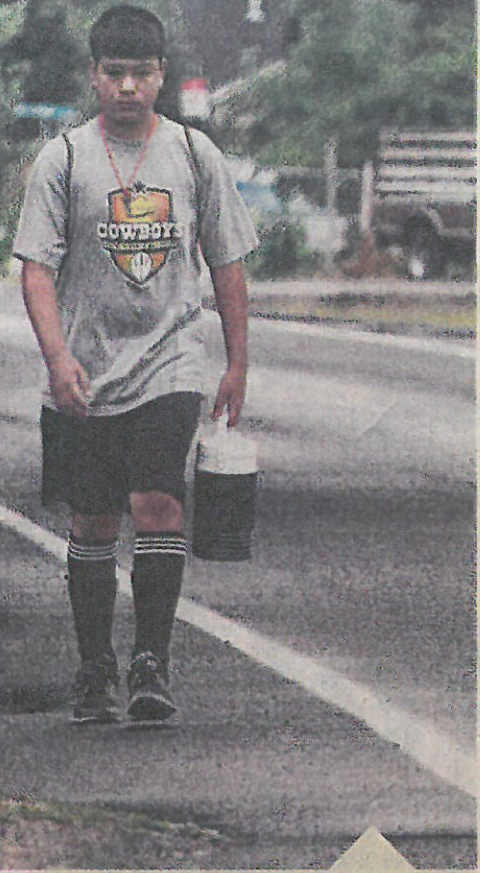


GETTING TO SCHOOL USING KID POWER



Fewer students are walking or biking to school, and solutions to turn the tide are slow to come in Salem

Miguel Gonzalez, 12, walks to soccer practice. Gonzalez is among a dwindling number of area students who walk to school. KOBBI R. BLAIR / STATESMAN JOURNAL

By Stefanie Knowlton
Statesman Journal

The first day of school used to evoke images of kids pedaling bicycles or walking hand in hand with older siblings through the neighborhood.

Now you're more likely to see parents idling in long lines of traffic as they inch toward the front door to drop off kids.

Nearly half the kids in America walked or biked 40 years ago, according to a national Safe Routes to School study. Since then, the number of vehicles more than doubled, crime rose and fell and, at the heart of it all, parents developed a fear that kids weren't safe to

navigate their neighborhoods.

Now one in eight American children walk or bike to school. Childhood obesity rates have tripled, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Traffic clogs the neighborhoods surrounding schools as more parents drive their kids.

The growing problem even changed the way Salem-Keizer designed its newest schools, adding more room for cars and less for bike racks. To accommodate drivers, the district built a quarter-mile of car queuing lines that wrap around the four newly built schools.

"Society has changed," said Salem-Keizer manager of construction ser-

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BACK TO SCHOOL COVERAGE

Salem-Keizer schools get back to class Tuesday for sixth and ninth graders and Wednesday for remaining grades (except kindergarten, which starts Sept. 10).

Find extensive back-to-school coverage in Wednesday's and Thursday's Statesman Journal.

Online at StatesmanJournal.com/schools:

- » On Wednesday morning, watch for updates, photos, videos and tweets from reporters and photographers who will be at more than 18 schools
- » Share your back-to-school experiences on Twitter and Instagram, using the hashtag #sjfirstday



Pranav Ramesh, (front to back) Sage Taloyo and Corey Wisner practice stopping at an intersection Thursday during a Safe Routes to School bike safety class at Grant Elementary School.

vices Bruce Lathers, who walked to school on a country road when he was a kid.

Dozens of Oregon cities from Portland to Klamath Falls are working to reverse the trend with programs that target everything from parent and student education to infrastructure improvements such as sidewalks. What's more, they're seeing results.

Now, with a patchwork of programs and support, Salem is taking its first tentative steps to join them.

Roadblocks and speed bumps

Salem resident Miguel Gonzalez, 12, likes to walk for the "peace and time alone," he said, and it just makes sense.

"There's no point in driving and wasting money driving to school because it's only a few blocks away."

He plans to walk the mile from his house to Blanchet Catholic School starting this week.

Most Salem kids have asked their parents to let them bike or walk to school, according to a 2010 survey of 2,750 Salem parents. But only one out of four students in the survey got the chance.

So what's stopping them?

Gonzalez's friend who lives nearby isn't allowed to walk because her parents feel it's too dangerous, he said. Parents' top reasons for keeping kids off neighborhood streets are the speed and volume of traffic, the distance to school, weather, crime and safety of crossings, according to Salem's survey.

But the big reason kids don't walk or bike to school anymore is parent fear, said Lenore Skenazy, author of "Free-Range Kids," blogger and public speaker.

Parents of young children have become so afraid in general that almost any normal childhood activity such as walking to school is seen as a death-defying act, she said.

"We live in the safest times in human history," she said, "and we're acting as if we're not."

The violent crime rate is nearly half of what it was two decades ago, according to the Criminal Justice Information Services Division. And five-times as many kids died as passengers than pedestrians in 2010, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Katie Wampler leads Forest Ridge Elementary School students on International Walk to School Day 2012. Wampler, a parent volunteer, helped start a schoolwide effort to increase walking and biking to school 10 years ago.

BIKE + WALK TO SCHOOL DAY

This year, more than 100 Oregon schools will encourage students to walk and bike to school Oct. 9 as part of International Walk + Bike to School Day. Safe Routes to School donates prizes and materials to help schools and advocates organize the events. For information, go to www.walknbike.org

Kids are far more likely to become obese, develop diabetes or get depressed from lack of exercise than they are to get hit by a car or kidnapped, Skenazy said.

Salem mom Shirlene Gonzalez admits that fear plays a role, she said, but it's not the only factor.

Next week she'll let Miguel walk to Blanchet, but she's nervous because part of his route includes Brown Road NE, which doesn't have sidewalks.

"I've walked with him, and it's scary," she said.

A map of Salem shows that many neighborhoods between the downtown core and newer developments lack sidewalks. Salem Transportation Planning Manager Julie Warncke calls it the doughnut because it forms a big O on the map.

Salem spent about \$1.2 million of its \$100 million streets



Corey Wisner adjusts his safety reflector Thursday during a Safe Routes to School bike safety class at Grant Elementary School.

and bridges bond to fill in some gaps, but it barely dented the doughnut. It would cost too much to build them all, Warncke said. Another \$38 million went to safety improvements such as median islands and curb extensions, she said, many of which improved access to schools.

The city also got a \$240,000 grant to update its transportation plan with a focus on Safe Routes to School, detailing projects for each school that will make it easier to bike and walk.

Adding sidewalks to Brown

Road NE topped a list of projects. Soon Marion County and Salem will install sidewalks stretching the seven blocks from Arizona Ave. to San Francisco Drive NE, but they will stop shy of extending the sidewalks the four blocks to Sunnyview Road.

Gonzalez plans to lobby the city to use leftover streets and bridges bond money to extend the sidewalk all the way to Sunnyview. Letting your children walk to school is hard, she said, so she's trying to find ways to

make it as safe as possible.

'Long time coming'

Cities with comprehensive Safe Routes to School programs show that they can make a difference. Congress started the national program in 2005 and gave states \$612 million over four years to develop grant programs that focus on education, engineering, enforcement, encouragement and evaluation.

Cities such as Portland and Eugene quickly jumped at the chance. Portland started its program in 2000 and eventually boosted the number of students biking and walking to school from 28 percent to 42 percent.

Eugene snapped up \$2.5 million in grant money to pay for infrastructure and a full-time coordinator who organizes bike and walk events, educates teachers, parents and students and works with partners to remove barriers such as missing sidewalks.

Overall, more than 40 cities have been awarded a total of \$12 million since 2005. This year Salem got its first grant.

"We can't compare ourselves to Portland or Eugene," said Hersch Sangster, secretary of Salem Bicycle Club and founder of Salem's Monster Cookie Ride.

Salem has come a long way, he said, with projects such as restoring the Union Street bridge and making downtown more bike friendly. Now it's in the beginning stages of getting more kids involved, he said.

"We have to do our own thing," he said, "and we're doing it."

Salem-Keizer Education Foundation got \$26,000 to start a Safe Routes to School program at Hallman Elementary School, the first program in the Salem-Keizer School District.

"It has been a long time coming," said Kate Tarter, a parent volunteer and now vice president of the Salem-Keizer Transit Board.

Tarter started the effort back in 2007 to address barriers at Hallman Elementary, which was built as a walking school. But only one-third of students walked or biked, largely due to gaps in infrastructure.

Many Hallman students live in the apartment complexes along Hawthorne Avenue where there were no sidewalks or pass-throughs to neighborhood streets. Salem-Keizer designated it a hazardous walk zone, so instead of walking, kids gathered along the shoulder to wait for the bus.

That's where 9-year-old To-

Kid power

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paz Luna was struck and killed by the side mirror of a passing Salem Public Works truck in 2005. He had stepped into the road when he was hit. His death is partly what inspired Tarter to fight for Safe Routes to School.

She collected hundreds of surveys, energized city, state and school officials and spent countless hours drafting a Safe Routes to School action plan for Hallman Elementary School.

The city of Salem added curbs, sidewalks and a crosswalk, and lowered the speed limit to 25 mph on Hawthorne.

Then Hallman launched the Safe Routes to School program in April and hired coordinator Kiki Sangster, who comes from a long line of cyclists. She taught an after-school biking and walking safety class that wrapped up in June.

Kids practiced their walking skills in the neighborhood, including crossing safely, using maps and determining the safest route through geocaching activities. They also used their bike safety skills on Hallman's track.

Sangster coordinated bike-and walk-to-school events, a bike rodeo and rounded up donations for bikes and helmets from more than a dozen community partners.

Her father, Hersch Sangster, taught alongside her as an assistant. The duo also ran seven bike safety camps at Grant Community School this summer through Salem-Keizer Education Foundation.

They'll continue the class this fall at Hallman until the grant runs out at the end of the month. It's not clear whether the pilot program will continue at Hallman.

Salem-Keizer Education Foundation might offer the class at some of its after-school sites. But Sangster already is fielding calls from other elementary schools for short stints teaching safety.

"I would love to take this to other elementary schools," she said.

Other avenues

Despite gaining new programs and advocates, Salem still lacks a comprehensive Safe Routes to School program or coordinator.

All it takes is a health advocate, a parent or a teacher to create a program at a local school, and it can grow from there, said Julie Yip, Oregon

Who walks and bikes to school

Students around the country are about four times less likely to walk and bike to school now compared to 40 years ago. Salem schools vary on the percentage of walkers and bikers, according to a 2010 City of Salem survey of 2,750 parents of elementary and middle school students, but driving is the top choice across the board. The color of the circle represents the percentage of students that walk or bike each morning to school. The below locations are approximate. Not all City of Salem schools are included due to lack of data.



SOURCE: 2010 City of Salem Survey of about 2,750 parents

LAURA FOSMIRE / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School coordinator.

One example is Forest Ridge Elementary School, where nearly 200 students bike, walk and roll to school on international Walk to School Day in October, and it's not just a one-day push.

Parent volunteer Katie Wampler runs a yearlong incentive program that rewards kids for all the hours they log biking and walking to school.

"Several kids didn't come to school in a car one single day all year," she said. "It didn't matter if it was pouring down rain or it was icy."

The 50 students who log the

most trips all year get prizes such as T-shirts and water bottles donated by Ace Hardware.

Despite Forest Ridge's success, other schools haven't asked how to set up similar programs, Wampler said. Only one other Salem-Keizer school, Salem Heights, celebrated international Walk to School Day last year.

About 77 percent of parents think Salem-Keizer schools either discourage or don't encourage biking or walking to school, according to a 2010 city of Salem survey.

The city already took the first step by developing Safe Routes to School assessments

for each Salem school, including parent surveys, which are part of the requirements for grant money.

The next step would be to create an action plan to improve the school's walking and biking. Warncke said she is willing to help, but not to lead the charge.

"We see it as something the schools need to lead rather than the city pushing this," she said.

Two Salem-Keizer officials served on the stakeholder advisory committee for the city's Safe Routes to School assessment, but neither remembered getting copies of the finished report, they said. Warncke sent an updated version last week.

TEACH KIDS TO WALK SAFELY

Safe Routes to School developed these tips to help parents model safe walking with the goal of teaching kids the skills to deal with traffic safely on their own:

- » Wear bright-colored clothes, and carry flashlights or wear reflective gear if it is dark or hard to see.
- » Look for traffic at every driveway and intersection. Be aware of drivers in parked cars that may be getting ready to move.
- » Obey all traffic signs and signals.
- » Cross the street safely:
 1. Stop at the curb or edge of the street.
 2. Look left, right, left, behind you and in front of you for traffic.
 3. Wait until no traffic is coming and begin crossing.
 4. Keep looking for traffic until you have finished crossing.
 5. Walk, don't run, across the street.
- » Select walking route with less traffic and fewer intersections.
- » Pick places where there are sidewalks or paths. If there are no sidewalks or paths, walk as far from vehicles as possible and walk on the side of the street facing traffic.

Source: Safe Routes to School

Bicycle advocate and father of two Curt Fisher wishes the city would do more, but he understands that it starts at the ground level.

"There hasn't been a groundswell of support to push through those plans," he said about bicycle and pedestrian improvements citywide.

Fisher has tried to inspire grassroots efforts to make Salem more bike and pedestrian friendly. He resurrected the family-friendly bike rides, Kidical Mass, last year after a two-year hiatus, but they fizzled out.

Now he is helping with Salem Sunday Streets, which will close streets to traffic for one day and open them for biking and walking Sept. 8. You never know what will change the culture, Fisher said, and kids might just be the way to do it.

"Teaching the kids the skills they need to take control of their own transportation choices and exercise their own independence probably has more potential than anything else," he said.

*sknowlto@StatesmanJournal.com,
(503) 399-6735 or follow on Twitter
@Stef_Knowlton*