

Success Stories

CA4Health: Partnerships Provide Safe Routes to Merced County Students

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Summary

CA4Health works with rural California counties to implement local changes that will create healthier communities. In an effort to promote physical activity and active transportation, Merced County Department of Public Health partnered with Winton School District, the Merced Bicycle Coalition, and Central California Regional Obesity Program to promote walking and bicycling among students at three elementary schools in the community of Winton. This led to the passage of a district wide Safe Routes to School policy affecting nearly 1900 students.

Challenge

In the unincorporated community of Winton, inadequate infrastructure and high crime rates discourage residents from engaging in physical activity, contributing to high rates of obesity among adults and children. Winton School District is an integral part of the community of Winton, with three elementary schools and one middle school. According to the most recent California Physical Fitness Test, over 61% of 5th graders in Winton School District need improvement or are considered high risk in the area of body composition based on body mass index. Surveys distributed to parents in Winton School District show crime, safety of intersections, and speed of drivers as top reasons parents do not allow children to walk or bike to school. Surveys also demonstrate less than 1% of students arrive by bike and less than 25% walk in the morning.

Solution

Events such as bike rodeos and safety assemblies were held to engage parents and students, increase awareness of the benefits of walking and bicycling, and teach bicycling skills and safety. In collaboration with the Local Government Commission, walk and bike assessments were held to identify issues and gather community feedback. The assessments were focused near schools and included participation from a member of the Board of Supervisors, the superintendent of Winton School District, and representatives from county departments, including Public Health, Public Works, and Planning. Billboards were also posted near schools in English and Spanish with a message to “drive slowly near schools.”



Your Involvement is Key
CA4Health, the Public Health Institute's Community Transformation Grant, works with the counties in California whose population is less than 500,000.

For more information and to get involved please visit us at www.CA4Health.org.

Results

The encouragement activities, walk and bike assessments, and media campaign led to a shift in attitude among students, parents, and district staff around walking and bicycling. Teachers and principals began planning their own programs, and a motivated group of teachers formed a “Winton Walkers” club at one elementary school. In December 2013, the Winton School District school board voted unanimously to pass a Safe Routes to School policy for the district. The comprehensive policy acknowledges district support for safe and active transportation. The policy also requires traffic safety education and training for students and teachers; supports creation of walking school bus and bicycle trains; promotes events encouraging walking and bicycling; and prohibits idling.

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"The success in Winton was a result of multiple partners working together for the good of the community including the school district, parents, students, non-profits and government agencies."

- Randall Heller, Superintendent of Winton School District

Future Directions

Merced County Public Health and partners will continue to support Winton School District as they begin to implement the Safe Routes to School policy. In the upcoming year, the partners will focus on training for teachers on strategies to integrate bicycle and pedestrian education into the classroom for 4th and 5th graders. Partners such as CCROPP will continue to promote the Walking School Bus, and planning is underway for more encouragement events, including the district's first participation in "Bike to School" month. In the future, partners will work with the district to explore adding a joint use provision to the Safe Routes to School policy.

