

# S U C C E S S

# STORIES

## Maplewood, New Jersey

### Jefferson School, Maplewood, NJ, Promotes Walk Your Children to School Day to Advocate Walking and Biking

In Maplewood, New Jersey, 2002 was an important time for the advocacy of walking and biking. On Wednesday, October 2, 2002 the students and teachers of Jefferson Elementary School joined children in countries around the world in a celebration of International Walk to School Day – I-Walk for short. In 2001, nearly 3 million children, parents and community leaders from 21 countries around the world walked the walk. Last year New Jersey Governor McGreevey proclaimed October 2nd, 2002, “Walk Our Children to School Day.”

#### Key Facts

- Parents had concerns with traffic congestion and students crossing busy streets.
- Parents had concerns with children not getting enough physical activity during a normal school day.
- The Jefferson School’s program was a success due to the efforts of only a few key people.

#### Innovative Ideas

- Held “Walk to School” event to coincide with annual fundraiser.
- Students that were bused participated by being dropped off at a staging area about a half-mile from the school.
- A contest to see who walked more during school hours, the principal or the gym teacher, was held by using a pedometer (step counter).

Jefferson Elementary School is located on Ridgewood Road in Maplewood, New Jersey. The town is very walkable for students because the schools are located within neighborhoods, there is a functioning downtown, and, because it is an older town, most streets have sidewalks. However, approximately half of the students that attend Jefferson School live more than two miles away and they are bused. For the walking students and the parents of the walkers there are the typical issues and concerns that go along with children and walking: speeding and distracted drivers, buses on a schedule, traffic congestion especially around the school, and crossing busy streets. Of particular concern is Ridgewood Road, which many of the children have to cross to get to the school – it is a busy collector street and has a sidewalk on only the east side of the road. Another matter of concern for the Jefferson parents, as well as parents everywhere, is personal security.

Concerned with the travel environment for students walking to school and the increase in students arriving to school by car, a Walk to School event was planned to kick-off a special study to assess and improve the pedestrian environment around the school including the walking routes to school.

The preparation for this event was an education for one parent, Sharon Roerty. As a Senior Project Manager at the Voorhees Transportation Policy Institute at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University, Ms. Roerty had researched the hidden costs associated with children not getting enough physical activity like daily walks to school. She helped research several studies about the need to provide better infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. In her paper, “I Walk, Why Walk”, Ms. Roerty wrote that “studies show that physically inactive kids are likely to grow up to be physically inactive adults – and as such are at a high risk for obesity and its related problems, including diabetes and heart disease. In fact, for the first time ever, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) says the life expectancy of the current generation may be shorter than that of their parents. The dramatic increase in obesity in this country and particularly in children is frightening. Reports show that we are in epidemic stages. The increase in diabetes in children is equally scary. Poor air quality and the increasing number of children who have asthma is cause for alarm.” (see <http://policy.rutgers.edu:16080/tpi/pedbike/articles.html>)



As a parent of two students at Jefferson Elementary School and a member of the Transportation Committee in Maplewood, Ms. Roerty knew her first step in coordinating an event for the students was to contact several other parents as well as the principal.

The school's fundraising committee was a good place to start. By working with the committee and a national fundraising organization, more parents were able to get on board with helping prepare for a Walk to School Day event. To help kick-start the event, the committee discussed moving the annual Walk-A-Thon school fund raiser from a spring event to the fall to coincide with International Walk to School Day on the first Wednesday in October. In the past, students had walked laps behind the school to raise money. The committee felt that the students that walked to school could use their miles to add to the fundraising effort. The committee proposed the idea to the principal, Dr. Caulfield-Sloan.

"We didn't expect the excitement the principal had for the project. Our original idea was to start small and involve the kids that currently walk to school, but Dr. Caulfield-Sloan saw the event as an opportunity for much more." The principal saw the opportunity for all the students to participate by having the school buses drop the students off at a staging area about a half a mile from the school. The teachers met their students and they all walked together to enter the school. In addition, Victor De Luca, the Mayor of Maplewood and Marilyn Davenport, the Assistant Superintendent for the South

Orange/Maplewood School District, led the students as they walked to school.

The mission of the event was to create powerful partnerships for change. The idea is for children, parents, and community leaders to walk to school together with a purpose to promote safety, health, physical activity and concern for the environment. Leading up to the event the children and their parents received a variety of messages about the benefits of walking and active living. They were also reminded of safe walking practices, such as never walking alone and being mindful of traffic.



To add some more fun into the event, the principal and the physical education teacher wore pedometers for the day and the students entered guesses as to who would walk the most steps in the school day. All of the students except for a handful participated in the event. Parents signed permission slips for the students to participate.

The event was publicized in several newspapers and as an added bonus; the fundraiser component was the most successful fundraiser the school ever had.

Looking back Ms. Roerty attributed the success to the enthusiastic support of the Principal, the entire teaching staff, a receptive PTA and a great co-chair. She commented that while planning and staging the event was a challenge, it became much more doable and a lot more fun working with everyone else.

The first ever Walk to School Day at Jefferson was a huge hit and everyone seemed to have enjoyed it. It morphed from a fundraiser to an awareness and spirit-raising event and it all came to pass because the Principal embraced it. She understood the mission of the walk – to get kids active, promote safe walking, etc, but she saw it as a way for all of the students in the school to unify and do something together, to building school spirit, and because of her spirit and willingness to do whatever it takes, it happened.

**For more information:**

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Ms. Roerty was the Moderator of the New Jersey Pedestrian Task Force, and was appointed by the State Legislature in 2000 to the New Jersey Council of Physical Fitness and Sports. She is a member of the New Jersey Bicycle Advisory Council; the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals; and American Institute of Certified Planners.

**Resources:**

The Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC),  
New Jersey Pedestrian and Bicycle  
Resource Project.  
<http://policy.rutgers.edu/tpi/pedbike/>

To register a "Walk to School Day Event"  
on-line see:  
[www.walktoschool-usa.org](http://www.walktoschool-usa.org)

"International Walk Our Children to  
School Day"  
[www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/)

**Maplewood, Essex County**

Population (2000) .....	23,868
Area .....	3.97 square miles
Density .....	6,012 people/sq. mile
Public School Participant:	
Jefferson Elementary School (grades 3-5) .....	approx. 500 students



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*Note: This letter was sent to the Editor of the News – Record of South Orange and Maplewood to be published prior to the Walk to School Day event.*

September 20, 2002

### **IWALK – WHY WALK?**

To the Editor:

On Wednesday, October 2, 2002 the students and teachers of Jefferson School will join children in countries around the world in a celebration of International Walk to School Day -- iwalk for short. Last year nearly 3 million children, parents and community leaders from 21 countries around the world walked the walk. This year New Jersey Governor McGreevey has proclaimed October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002, “Walk Our Children to School Day.”

The mission of the event is to create powerful partnerships for change. The idea is for children, parents, and community leaders to walk to school together with a purpose to promote safety, health, physical activity and concern for the environment. More reasons to walk are to reduce traffic congestion and speed, reacquaint yourself with your neighborhood, meet new friends on the walk, and walking to teach safe walking skills.

Walking is a simple, low-cost means of transportation. It is also a low impact but potentially very beneficial form of exercise; a way to commune with nature and neighbors. A shared walk home from school is a great way to recap the day. Walking with your child, unlike driving, enables you to focus completely on them and engage in a meaningful exchange. When kids walk together – the trip provides time to decompress, build relationships; and sometimes to review lessons learned. Because there is safety in numbers, children should always be encouraged to walk in groups. Walking provides children with a sense of independence and empowerment.

Walking is a behavior. The more you do it the more likely you are to do it. If you drive your child to every destination they expect and really never give thought to walking, even for very short distances like the walk to school or four-block trip to their friend’s house. For previous generations of Americans, walking to school was a very common experience; it was in many ways a rite of passage. Relived and retold, stories of journeying “miles” to school in horrific weather have become treasured folklore. However, it is estimated that nationally only about 10 percent of today’s generation of schoolchildren walk or bicycle to school as compared to about 70 percent only four decades ago.

Research shows that physically inactive kids are likely to grow up to be physically inactive adults – and as such are at a high risk for obesity and its related problems, including diabetes and heart disease. In fact, for the first time ever, the CDC says the life expectancy of the current generation may be shorter than that of their parents. The dramatic increase in obesity in this country and particularly in children is frightening. Reports show that we are in epidemic stages. The increase in diabetes in children is equally scary. Poor air quality and the increasing number of children who have asthma is cause for alarm, if not a call to arms.

Can walking solve everything? Probably not but walking can lead to a more physically active lifestyle and help us become more healthy. Walking can reduce weight and thereby

prevent or reduce incidences of debilitating and life threatening diseases. Walking can eliminate some automobile trips, which will conserve oil, reduce congestion and lessen emissions. Walking will improve our cardiovascular fitness and can help to relieve hypertension and depression (in all age groups). Doctors prescribe 30-minutes of walking a day at least 5 days per week.

Sometimes my kids like to walk and sometimes they don't, but they don't always like to read or eat the right food or do their homework and as a parent I am trying to instill good lifetime habits and I look at walking as one of them. When I walk with my children we notice different houses and spot favorite trees, we pet dogs, we meet friends, and quietly I use the time to interject safe walking skills and encourage them to identify obstacles and hazards that need to be changed. The latter is a great way to enrich their power of observation and to get them to think about their community and become agents of change.

Walking is one simple act with so many benefits. On October 2, 2002, the NJ Pedestrian Task Force, the NJ Council of Physical Fitness and Sports the American Diabetes Association And The kids from Jefferson School urge everyone to try a walk to school or to the bus stop or somewhere and know that people all around the world are also walking – rediscovering their community, conserving resources, preserving the environment and improving their health.

Sharon Roerty  
Maplewood

Note to the editor

*At Jefferson Elementary School, the Walk to School event will kick off a special study to assess and improve the pedestrian environment around the school including the walking routes to school. It is a model I hope can be replicated throughout the school district and the state. Jefferson School has activities planned throughout the day, starting with the entire school assembling in Orchard Park on Dehart Rd. At 8:05 Jefferson students and teachers will walk along Ridgewood Rd. to the school. At 11:00 a Walkathon will be held on school grounds. This is a fund-raising event. And, throughout the day, Principal Caulfield-Sloan and Phys Ed teacher, Ms. DiChiaro-Getlan will be wearing pedometers in a challenge to see who can walk more steps in a school day. Coverage of Walk to School Day by News-Record would be welcomed.*