

Back to School with Safe Routes to School

It's that time of year to start thinking about getting ready for going back to school. In addition to clothes, books and backpacks, children need to get to and from school on time and safely. Will your child(ren) be walking or bicycling to school this year?

Fifty years ago, walking and bicycling to school used to be the norm, but nowadays only about 13% of children and youth get to school on foot or by peddle power (active transportation). It is especially challenging in rural areas like Mendocino County; many children live long distances from school; communities are bisected by dangerous, high speed highways; unattended dogs roam the streets and chase pedestrians and bicyclists; and the lack of sidewalks and bicycle lanes in many area puts children in close proximity to traffic.

Rates of obesity are high for all American children, but they are even higher in rural communities. On average nationally, 40-50% of rural children are overweight or obese, and they get less physical activity than urban and suburban children. In Mendocino County, only 54.7% of fifth graders and 58.8% of ninth graders are at a healthy weight, according to HealthMendocino.org.

Small towns and rural areas often lack safe walking conditions, and Safe Routes to School initiatives can be a great way to safely increase physical activity for children. Today Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are taking off around the nation. These programs are making it easier and safer for students to be healthy by walking or bicycling to school. These programs can improve safety on streets near schools while providing encouragement for children to walk and bicycle to school. Walking and bicycling to school helps students to get daily physical activity, improve their health, and arrive at school alert and ready to learn. SRTS programs also benefit the community by decreasing traffic congestion and air pollution around schools.

This fall, Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG) and Mendocino County Health and Human Services Agency, Public Health Prevention and Planning Unit are partnering to bring Safe Routes to Schools programming to seven school districts. One elementary school and high school in Anderson Valley, Fort Bragg, Laytonville, Potter Valley, Round Valley, Ukiah and Willits will participate in the program. Bike rodeos, safety education, walk and bike to school day activities, walking school buses and after school clubs are just a few of the activities that will pair older students with elementary school students to increase walking and bicycling events.

Safe Routes to School Programs are more than a series of activities; they include assessing the environment around the school to identify dangerous areas, surveying parents to learn their perception of safety issues, speaking to decision-makers about the need to make the

environment safer, partnering with transportation agencies to develop resources for infrastructure improvement, and working with law enforcement to decrease speed around schools and change driver behaviors.

A community taskforce will be created in each district to provide oversight and to plan ways to sustain activities in future years. If you are interested in helping to promote Safe Routes to School in one of these communities and willing to serve on a taskforce, please contact [HHSA](#) Public Health Prevention and Planning Unit at 472-2610.