

Franklin Park students, staff enjoy safe walk to school

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Sha'tirra Lewis is a parent-pickup kid, but on Wednesday, the Franklin Park Elementary School fourth grader took a different route — and mode of transportation.

For the first time ever, the 10-year-old walked to school, heel-toeing her way along Edison Avenue.

And she did it with a whistle around her neck, a flashing red heart clipped to her backpack and alongside about 125 others who came out in support of International Walk to School Day.

The initiative, now in its 19th year, encourages students to make the trek to school with the help of staff, parents and volunteers from the community. Celebrated each October, Walk to School Day pushes the health, environmental and community perks of walking to school, as well as advocating that safer pathways be built around schools.

And that's a priority for Franklin Park, said Jasmin Riley, the school's P.E. coach.

"We have a big walking base, and we want to make sure that we have sidewalks, crosswalks, and that the students know the proper ways to walk and use the crosswalks, the sidewalks and the crossing guards," Riley said.

In the weeks leading up to the organized walk, Riley taught the students about bike and pedestrian safety, as well as important tips for walking to school. And Wednesday's organized walk, a second for the school, was a good way for students to put what they have learned into action.

The STARS Complex was the starting point for the early morning walk, with students like Lewis escorted along the quarter-mile trek by school staff, parents and community volunteers.

They whistled, made noise and attracted a lot of attention, with local first responders, like the Fort Myers police and fire departments, driving alongside the parade of children.

"It's fun," Lewis said, holding onto the straps of her backpack. "There's a lot of policemen and firemen, and I like the lights."

But as all the adults present would say, safety was the focus.

Although most of its students live within a 5-mile distance, walkers have had a rough time getting to school, said Principal Bethany Quisenberry.

Some have to travel along roads used as throughways for commuters and, often, their routes are along poorly lit, overgrown, sunken and crumbling pathways.

The problems only continued once they stepped onto campus, as, up until May, the school didn't have a bike lane or sidewalk for children to use, forcing the kids to walk through a four-lane parking lot to get to the schoolhouse.

This was the result of a campus upgrade, which dates back about 20 years to when the school system moved the main entrance from Ford Street to Edison Avenue.

Seeing a need for improvement, Ann Pierce of **Streets Alive of SWFL** approached the school and pitched the idea of doing a walking audit of the school community. The school took the group up on its offer, and, in January, a team of 11 people brought their cameras and notebooks on a tour of the school's nearby streets.

They came across faded pedestrian crosswalks, crumbling and cracked sidewalks, roads with no safe walking spaces, and overgrown shrubs and trees that pushed pedestrians into the roadway.

Their findings — as well as recommendations on how to fix those problems — were compiled into a 51-page document and shared with the city's Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Council. This kicked off a series of improvements for not only the students, but other residents of the Dunbar community.

"It's not just our students, it's the neighborhood. This is a walking neighborhood," said Principal Quisenberry.

The school district listened, installing a sidewalk that connects the pathway just outside campus with the front door of the schoolhouse. Since then, Quisenberry has seen an increase in the amount of kids walking to school — and those riding their bikes.

That also can be attributed to the work done recently by the city. Ramps that are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act were added to the sidewalks on Edison Avenue, a crosswalk in front of the school is being repainted, and signs, provided by the school system, have been installed on the right of ways near the school, said Richard Moulton, the interim director of Public Works.

But there's more work that needs to be done, like the creation of a slow zone along Edison Avenue, and the addition of at least one more crossing guard for the school children.

"We have a lot of students that go toward Edison and then we also have a lot of students who go toward Henderson, and what I've done with our staff is we have three staff members assigned to walkers," Quisenberry said. These staff members walk students off campus and along Edison so that "they're safe."

This is beyond the school's responsibilities, but Quisenberry said student safety is very important to us.

And so are events like Walk to School Day.

“We’re lucky as a school. Being a neighborhood school means that at least there are sidewalks,” she said. “There are many schools right now in Lehigh, in Cape Coral, in south Fort Myers that, because of where the school was built, there’s no sidewalks going to the school. Having these types of events builds that awareness for them as well.”