



## Case Study: GREATER WASHINGTON DC REGION Parent-driven Safe Routes to School programs

The Vienna-area elementary schools, part of Fairfax County Public Schools, have started their own walking and bicycling renaissance. A Bike Train started at one school and a Walking Wednesday program at another. The result is a spring Bike/Walk Challenge with five schools participating in 2012 and all seven Vienna-area elementary schools and a middle school participating in International Walk to School Day in September 2012. Schools have more students walking and bicycling to school every day and have shown reduced cars in kiss-and-ride.

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### Parents Make a Difference

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In 2009, Jeff Anderson started Wolfie's Bike Train at Wolftrap Elementary school with his children and their friends, partially inspired by Bike to Work Day in May that year. While he regularly rides with his own children, Jeff set up a Facebook page and invited anyone to ride with them once a month. Wolfie's Bike Train started with 10-kids and now attracts 70-80 bicyclists on their monthly rides. The bike train has never missed a month and has ridden in temperatures ranging from a balmy 85F to a downright freezing 19F. Special guest have joined the bike train including county department of transportation employees, international bike racers, local high school bike racers and Santa joins in December.

Furthermore, Jeff has noticed that once students get comfortable bicycling, they start to ride to school on their own. This fosters independence and incorporates physical activity into daily routine. Their efforts have been recognized nationally, with a segment about the Wolftrap Bike Train appearing on [Nickelodeon's Worldwide Day of Play](#) in the fall of 2012.

Down the road at Vienna Elementary, parent Sean McCall took a slightly different approach and started a Walking Wednesday program in 2011. A local foundation grant was used to kick-start the program. Three parent volunteers send flyers home in students' folders reminding them to walk or bike to school on Wednesday. The parents then meet at the school where the janitor sets up a table. Students who walk receive a small foot token to be added to key chains on their backpacks. On special occasions such as St. Patrick's Day or Valentine's Day, the students receive special reflectors. Parents who walk or bicycle with their students sip coffee donated by a local coffee shop, Caffé Amouri.

In the spring of 2009, three of the Vienna schools co-sponsored a Bike/Walk Challenge week, in which Wolftrap and Vienna both participated. In the spring of 2011, the Bike/Walk Challenge finally achieved critical mass across all the Vienna-area schools and culminated with almost 1,500 kids walking or bicycling on Friday, the final day of the challenge. Schools report the

number of walkers and bicyclists into the local newspaper, the Vienna Patch. The Vienna Patch posts the numbers each day and reports the official tally. At the end of the week, trophies are awarded. The Bike Cup trophy is awarded for the highest percentage of bicyclists and the Challenge Cup for the biggest improvement from the previous year. Special recognition is given to Rookie of the Year, the school that did not participate in the previous year but has a largest percentage of participants

The excitement in Vienna grew in fall of 2012 with all seven Vienna-area elementary schools participating in International Walk to School Day at the beginning of October. All schools plan to participate in the spring 2013 Bike/Walk Challenge.

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## Results

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Walking Wednesday has achieved as many as half the students in the school walking or bicycling and 100 bikes in the racks. The success of Walking Wednesday has started to change the culture. The principal counted less than 25 cars in kiss-and-ride on a Thursday when there are usually 70. Twenty bikes are regularly parked in the racks when last year there were five or six. Teachers report students who walk and bicycle to school are more focused during the day. According to travel surveys, walkers and bicyclists have increased from 12 percent in the fall of 2011 to 31 percent the following fall.

At Vienna Elementary School, the principals and PTA now integrate Walking Wednesday into event planning. Morning meetings are scheduled Wednesday mornings and parents are encouraged to walk or bicycle.

The Walking Wednesday program is contagious, as Marshall Road Elementary School has started one in fall 2012 and Wolftrap has complemented the bike train with its own Walking Wednesday program. Flint Hill, another school in the area regularly promotes International Walk to School Day and National Bike to School Day.

Seeing the success in Vienna, the parents in the nearby community of Reston recognize the leadership in Vienna and are starting more formal Safe Routes to School efforts.

Finally, with the success of Wolfie's Bike Train, Jeff began to work with the school system to change policy. When the initiative started, it was the principal's decision whether or not to allow bicycling. Jeff lead an effort to change district wide policy and it is now the parent's choice, regardless of principal opinion, on how their student travels to school.

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## Keys to Success

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Both Wolftrap and Vienna Elementary Schools involved their principals and PTAs early in their process. Principals, school board members and local elected officials have ridden with the Bike Train and walked with students. Bike racks have been provided at no cost by the school system and a local bike shop has donated temporary racks during the Bike/Walk Challenge week.

Both programs have also reached out to community partners. Mini-grant funding from community foundations and the Virginia Safe Routes to School program have been used to buy incentives or host bike rodeos. Caffé Amouri is a great community partner donating coffee each week. Involving the local newspaper, the Vienna Patch gave the Bike/Walk Challenge an impartial entity to report numbers, community was able to track the progress and students saw themselves in the newspaper.

The Vienna-area parents are willing to both recruit other schools and give advice and share expertise with new schools that want to start a Safe Routes to School program. This informal network proved invaluable. For example, a new school wanted to start a bike train but was nervous about starting. To help, Jeff joined the bike train the first time and shared his expertise. As each new school has joined the movement, the parents have shared their knowledge. The parents have also met a few times to discuss their programs, how to recruit new schools and how to continue their success.

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## Next Steps

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Both Sean and Jeff have become active in local transportation initiatives. Vienna Elementary School is located in the Town of Vienna. Sean has been working with the Town to improve pedestrian infrastructure. He has reached out to other Safe Routes to School programs to join the effort for sidewalks and safe intersection crossings throughout the Town. He notes that almost every child walks or bicycles for part of their trip to school and should be safe whether the destination is the school building or a bus stop.

Jeff is the Safe Routes to School point person for the Fairfax Advocates for Better Bicycling and on the Fairfax County Trails & Sidewalks Committee. He is also on the Fairfax County Public Schools Safe Routes to School Working Group. The Working Group recently supported a grant application for a full-time Safe Route to School coordinator for the district.

The spring of 2013 will be the first time all seven Vienna-area schools participate in the Bike/Walk Challenge. The success of the Challenge, the programs at the individual schools, and the parent network are being used as a model for the school district and hopefully for the new district-wide coordinator.

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## Contact

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