

Walking to School Boosts Creativity and Learning

By Drew Jacobs

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As Nashville observes “Walk to School Day” on Oct. 6, students will get outside with their peers, neighbors, and families, and experience what it’s like to explore and have fun on the way to school. But might we think bigger than just this singular awareness day, about why most children can’t walk (or bike) to school *every* day? As Tennessee ranks third in the nation for pediatric obesity, identifying safe, straightforward, convenient ways for youth to get routine physical activity back into their daily lives, is now more important than ever.

In the mid-20th Century, three out of four young Americans arrived at school by walking or biking. Our nation –as a matter of public policy– sited schools *near* the vicinities in which children actually lived, and provided sidewalks. American schools were interactive: serving as “the heart” of their surrounding neighborhoods, proudly embraced and supported by nearby residents –their athletic fields, playgrounds, auditoriums, libraries– open to communal use. But suburban sprawl driven by the rise of the automobile has resulted in an impractical, expensive, and unhealthy disconnect between neighborhoods and schools. As a result, fewer than 15 percent of children arrive at school by walking or biking today. Buses –or more often, automobiles– shuttle students to and fro.

Constrained public-sector capital resources resulted in a “big box” approach to education: enormous schools on large tracts of land, drawing massive numbers of students from unnecessarily broad zones. School boards often evaluate only the upfront construction expenses, while the longer-term costs of poor school siting policy, though rarely assessed, include: treatment of childhood overweight/obesity due to physical inactivity; congestion (30 percent of morning rush hour traffic attributable to kids being driven to school); toxic air quality around schools and pediatric asthma from cars idling in “hook-up” lines; fuel budget to power buses that clock hundreds of miles a day; and additional supporting infrastructure (new roads, utility extensions) for schools located out in the middle of greenfields.

But the foremost missed opportunity here for education policy-makers is an effective way to advance academics, just by giving kids a fighting chance at walking or biking to school. As P.E. classes are cut to allow more instructional time to boost standardized test scores, we dismiss the cognitive proof that physical activity improves behavior, learning readiness and performance. We also ignore an emerging trend of declining creative talent in America’s future generations. A return to allowing young minds to tangibly discover and connect with the outdoors, through an explorative activity as simple as walking to school, can go a long way toward shoring up the creativity deficit.

Not every child plays an afterschool sport; not every child has access to a gym; not every child even has P.E. class anymore — but every child goes to school.

As our region’s population continues to grow, Tennessee’s Safe Routes to School Network, the Tennessee Obesity Taskforce, and the Nashville Area MPO have taken a leadership position in informing education policy-makers about how collaborative, forward-thinking school siting decisions can truly have a positive impact on children’s health, happiness, and achievement.

Drew Jacobs is organizer for Tennessee’s Safe Routes to School Network, a program that advocates for and promotes safe walking and bicycling to and from school.