



The Times

Parents cast wary eye as students walk

Safety trumps health concerns

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BY JEFF TRENTLY

Kids around the world were putting one foot in front of the other yesterday to mark International Walk to School Day.

But parents in Hopewell Valley were putting their foot down.

"Our kids would be road kill before they got to school," said Rhona Wulf, who has a daughter at Bear Tavern Elementary School in Titusville.

Parents like Wulf have been angry since the Hopewell Valley School District, in a budget crunch, trimmed cul-de-sac busing services and eliminated rides altogether for more than 200 students -- and more cuts are threatened next year.

"There's no way our children can walk," Wulf said. "These roads are heavily traveled and no sidewalks."

While busing remains a hot issue in Hopewell Valley, proponents of foot and pedal power elsewhere in Mercer County were using the day to attract attention to safety, environmental and health concerns.

Nationally, only about 16 percent of students ages 5 to 15 walked or biked to or from school in 2001, down from 42 percent in 1969, according to the national walk organizers. Meanwhile, obesity rates among children have more than doubled in the past 20 years, according to the National Longitudinal Study of Youth.

Safety was the big issue at Maurice Hawk Elementary School in West Windsor, where the entire school -- 784 students from kindergarten to third grade -- took to the streets to demonstrate that walking to school in areas with adequate sidewalks is not only safe but fun for children even as young as 5.

"It's a lot more fun than riding the bus," said second-grader Douglas Saunders, 7, who walks to school every day with his mom.

Having sidewalks and safe road crossings is one key for children to make the trek from home to school, said Ken Carlson of the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance, which helped organize the walk.

"If you have infrastructure it creates a culture -- you don't even think twice about walking," Carlson said. "Now you don't even think once about it."

But sidewalks aren't enough, some parents say.

"When I was a kid and went to grammar school I did walk but that was a different society back then," said Bob Giangrosso, a Hopewell Valley parent who says it's not safe for his children to go on foot to school -- and that it takes too much time to walk with them.

"Parents would have to get up at least an hour earlier to walk," Giangrosso said, noting it takes 25 to 30 minutes to walk to his children's school. "That's a heck of a burden to put on parents and children, too."

But Alison Miller of the bicycle alliance isn't buying such thinking.

"It's very important to educate parents on the value of not getting in your car everywhere you want to go," Miller said moments before the Maurice Hawk children began their walk yesterday morning. "Nothing is more effective than kids saying, 'We can walk.'"

And walk they did yesterday.

"Boys and girls all over the world will be doing walks like you are today," Principal Denise Mengani told the children gathered on the school's front lawn. "This is about the environment and about staying healthy and trying to ride bikes because that's good, healthy exercise," she said.

Maurice Hawk Elementary has the most walking students in the area, Mengani said -- between 100 and 175 who walk every day.

"It's healthier," said Barry Keppard of the Greater Mercer Transportation Management Association, which helped organize the Hawk walk. "As you walk around the school, pay attention to what you see," Keppard told the children, who were given safety surveys to fill out after the walk.

Kids picked up leaves off the ground and plucked low-hanging tree branches as they made the 20-minute trek through neighborhoods around the school.

"I like that you get exercise," said Emily, a second-grader who takes the bus to school.

"I like it because we got to see so many things," said 7-year-old Gabriella.

"I saw my sister's school and a car that looked like my mom's and a dog that looked exactly like my dog," another second-grader said.

Almost 2,200 schools across the nation participated in the Walk to School event yesterday.

Trenton's Mill Hill neighborhood had its own twist on the event.

Volunteers handed out fliers to passing motorists on busy Market Street during rush hours yesterday to highlight pedestrian safety in the neighborhood.

"The speed limit is 25, not 55," said Mark Thompson of the Old Mill Hill Society, which organized the event. "A lot of people don't realize the speed limit is that low and there's a neighborhood right there."

About 100 people run red lights each rush hour on Market Street, Thompson said. "We want to do something about it before something tragic happens."

"We asked people to roll down their windows to give them a flier and everyone did," said Lisa Kasabach, chairwoman of Old Mill Hill Society, a bit amazed.

The flier asked motorists, in bold letters, to SLOW DOWN, PAY ATTENTION and DON'T RUN THE RED LIGHTS.

"The streets should be safe for pedestrians," Kasabach said. "In the city lots of people walk."

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