

School district could backpedal on policy

Saratoga Springs board to consider modifying ban on riding bikes to schools

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First published: Tuesday, September 29, 2009

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SARATOGA SPRINGS -- Seventh-grader Adam Marino is getting a firsthand lesson in civil disobedience.

The 12-year-old and his mother, Janette Kaddo Marino, are defying Saratoga Springs school policy by biking to Maple Avenue Middle School on Route 9. The Jackson Street residents pedal more than four miles together each way to the middle school on nice days despite being told not to by school officials and police.

"I guess you can say that we continue to do what we feel is our right," Kaddo Marino said recently. "We feel strongly we have a right to get to school by a mode of transportation we deem appropriate."

Their methods may be unconventional, but the Marinos are part of a growing number of Americans challenging the sedentary habits of today's youths and what they view as overanxious "helicopter" parenting. As fewer children walk and bike to school nationwide, parents have started groups like the "Walking School Bus," which promotes physical activity and fitness in youth by having them walk to school with adults.

Parents and teachers at Niskayuna's Hillside Elementary School implemented the state's first Walking School Bus program. Separately, this week marks the end of the first "Children and Nature: Saratoga -- Come Out and Play," a week of outdoor events in Saratoga Springs coordinated by the local chapter of a national organization that seeks to "reconnect" children and their families to the outdoors.

Riding his 21-speed Giant mountain bike to school benefits Adam Marino's health and the environment, his mother says, and Adam believes it makes him a better student. "It would be really nice if it got changed," he said of the school policy.

The youngster may get his way.

While the school district does not allow elementary school or Maple Avenue students to ride bikes to school, that could change in the coming weeks, Superintendent Janice White said. The Board of Education could vote to amend the policy on Oct. 13, when it is scheduled to discuss a recommendation from a district-formed committee.

"Supervised, parent/guardian bike riding may be permitted at specific sites in the future," White said in an interview Friday. The school has no legal responsibility over what occurs on Route 9, she added.

The biking debate started last spring, when school district officials told Kaddo Marino that Adam was violating school rules by biking to class. Walking to the school also is not permitted.

Kaddo Marino challenged the policy and asked the school board to change it. The district charged a committee to review the rule, which was instituted in 1994.

At the start of school in September, Kaddo Marino thought that she had a nonverbal agreement with school officials to allow her son to ride his bike until a new policy was resolved. But on the night before classes started, school authorities called parents to say that walking and biking to school would not be tolerated.

When the pair stuck with their plan, they were met by school administrators and a state trooper, who emphasized that biking was prohibited, Kaddo Marino said.

In response, members of an advocacy group, Saratoga Healthy Transportation Network, rallied around the mother and son by accompanying them on their rides to school. They go an average of twice a week. Mom rides to the school to join her son coming home.

Route 9 is a state road also called Maple Avenue. The suburban thoroughfare is busy with cars and businesses. It has crosswalks and wide shoulders, but no bike lanes.

The accident rate on the road near the school is less than the statewide average for similar streets, and no bike accidents have been reported in the last three years ending Feb. 1, according to Mark Kennedy, regional traffic engineer at the state Department of Transportation.

At Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake schools, officials allow elementary and middle school students to ride their bikes to school if they bring in notes from their parents, spokeswoman Christy Multer said. About six to 10 middle school students ride on nice days, Multer said. They park their bikes in racks, and leave after buses depart.

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