Safe Routes to School helps more kids walk and bicycle to school more often through infrastructure improvements, education and promotional activities. Walking and bicycling to school helps families stay active and healthy and kids arrive to school focused and ready to learn.

- In the first three years of SHIP, 215 schools serving 143,000 students created Safe Routes to School programs.

**Walking is the new way to roll**

Like many neighborhood schools in Rochester, Elton Hills Elementary enrolls many students who don't ride the bus. They live too close to be eligible for free transportation. Three years ago, a group of parents considered the situation and decided to set the wheels in motion for a new way of getting to school that didn’t involve wheels at all. Kids could walk, following designated routes, with adults supervising for safety. All aboard, the organizers invited the Elton Hills community to join the walking school bus.

Principal Paul Ehling explains, “The premise of a walking school bus is that the kids are walking, getting more exercise. And you have less car traffic around the school. It’s good for everybody.” Parent volunteers sign up for morning or afternoon shifts, and a few high school students help, too, which lets them earn community service credits.

Jane Dahlen, the current walking school bus coordinator, agrees and notes, “For me, I think it’s a good example for children that exercise should be part of their daily routine. It doesn't have to be something you have to do at the gym and fit in. We're showing you can get exercise by walking to school, walking to work, doing basic routines. By making it a part of an everyday experience, I think it's easier to stick to it.”

Now that the walking school bus has logged hundreds of miles in all seasons, what advice do the organizers have for other parents at other schools? Sarah, a mom of an Elton Hills first grader, says, “You need to volunteer. You need to get out there with them. It’s a good way for the parents to get to know the other kids.”

Dahlen adds, “I walk at least two miles every morning to get the kids to school. It’s great exercise, but I also think it’s much more than just physical activity. Kids talk more when they’re moving, and this is a great way to bond with your kids. It takes a village, a neighborhood, a community to get these kids together.”

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The Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) works to improve health through better nutrition, increased physical activity and decreased commercial tobacco use and exposure. Find out more at www.health.state.mn.us/ship

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