

SRTS CASE STUDY: Lawton, Oklahoma

Walking school buses build community

SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School



CASE STUDY

Introduction

Two Lawton, Oklahoma, schools have begun walking school buses to address different challenges, and both schools have seen unexpected benefits from their efforts.

Principal Brenda Hatch has been instrumental in Safe Routes to School programs at both schools in the pilot project: she was principal at Howell Elementary School when the program started in 2007, and now she is principal at Whittier Elementary School.

Howell Elementary, which has approximately 197 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, is located in a low socio economic area with safety concerns due to crime as well as the lack of sidewalks along the roads, Hatch says. Children must walk along the edges of people's yards, and in the past, neighbors had complained that some children were throwing rocks and fighting on the way to and from school.

"I knew that many kids were walking out of necessity," Hatch says, and she and other community members shared the belief that "we need to do something to make this safer."

In contrast, Whittier Elementary School, which has approximately 273 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, is a small neighborhood school where "the congestion is just phenomenal," Hatch says. A city park is located two blocks away from the school, and school officials wanted to encourage parents to drop their children at the park and allow their youngsters to walk the quarter mile to school with supervision. Some students transfer to attend Whittier and would not be able to walk to school unless there was a remote drop off location. The school offers extended day care for students, and some children may be dropped off at 7 a.m. By the time school starts, they've been at school for an hour and 45 minutes, and are ready for some activity, Hatch notes. Whittier needed to connect the park's sidewalk with the school.

The success of this SRTS program comes from efforts to tailor it to each school's needs.

"You're going to do it for different reasons," Hatch acknowledges.

Lawton SRTS efforts began in earnest when a representative from the Comanche County Health Department introduced the program to Howell Elementary's Safe School Committee. Eventually, Fit Kids Lawton, a group of community partners that included Comanche County Memorial Hospital, doctors, the Friends of Trails bike club, builders, schools, city officials, parents, the county health department, the local YMCA, the Lawton Police Department and other organizations, created a Safe Routes to School subcommittee. The initial SRTS goals were to increase the number of children safely walking and/or biking to school, and to reduce traffic congestion during drop off and pick up times.



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Activities

The Lawton pilot SRTS program began in spring 2007 with a \$15,000 non-infrastructure grant awarded by STIPDA, the State and Territorial Injury Prevention Directors Association. The funds were used to purchase drop off signs and to identify safe houses along the routes for children. At houses designated as “Safe,” everyone in the home has had a background check. Many of the safe house residents were retired school staff or grandparents of the students, Hatch notes.

“If we’re going to encourage them to walk, they have to have places they know they can go,” Hatch explains, if for example, a dog starts to chase a child or they feel uncomfortable due to strangers.

Both schools started walking school buses to provide safe supervision for the students who walk to school. Hatch walks as often as she can, and she asks for teacher volunteers if she cannot participate. Some parents and grandparents walk in the afternoons, too, however, Hatch felt that since the school initiated the SRTS effort, she needed to take the lead on providing supervision.

“I had started it as a school program,” she says. “I just feel responsible.”

Parents have helped, she notes. A parent at Whittier waits with children who are dropped off in the morning until the walking school bus leader arrives. Other parents volunteer to be crossing guards and to oversee the drop-off area in the afternoon.

At Howell, many students live within a one mile square of the school, and 25th Street serves as a centralized meeting point. The walking school bus route is a half mile to the farthest point, located at an area church where it begins in the morning and ends in the afternoon. Neighborhood students walk down their streets to 25th Street where they meet adults who lead them the rest of the way to school.



In May 2008, Oklahoma DOT awarded Howell and Whittier a two-year \$113,400 SRTS infrastructure grant to build sidewalks and also a \$5,700 non-infrastructure grant for education and encouragement activities. The ODOT grant is being managed by Lawton Public Schools.

The city repainted crosswalks, added crosswalks and extended the school zone. It installed pedestrian signs, hired crossing guards and purchased motivational items to reward frequent walkers. The schools use punch cards, and after 10 punches, students and parents receive a T-shirt. Subsequent punches earn prizes that encourage activity such as jump ropes.

Parents know that if it is raining or if the wind chill is below 32 degrees, the walking school buses will not operate.

Whittier and Howell have participated in International Walk to School Day. In addition, they have held special events at Whittier every quarter to increase participation to as many as 150 students. On those days, more parents drop off at the park, and the buses unload students so that they can also participate. The schools held a Turkey Trot in November, as well as Oklahoma Day led by horseback riders and a March to School Day with soldiers from neighboring Ft. Sill Army Base.

“We try to do a variety of things,” Hatch says.

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Milestones

More children at both schools are walking to school thanks to the walking school buses. Before the program began at Howell, 12 students walked to school, and now the school averages 25 to 30 students who walk to school each day. At Whittier prior to the program, approximately 10 children walked to school in the morning, and now 20 students walk regularly. In addition, the walking school bus leaders encourage the before-school students to walk along to pick up the students who were dropped off, and this gives the early arrivers the chance to participate as well as the benefits of a brisk walk before school. After school, 40 to 50 students walk to the park to be picked up. The Lawton School District is encouraging more schools to participate in SRTS.

Although the increased participation is impressive, there have been many unexpected benefits.

“What we didn’t realize was the relationships we were going to build,” Hatch says.

At Howell, the walks promote both peer interaction and also staff interaction with parents who might not have been comfortable coming to the school building. Each day, two adult staff members walk with students. Rather than waiting for the return trip, however, some students start out as the leaders walk past their street to the starting point at the church, then back again. The extra time walking provides extra attention for the children, and Hatch says they talk to the adults about everything.

In addition, when school staff walk the route and meet parents in their own comfort zone, the parents talk to them more readily.

“We built wonderful relationships with parents,” Hatch says. “Once you convince a parent you love their child, they’ll do anything in the world for you.”

Another bonus has been the neighborhood response. After neighbors saw what was happening with the walking school buses, they made sure their lawns were mowed. To show school appreciation, one day a month school volunteers clean up along the walk route, and at the end of the year, they leave a goody bag in each person’s yard that they walk through with an invitation to a bingo party.

The interaction with students has been a benefit of the Whittier walking school bus, too. “They talk our heads off,” Hatch says with a laugh. Students walk with a buddy and, “It’s a good social time for the kids.” In the morning, students follow their walks with a healthy breakfast.

“They go to class, they’re awake, they’re ready to learn,” Hatch says.

Contact

Whittier Elementary School Principal Brenda Hatch
bhatch@lawtonps.org



For more resources and information on Safe Routes to School, please visit the National Center for Safe Routes to School Web site at www.saferoutesinfo.org.