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A 'walking school bus'

Richard Sennott, Star Tribune

A brilliant sun was rising Thursday as elementary school students crossed Nicollet Avenue on their way to Lyndale Community School.

They weren't alone. A team of parents, teachers and a city councilwoman, all wearing neon safety vests, were there to help them cross the busy south Minneapolis streets.

They were inaugurating the neighborhood's "walking school bus," an effort to promote exercise and health by making it safe and fun for kids to walk to school. The program, started by a Lyndale parent with the help of school and district officials, will continue each Tuesday and Thursday for five weeks thanks to a federal grant received at the end of last year.

"It's good for the kid's health, good for the environment and is a sign of a vibrant community," said Scott Bordon, the south Minneapolis parent who coordinated the program.

THE BACKGROUND

Bordon, who has been walking his own kids to school since the beginning of the school year, started promoting neighborhood walks last October for International Walk to School Day. Since then, his family, along with others, continued walking, even through the winter.

"Our kids could take a bus," Jenny Bordon, their mother, said, "but they like to walk. They've never complained once."

Lyndale Community School was one of 25 schools nationwide to win grants from the National Center for Safe Routes to School, which encourages communities to promote walking, biking and other forms of recreation.

HEALTH BENEFITS

With the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Disease (CDC) estimating that 17 percent of kids are obese, the hope that a walking program could help combat the obesity epidemic got the attention of Minneapolis Public Schools officials.

Julie Danzl, the Minneapolis coordinator of the Statewide Health Improvement Program, said the walking school buses are a great way to incorporate physical activity into the

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school day. While Lyndale Community isn't the first Minneapolis school to try a walking program, Danzl said, "This school is by far the most organized."

In addition to keeping kids healthy, teacher Joe Sandkamp said a morning walk can help kids perform better in school.

The CDC seems to agree. A research review released this month found substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement.

IT'S NEIGHBORLY

But the heart of the program is just plain fun -- and for more than just the parents and kids.

"Walking is the sign of a good neighborhood," Scott Borden said. "Everyone loves to see happy kids."

Added Jenny Bordon, "When we walk home in the afternoon, people come outside of their homes to smile and wave at us. It's community building."

Megan Hanson is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.

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