

Events as Tools for Change

Events can celebrate good things, put a light on neglected issues, galvanize community support, or even start advocacy. They can be particularly good at helping all stakeholders to come together and experience what is working, what isn't, and how to collaborate to fix what is broken.

That is the story behind the growth and successes of Walk to School Day events held every October since 1997 and Bike to School Day held every May since 2012. Each year thousands of schools, students, parents, and their communities participate.

And each year participation exceeds the record for the

previous year. Some think they are just having fun together. A teacher sees how nice it is to get to meet parents she had not seen at all the last year. A principal thinks fondly about how better behaved students are when they get a bit of exercise. A student is just happy to walk with both her dad and new teacher. Some see the possibility of broad benefits. A mayor sees a chance to rally support for a new program. At the other end, some see dangerous conditions or bad behaviors by drivers and decide something is going to get done about it.



Walk to School Day 2016, Phoenix, AZ.

Celebrate where it is safe and fix where it is not

Through an event, some communities find they have a lovely walk to school and realize they want to do it more often. Walking Wednesdays and walking school buses often are an outgrowth. Some parents and students just decide to keep walking on their own.

Other communities have routes that are not safe for students who need or want to walk to school. The first attention should go to fixing conditions where students have no other (or safer) ways to get to school other than on foot, then improving places where students could choose to walk if it were safe and appealing. The issues might be that there are no sidewalks, no safe places to cross streets, or something else.

Making improvements to the physical environment often requires both public support and political will. Special events can help build momentum and attention for both of these critical parties. For elected officials who need to get community support to devote resources towards pedestrian safety, a special event like Walk to School Day can help rally support. If there are community members energized about the need for



Walk to School Day 2016, Raleigh, N.C.

change and they need to get the attention of their elected officials, Walk to School Day can provide an opportunity for an elected official to see safety concerns and publicly commit to doing something about them.

Bike and Walk to School Day events do not just offer city leaders an opportunity to commit to safety and affirm their support for walking and biking. According to organizers, these events also lead to changes in their communities. Following Bike to School Day 2016, 66 percent of surveyed organizers indicated that their events led to policy or environmental changes in their communities; the kinds of changes that can make walking

and bicycling to school possible on a regular basis, not just for a few special days.

For the past several years, event organizers most often identify these changes resulting from Walk and Bike to School Day events:

- Adding required safety education
- Adding walking and bicycling promotion to school policies
- Adding signage that supports safe walking and bicycling to the school
- Increasing traffic enforcement near the school
- Adding or improving sidewalks, paths, or crosswalks

An excellent example of how local government leaders and community members can use an event to mobilize communities was the celebration of twenty years of Walk to School Day that occurred in October 2016. The emphasis was on encouraging mayors to launch movements committed to safe walking and biking, such as committing to reaching zero traffic deaths (also called Vision Zero) starting with children and youth.



Walk to School Day 2015, Sweet Home, Ore.

The 20th anniversary of Walk to School Day – Reaching for larger goals

Walk to School Day 2016, as part of the 20th celebration of the event, recognized the special role of mayors and other city leaders in using events to kick-off new initiatives. A special event can serve as the starting point for a safety project at a specific school, a citywide safety effort for youth walking and biking to school, a movement to improve health by encouraging physical activity, or a longer-term safety effort like Vision Zero.

As part of the push for mayors to attend and participate in Walk to School Day in 2016, over 1,500 mayors received invitations from event organizers. In all, nearly one-third of U.S. events included a mayor or other elected official.

Event organizers explained how their mayors supported Walk to School Day and safety in their communities (below):

Mr. Rappold kicked off our event with a short talk with students about the city's efforts to promote a healthy city that includes safer walking and biking routes, including walking to our school. – Beckley, W. Va.

Both the mayor and city manager worked with the community chief of police and the entire police station to collaborate on the event. The city manager and mayor both walked with the students to school, along with the school principal and one of our police officers. – Noble, Okla.

Our mayor has been involved in the Lincoln Charter School International walk to School Day since 2012. The event has been held in partnership with our city officials ever since. Mayor C. Kim Bracey is a health champion for our children and our city. She walks, bikes and inspires our young people to be active. – York, Pa.

Mayors used their participation in Walk to School Day to assert their goals for the community. Created especially for the 20th celebration of Walk to School Day in 2016, the Mayors' Statement on Safe Walking and Biking for Youth does just that. Both mayors and event organizers used or adapted the Mayors' Statement to fit their plans for the event.

Mayors used the language from the Mayors' Statement to show how their commitment to walking and biking stretches beyond the Walk to School Day event. They featured the statement in proclamations for Walk to School Day and in speeches to students, teachers, community members and media. In Washington, DC, Mayor Muriel Bowser (shown in picture) attended an event that included more than 100 students from over a dozen schools. As part of the event, the mayor signed the Mayors' Statement to

Mayors' Statement on Safe Walking and Biking for Youth

The ability of people to safely walk and bicycle is a vital part of what makes communities thrive. We recognize that by creating opportunities for children and youth to safely walk and bicycle, we can benefit people of all ages, abilities and resources. My community is committed to work to promote safe walking and bicycling and to eliminate fatal and serious traffic crashes among all road users. Now is the time to act. We know the benefits this would bring to the health and well-being of our children, our communities, and the nation are immeasurable.



Walk to School Day 2016, Washington, D.C.

show her continued commitment to a safe walking and biking environment for youth in the city.

Community members also used the Mayors' Statement. It provided language for them to bring to their mayors and city leaders to help advocate for safe walking and biking for youth. Many event organizers used the Mayors' Statement in their invitations to mayors, encouraging their mayors to not only attend the event, but also to use it as a launching point for further initiatives. Within their communities, event organizers also used the statement as a promotional tool, spreading it through newspapers, press releases, and social media to both promote the Walk to School Day event and the cause of youth safety.



Walk to School Day 2016, Woodbridge, Va.

For more information on Vision Zero programs and the benefits of starting where children walk and bike, see “Focusing on the Safety of Children Can Propel Vision Zero Initiatives” (<http://bit.ly/vision-zero-for-youth>).

For more information on slowing down traffic where children walk and bike, see “The Benefits of Slowing Down Traffic – Starting Where Children Walk and Bike” (<http://bit.ly/managing-speed-for-youth>).

For information on upcoming Bike to School Day and Walk to School Day events visit www.walkbiketoschool.org. Events are registered at the site so that others will know what is happening in their communities. The site also contains resources on how to use an event as a tool for change.