

Two local schools to take part in walk to school pilot project

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Staff Writer

Two local schools are part of a pilot initiative designed to encourage more children to walk to school.

Halton Region Health Department and Halton District School Board have been collaborating on the Active and Safe Routes to School (ASRTS)— which aims to promote healthy living, as well as reduce air pollution and traffic congestion in the region, in one fell swoop. The hope is that all school kids who live within 1.5 km of their elementary school will be walking in no time.

In Halton Hills, Centennial School (Georgetown) and McKenzie-Smith Bennett (Acton) are participating.

Parents are being urged to surrender the wheel and partake in a movement that will revolutionize the way children commute to and from school. Schools are being encouraged to rally support in classrooms, and perhaps most importantly, children are being given the chance to undo any damage that hours of video game playing and sitting in front of the computer have caused.

“The goal is to reduce the number of cars idling and reduce congestion in front of the schools making it safer for people who do walk, and increase the amount of physical activity,” said Halton District School Board chair and Wards 3/4 Trustee Gillian Tuck Kutarna.

She said the program will help to instill some “good lifestyle habits” into children and “increase awareness of their natural environment.”

If more students are walking money could be diverted into the classroom, she added.

Carol Thompson, principal at Centennial School, said the ASRTS program is a “great idea.”

The school is in the process now of determining how it will participate considering ideas like “Walking Wednesdays” a “No Idling Day” or supporting International Walk to School Day, said Thompson.

M-SB principal Sharon French said the school is “very excited” about the program.

“We’re looking forward to being part of this initiative,” said French. “It’s a win-win all the way around.”

She said that school too is in the process of determining how it will participate. She said one option they are considering is the “Walking School Bus” where students would meet at a specific location and walk to school as a group supervised by a parent or school staff member.

Both schools expect to have their walking programs in place next September.

At the recent ASRTS kick-off forum the eight participating Halton schools received Walking School Bus kits

Walking School Bus (WSB) drivers meet kids at various locations, wearing fluorescent vests. There are usually two staff members and one parent who supervise the students. WSB drivers give children an opportunity to walk at least once a week. There are incentives for students to walk often, such as rewarding those who have walked 50 times with a walker charm.

In her opening remarks at the forum,



As part of their survey for the Active and Safe Routes to School pilot program, those taking part in the exercise looked at a set of drawings of the new street and bus access which will be completed on Acton Boulevard in front of Acton's McKenzie-Smith Bennett School. The street will be slightly narrower, yet have a lane designated for buses to load and unload students. Taking part in the survey were (from left) Matt Roj of Town of Halton Hills Engineering Department, Halton District School Board Wards 1/2 Trustee Gerry Ockenden, Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette, McKenzie-Smith Bennett principal Sharon French, Halton Hills Ward 1-2 Regional Councillor Clark Somerville and Jennifer Jenkins, Health Promoter and Project Manager for the Active and Safe Routes to School pilot program. *Photo by Ted Brown*

Jennifer Jenkins, Project Manager at the Halton Region Health Department, highlighted three health issues that the new program will treat: youth physical activity, air quality and injury prevention. Three grand claims, with several supporting facts.

On the health front, statistics point to a higher rate of obese children today than in the 1970's. According to Jenkins, 8 per cent of children today are obese, compared to the three per cent of yesteryear.

Randy Calvert, Program Manager of Metabolism, Exercise and Nutrition at McMaster Children's Hospital, gave an opti-

mistic example of a Walk to School program in North Carolina. The students who walked to school regularly there increased their daily activity by 24 minutes a day. He cited the study of a 14-year-old girl who increased her activity by three per cent a day for a month. Though a modest increase in activity, she warded off what could potentially have developed into diabetes, he said.

Calvert warned that only 20 per cent of children are meeting physical activity targets, and they have been sucked into bad habits.

For more information about the program, visit www.saferoutestoschool.ca/

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