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School Walking Programs Benefit Montana Students and Teachers

Walking to school is certainly a proud Montana tradition. We've all heard stories about how far our forefathers had to walk and how high the snowdrifts were back then. Unfortunately, like youngsters all across the US, Montana students rarely get to and from school under their own power anymore.

"Thirty years ago, most students who lived near a school walked or rode their bikes year round," explains Cathy Costakis, Physical Activity Coordinator with Montana's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program (www.montanapna.org). "As families began driving children to school, traffic congestion and safety issues became problems in school zones and children missed out on a natural way to get a daily dose of outdoor activity. The good news for students and teachers is that Montana schools are using creative programs to encourage walking before, during, and after the school day."

For several years, Montanans have joined millions around the world in celebrating International Walk to School Day on the first Wednesday in October. Seventeen schools - from Billings to Vaughn - have registered their 2009 events online at www.walktoschool.org/. On October 7th, thousands of Montana families will again reap the old-fashioned benefits of using their legs for school transportation.

"Walking or biking to school is really a win-win-win situation," says Costakis. "First, there are serious health benefits. Kids, and the adults who accompany them, get the physical activity they need for optimal health and well-being. Secondly, there are academic benefits because children who are fit and healthy are ready to learn. And, finally, there are environmental benefits. When more kids get to school under their own power, it reduces traffic and vehicle emissions, especially in school zones."

According to Costakis, there are many different types of successful walking programs across Big Sky country. Here are three examples:

- **Lavina School (K-12):** For four years, teachers and students have walked together for 15-20 minutes every day of the school year, mostly outside on the track. Walking has become so routine that once when they tried to skip it, the kids said "We can't go to class yet, we're not awake, we have to go walk."
- **Helena, Jefferson Elementary:** *Walk-to-School Day* celebrations have been going on here for nine years. Many community volunteers and elected officials join the fun, which includes a free breakfast for all the participants, donated helmets for any children using wheels, and safety demonstrations.
- **Fort Peck Community College Wellness Center:** *Walk-a-Mile-for-a-Backpack* has become an annual event in Brockton, Fraser, and Poplar, thanks to the Wellness Center and donations from local programs. This year in August, 375 children received backpacks filled with school supplies.

"This is an important time of year for all Montana drivers to focus on traffic safety around schools," notes Costakis. "If you are driving, pay attention to cross walks and crossing guards. Better still, leave the car at home and walk your children, grandkids, or neighborhood friends to and from school."

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