

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly

International Walk to School Day is October 5th

By Mary Smith

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) Board member Mary Smith has been involved with wellness promotion in Polk County since 2004.. Mary is the Active Routes to Schools Coordinator for the Rutherford Polk McDowell District Health Department

One of the health priorities identified by the Polk County Community Health Assessment in 2015 was to increase opportunities for active living. In fact, a 2012 NC Statewide health survey reported 16.5% of children engage in no or less than one hour of physically active play daily. Considering this data, one of the goals adopted by Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly in the 2016 action plan is to increase the number of programs that encourage walking or bicycling to or at school. Saluda and Tryon Elementary schools in Polk County are participating in International Walk to School Day annually. Each October, our students join millions of children, parents, teachers and community leaders across the globe walking to school to celebrate International Walk to School Day.

These events raise awareness of the need to create safer routes for walking and bicycling and emphasize the importance of issues such as increasing physical activity among children, pedestrian safety, traffic congestion and concern for the environment.

America is at a crossroads. In one direction, walking in our communities is getting harder and harder, and it happens less and less. Most trips that were once made by walking and bicycling have been replaced by automobile travel. Unsafe street crossings, speeding motorists, and a lack of sidewalks limit many children's ability to walk or bicycle in their own neighborhoods.

These unwalkable environments force children to play inside, often in front of the television or computer. Meanwhile, the number of

overweight children is growing at an alarming rate, putting them at risk for life-long health problems.

In the other direction, communities, including Polk County are building sidewalks, trails and pathways, safe street crossings and plentiful destinations within walking distance - all to encourage us to get out and walk again.

What if no students live close enough to walk or the route is not safe? Schools have found creative ways to deal with those issues such as:

- Walking (or Wellness) Wednesdays that establish at least one day a month for everyone to walk to school or schedule a weekly walk at or around the school.
- Using pedometers (devices that count steps) or walking laps around the school to track the distances students walk and plot mileage on a map of North Carolina to see how long it takes the school to walk across the state.
- Looking for a remote meeting point where groups can park, meet and walk the remainder of the route together to the school.

For detailed information on how to plan a walk to school day event or school walking program, check out walkbiketoschool.org. or contact Mary Smith, the local Active Routes to School Coordinator at the Rutherford Polk McDowell Health Department at 828-460-7328.

Active Routes to School is a grant program funded by the North Carolina Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School Program in Partnership with the North Carolina Division of Public Health. Active Routes to School Regional Coordinators help to implement Safe Routes to School strategies through local health departments across North Carolina.

Safe Routes to School Programs use the 5 “E’s”:

- Education about safe driving near walkers and bicyclists.
- Encouragement strategies generate excitement about walking and bicycling safely to school.
- Enforcement: Enforcement activities can help to change unsafe behaviors of drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians.
- Engineering to address the built environment with tools that can be used to create safe places to walk or bike
- Evaluation to determine if the aims of the strategies are being met and to assure that resources are directed toward efforts that show the greatest likelihood of success.

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) is a group of 80+ community members, leaders and health professionals, all working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. We welcome any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place for all. For more information and a list of our 2016 meeting dates, please visit our website at www.polkfitfreshandfriendly.org.

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