



Bringing Safe Routes to Inner-City Chicago Schools

An Active Living Resource Center "City-Safe Routes to School" Workshop

Walking to school is not supposed to be dangerous. For the students at Ames Middle School in Chicago and four nearby elementary schools, it is. Students have to dodge heavy truck traffic from a factory and impatient neighborhood drivers and pass adult bookstores and liquor stores.

The Logan Square community was already working to make it safer for students to walk to school: The [Logan Square Neighborhood Association](#), a grassroots community organization, was working with administrators at Ames and the elementary schools. Parents, as part of parent patrols trained by the Chicago police department, stood on corners and driveways around the schools to help students cross the streets safely every morning and afternoon.

Parents also led walking school buses, established under the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) *Active Living by Design* project in [Chicago](#), which the Logan Square Neighborhood Association was managing. Parents, trained by the Chicago police department, collected children at "stops" along the route to school and walked them there, and then home again after school.

A Build and Ride program at Ames, started under another RWJF program, the *After School Project*, included teaching middle and high school students to build bikes and ride them safely. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association co-sponsored this program with the [Chicagoland Bicycle Federation](#).

The Logan Square Neighborhood Association was also working to promote physical activity and health in the neighborhood. This included activities to increase knowledge about and access to healthy foods through RWJF's *Healthy Eating by Design* program.

Despite all of this community activity, getting to school safely was still a problem. "We needed to enhance our knowledge about Safe Routes to School in a broad sense," said Lucy Gomez-Feliciano, the health organizer at the Logan Square Neighborhood Association.

Identifying Problems, Priorities and Solutions

On November 30, 2006, about 30 community members came together at an *Active Living Resource Center* workshop to find ways to make it safer for children to walk to neighborhood schools. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association and the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation coordinated the workshop. Staff from the *Active Living Resource Center* led the workshop, part of its City-Safe Routes to School Program.

During the three-hour workshop, parents, school staff and community members noted the obstacles they had seen to children walking to school. Representatives of organizations such as the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, School Safety Council, Chicago Metro Area Planning and the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago's Children explained how their organizations could help.

"The workshop really helped us understand all of the components of helping our children get to and from school safely," said Gomez-Feliciano. "Before the workshop, if we didn't see a street sign, we didn't know what to do to get one. Now we know how we can work with city departments, key players in children's safety."

During the last part of the workshop, participants matched programs and other community assets to existing problems. The asset mapping and problem-solving process highlighted many problems-and many existing programs, resources and potential solutions. Participants identified three priority problems to be addressed:

- Heavy truck traffic near the school.
- The lack of respect for parent patrols, with impatient drivers driving too fast or hurling verbal abuse as parents were trying to help children cross streets.
- Adult bookstores and liquor stores in the neighborhood.

In the face of problems like gangs, drugs and guns, traffic problems often got overshadowed.

"The workshop put up front and into everybody's eyes that traffic is a big part of the safety problem too," said Melody Geraci, who coordinated the workshop along with Gomez-Feliciano. Geraci is the City-Safe Routes to School project coordinator for the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation.

"The workshop put everyone in one room to acknowledge and formally document the problems that the neighborhood kids are facing every day as they try to make their way to school," said Sharon Z. Roerty, director of the *Active Living Resource Center*. "We talked about urgent and critical needs and we talked about the will to commit to action."

Staff from the *Active Living Resource Center* recommended focusing on:

- Controlling truck traffic.
- Adding school zone crosswalks and signs.
- Making better and safer pedestrian connections between Ames and McCauliffe (an elementary school across the road from Ames).
- Creating greater awareness of and respect for parent patrols and other safety measures.

Participants made some initial commitments to taking action. And the Logan Square Neighborhood Association committed to spearheading the effort.

The Community Takes Action

After the workshop, Gomez-Feliciano and a representative from the Chicago police department developed a community assessment report with recommendations based on the workshop and discussions with school administrators and parents. They gave the report to the commander of the local police district and the commissioner of the transportation department.

As a result of this work:

- The Chicago Department of Transportation included one neighborhood school (Mozart Elementary School) in its Safe Routes to School proposal to the state.
- The city was considering installing a traffic light at a dangerous intersection.

Gomez-Feliciano also visited the owner of a family-owned manufacturing company located across from Ames. He agreed to allow employees who have children in neighborhood schools to serve on the parent patrol. Each parent takes 20 minutes in the morning or the afternoon, on company time, to help children walk safely near the factory.

One of the four neighboring schools, McCutcheon Elementary School, participated in Mayor Daley's Safe Routes Ambassadors program after the workshop. Students who complete the program became Safe Routes Ambassadors, teaching other children about safe traffic behavior and the benefits of walking and bicycling.

In September 2007, staff from the *Active Living Resource Center* went back to Ames to conduct a workshop to help the community complete its School Travel Plan, required for the application for federal Safe Routes to School funding.