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Kids hit the streets for Walk and Roll To School Day



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Students, parents and teachers head for Sheppard Elementary School, walking along West Avenue in Roseland as part of International Walk to School Day Wednesday.

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Roseland Elementary School fourth-grader Maria Ponce found strength in numbers Wednesday morning when she convinced her mom to let her forgo the car ride and instead walk to school.

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Ponce met up with fellow Roseland students at a so-called walking bus stop Wednesday morning and walked with an adult to the Sebastopol Road campus

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to mark international Walk and Roll to School Day.

"She's scared that a car might run over us," Ponce said. "But when we met over there, there was a lot of kids so she said it was OK."

There were a lot of people out walking Wednesday thanks in part to the 13th annual event in which students from more than 50 schools across Sonoma County said "No thanks" to a lift from mom or dad. Last year, 33 schools took part.

"It's kind of exploded this year," said Beth Dadko, an event coordinator with Safe Kids Sonoma County. "The whole point is to get people out there to try it, to get people to see that it's not that hard, they can do it."

Organizers say the goal of Walk and Roll to School Day is multifaceted: reduce traffic and carbon emissions, save money on gas and encourage exercise among students.

"I think health-wise, what we want to talk about is starting healthy habits while they are young," said Julie Brandt, principal at Cloverdale's Washington School.

Parents and volunteers organized walking school buses, where adults lead a small group of younger students on a walk to school where they were met in some cases by balloons, Frisbees, pencils, activity books and stickers.

For older students used to being dropped off and picked up, changing habits can be a little trickier, said Healdsburg Junior High science teacher Kathy Alexander.

"They are not really going to do something for a Frisbee," she said. "To me, eighth-graders are usually almost late. It's an attitude of 'Just drop me off.' To them, it's not a cool thing. We have to make it a little bit cool to walk."

To that end, Alexander impressed upon students the science behind car trips and carbon emissions — and offered extra credit.

Something is working, Alexander said. Every second Wednesday of the month students are asked not to rely on a single passenger car trip to get to school.

"The student council voted to keep it going," she said.

Hahn Elementary School parent Dia Jenkins said she presses the issue of independence to sell the idea to her second- and fourth-grade children.

"It's a good way to get the brain in gear, see your neighborhood. It instills self reliance," she said. "My fourth-grader is way more excited about getting his own self to school than my second-grader."

Roseland Elementary second-grader Michael Cooke said he typically takes the bus to school but was inspired by Wednesday's early morning stroll to try to make it a habit.

"I'll do it again," he said.

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