducing traffic, improving air quality and, the fact that gas prices are going up, will be one extra motivation for kids to walk to school,” said Fulkerson, who is optimistic about the potential of the walk-to-school movement. “Also, being fit and healthy and walking to school is a good way for kids to start the

day.”

Instead of boarding gas-guzzling school buses in the morning, many children are climbing on ‘walking school buses.’ Neighborhoods have organized a foot-pool system so that parents can switch off who walks their children to school.

“We love it,” said Williams parent Anne Stephens, who joined a walking school bus last spring, with her fourth-grader, Peter. “It promotes all kinds of things, including physical fitness, a reduction in traffic congestion around the school and it reduces pollution.”

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