

Bear Creek Active and Safe Routes to School Program

February 23, 2010

Webinar Transcript



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This transcript covers the second half of a webinar held on Tuesday Feb. 23, 2010. The Green Communities Active and Safe Routes to School Program, which was described in the first half of that webinar, is covered in a separate transcript.

Additional materials about Bear Creek's Safe Routes to School Program can be found at <http://www.toolsofchange.com/en/case-studies/detail/634/>

Jay Kassirer: Kent Cruger has been a teacher, Assistant Principal, and Principal in Boulder Valley School District for the past 14 years. This is his sixth year as the Principal of Bear Creek Elementary School. Joining him today is Vivian Kennedy, parent of two former Bear Creek students and one current Bear Creek Student. Vivian was the coordinator of the Bear Creek Walk to School Program who truly took their program to a whole new level. It's won awards in the States for the shift in walking and cycling over the time that they've been doing this program. Please join me in welcoming Kent and Vivian.

Kent Cruger: Good morning, or good afternoon, I'm Kent Cruger and excited to be a part of this today. I think I'll start just by talking about the students because what we really found through our program is that it really was really the kids who took it to the next level and that made it so exciting for us.

Just a little bit about Bear Creek Elementary School. We're in Boulder, Colorado. We have a school of about 350 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. It's a beautiful part of the United States. That's a picture of Bear Creek Elementary School under the clouds.

It's a very active community, and we are a very busy school, so this is not the only thing we do. We have lots of before and after school activities, and there's an expectation from the community that we do reading programs, math programs ... lots of things before and after school. But there is time and there is the ability to have a successful Walk to School Program, even in the face of lots of things that the school does. I want to start by asking how many people remember walking to school primarily when they were growing up or when they were a child?

I can see that lots of people walked to school. On this informal survey, a large percentage! But we don't have that anymore. I think people have lots of fond memories and lots of community building around walking to school and the benefits of walking to school.

That motivates us to say, why can't we do that for the next generation?

I'm going to go through some slides of people who are involved in our program. I want to say caveat here that even though there are a lot of people involved, I don't believe that you need to get all the people involved at the very beginning in order to make it a successful program.

I don't want you to look through the next few slides or listen and say, boy, if we don't have that in place, we can't do it - because I think it was the power of a few people who were passionate about this, who really started it on their own, and then it was a snowball of groups and people that said "that looks like fun and that looks like something that will be beneficial to our children."

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It just kept growing and growing so don't be scared off by how many people were a part of our program. It came and grew by leaps and bounds based on one person starting, which was Jim Cornish, a parent who said, "we should do this", and just bulldozed his way in and said we're going to get this going. Then, Vivian Kennedy, who's with me here today, said, in a different very organized way, here's how we can take it to the next level. We had a district person, Landon Hilliard, who also was just passionate and a champion for us at the district level.

Don't fret if you don't have all these people in place, but the team eventually became students, the principal, school secretaries, really, everyone in the community doing their part to make our program work. The most important part and the part that just got us fired up and excited were the kids who were a part of the program because whatever we asked of them, they usually took it to another level. Students were excited, they had energy, and they became leaders in the program. Things like older students who were in Girl Scouts saying, we're gonna take on this Walking School bus route ourselves and help promote it, and we'll carry balloons, and we'll also get horns and get things going to really build excitement.

Perhaps we don't have poor weather compared to some areas of Canada, but we have some cold weather, we have some wind, we have some hills, and there are some tough days to actually walk to school. I want to ask you - when the weather got really bad - who

thinks it was the kids who said, “mom, I gotta get in the car today because it's minus 5 degrees”? Who thinks it was the adults who said, “come on, get in the car, it's too cold to get to school?”

You're exactly right– I guess it shouldn't have been a shock to us, but what was really exciting about what happened was that kids literally would not get in the car. We had this program going and had the tracking mechanism, and kids said I want to do it every day, the kids would say, “No. I can make it to school, it's not too cold.” Even when grandparents came to visit –we have some big hills to get to school - the kids said to the grandparents, “you can walk; you can make it”, and convinced their grandparents to walk to school with them.

This is a picture of one of the students who is very inspired and inspirational to us. The kids really did show us what was possible and took things to another level. So for example, we used to not allow skateboarding to school. I'm not sure why. Maybe people thought it was too dangerous, but as we were getting moving on this, we had some kids who loved to skateboard, and they wrote me a persuasive essay that then became a petition saying they would like to skateboard to school and here's what we're gonna do in terms of safety to make sure it works. I passed it. I said, okay, you know what, I think we're gonna try this out and see if it works.

One of the comments from our school secretary - at 8:20 a.m. all of a sudden it was like little ants coming from all over. It was a totally different picture than we used to have. It used to be cars coming from all over, and all of a sudden it became little kids emerging from everywhere. It really started to build a sense of community about, boy, there's a lot more kids out there, and even to the point where we had some parents of prospective students who would be coming to school the next year, who stopped kids as they were in big groups and said, what school are you going to?

There was a story of one parent who had to work in the morning, a single parent, and the other adults said here's how we do it. This is a walking school bus, and the father said, I could actually put my kid on the walking school bus and someone would take them to school? They said yeah, and he said, wow, that is a great way for the community to help me out. So people met each other, people helped out each other. The kids also inspired the staff, and there were teachers and other staff members who would never walk to school, even living very close to the school, and when you see

kindergarten, 5 and 6 year olds walking to school, going up hills and having no problem, as a staff member, you say, boy, if they can do it, certainly we can do it.

The thing about the staff that was also interesting is if you taught for a long time, and we have a very experienced staff – I'm fortunate that they just jumped right aboard the enthusiasm, but it also helped us because if you teach the same grade level for a lot of years in a row, or you're doing the same thing, people are always looking for something to just shake things up, make it interesting, and make it fun. I think, again, that's what the kids did for us is they made it fun and they made it something new that we did that had never happened before.

That's me in the middle, this is our school, and this is the beautiful background that we have, but this is a picture of our staff because we wound up winning the award for the school who had the most participating in the Bolder Boulder, which is a 10K running/walking event. So again, the kids changed our habits where people became walkers to school, walkers in their life, runners, and we became a more healthy staff. Teachers are notorious, at least in the States, for taking care of everybody, doing everything for their students and for families, but sometimes leaving their personal health on the back burner, so it really got us going.

We had lots and lots of parent volunteers, and as we got going more parents got involved and just wanted to be a part of the community effort. We also are fortunate to have very strong district support. I mentioned Landon Hilliard, but also our superintendent, our School Board. There is a healthy lifestyle in the whole town of Boulder, but certainly it was something that was promoted and recognized by our school district.

These are just some of the many local groups. When you go to a place and say, here's what we need it for... people remember walking to school, and when we say we want kids being driven less, walking more, and being healthy, it was not difficult to get people to buy into this is something that we can support. I don't think it has to be done this way, but this is just kind of how our Walk to School Program went from the start, to something enormous. It started in 2006 with, kind of, one day, International Walk to School Day, and I think that got us going in terms of, boy, people love this and they were excited about it.

The next year, we moved more to a one day a week – I saw on the other program, you know, Wednesday, Walk to School Day. At the end of that year, something that happened was, Jim Cornish, who ran the program, gave some pretty big awards for kids who really made efforts and who tracked their results day-to-day at the end-of-the-year assembly. It was unexpected, and one of the things that I think is important is throwing in random things that kids are not expecting gets great results. We had kids who won a bike at the end of the year and won an iPod.

This was an awards assembly close to the end of the year, within days afterwards, kids were saying, okay, I'm going for it next year; I want to win a bike and be a part of this program. Now, when we got to the next year, the thing we realized was if you worry about, you know, do you give bikes to every child who participated next year? We didn't, but we realized it was really about recognition. Awards are not really necessary. Kids just want to be recognized and be a part of the fun that all their friends are in. In 2008/2009 it really became a part of what we all do on a regular basis. Habits were formed and kids just started doing it, and adults, on a regular basis.

As was mentioned earlier, the tracking forms were not overly expensive. We used paper forms rather than something on the computer because families told us it's easy to put this up on the refrigerator, mark it down, and turn it in once a month. Not daily, but once a month. At the same time, in the classrooms, we had a poster to show how kids would get to school, and they would take pins and put it on the way they got to school on a daily basis.

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It only took ten seconds for each kid to come up and show whether they walked, whether they biked, or whether they carpooled. It showed daily to kids how many kids were biking or walking, and so it wasn't very expensive to track the trips, but it made a difference to kids. They wanted to know that we were recognizing how often they came to school by a method other than by car. Here's my next question, since we have lots of folks from Canada and I'm going to talk about the Cruger Cup, how many of you recognize what that cup is modeled after, what professional sport that we took that from?

We're getting 13, 14, 15 responses of, yes, we know. So obviously, the Stanley Cup. What happened was, we had a little problem because when we started to say to children, okay, the goal of the Cruger Cup is going to be to walk to school, bike, or carpool every day of the school year. We set the goal pretty high of every single day you've got to make it that way, and if you do, you were in the Cruger Cup. Now, only probably a couple kids will be able to do, but let's see if we can do it, if some kids can do it. It turns out, out of 360 students, over 100 students got to school every single day without using a car, other than a carpool, and that was pretty unbelievable.

The problem was, as we went through the year, we told them they were gonna earn the Cruger Cup, but we never told them what it was. I thought, boy, that's a monumental thing that they did, how am I – even if, you know, it cost \$1.00, \$5.00 each, we can't afford that, so what we came up with was something big and we awarded it at the end of the year and showed a kindergarten student holding this - and this is the size of about a kindergarten student - and they each get to take it home during the following school year, so they're doing it right now, and get to take a picture of them with the Cruger Cup.

Sometimes, kids will be eating their breakfast out of it, they'll be doing funny things with it, and we posted that in the school. All the kids - we've gotten through two-thirds of the kids now - have been able to take it home for a week. Some kids have taken it to the top of a ski mountain. Whatever they do with it, it's pretty funny. It's a big award, but it didn't cost too much.

The things that we found out that kids liked were competitions and goal setting, so we had two big things. One was the Cruger Cup (which was the idea of can you make it every day to school in a car-free commute kind of way.)

The other thing we did was the Tour de French. We had a teacher named Jay French who lived 17 miles from school, and he started biking to school during one of the first years, so we named an event after him called the Tour de French. Even if students didn't do it every day, every trip counted and we tallied up the monthly sheets and gave awards to the class, and also to individual kids based on how many trips they made or how many miles they did.

We also had the Rookie Rider Award for a kid who had never done any cycling before and then participated. And the Least Deterred Award; we heard stories of kids who were scootering to school in 8 inches of snow, so they got an arm band colored kind of like the Tour de France.

The color of arm band represented a different category, and individual classes won from month to month. We had Most Inspiration Award, the Bear Creek Role Model, Most Consistent, and sometimes teachers would win those awards, and it really, on a monthly basis, got kids inspired– and again, it was just recognition. Other than an arm band and their names on announcements, they didn't get anything else, but they were fired up about being a winner in the Tour de French. The other thing we kept doing was trying to switch things up and keep kids on their toes.

The other presentation had a Golden Shoe Award, which we just periodically awarded to kids and opened up the box and there were little prizes in there. We did a thing in March when things here are still snowy and wintery called March Madness where we encouraged kids to come to school not just walking, but could they skip to school, unicycle to school, or skateboard to school, walk backwards, or – Vivian can – what other things were they doing?

Brushing their teeth while walking, leap frogging to school, all these different things that kids did, and what they'd do is they'd get to school and they'd get to sign their name on the different sheet . A kid would come in and say, “today, I walked backwards to school”, they would write it up, and they'd put their first name on there, and then someone who came in the next day says, oh, I'm going to do this tomorrow. They came up with 40 or 50 different ways to get to school.

I don't know, again, how many people know the March Madness Basketball Tournament that goes on in the United States, College Basketball. We made a bracket of all the teachers and they competed head-to-head for the most creative ways and their most dedicated ways to get to school.

We also did an even called Zero Cars in the Parking Lot, where we said, today, a goal is we're just not going to have any cars in the parking lot. It was funny just to see where you usually have 40, 50 spaces in the parking lot a day where people would drive by and aks “is school not in session?” because there was one day where 99

percent of the parents didn't use a car, one day 96, so one or two cars maybe in the parking lot on those days.

The walking school bus was a very successful way to build safety, build numbers of kids walking together, and build community. We had other events that just kind of came up as we saw a need for it, you know, bike tune-ups and bike fairs when it was really hot or really cold out. We did hot chocolate – just kind of random things that kids would show up and go, “wow, this is great, I wasn't expecting this.” Our results, we think, were pretty remarkable; we changed from about 25 percent of kids walking to school on a regular basis, to consistently getting about 70 percent of our kids to school.

It reduced traffic and congestion; people really noticed that there were less cars on the roads. The safety of the parking lot increased, and students accrued an enormous amount of miles in car-free commutes. We wound up winning a national award in the United States, the James Oberstar Award, named after Congressman Oberstar who is right here, and we were able to travel to Washington D.C. It was just great to see that there's support at the national level as well. This Congressman, every time a bill comes up for new roads is always talking about infrastructure to get kids to be walking to school, rather than by car.

The things that we learned were:

- How important it was to track what the kids are doing; to set goals; to make it possible for everyone to do it.
- For families that lived very far away, we actually had things called Stride and Ride (drive part of the way and then walk the rest) and that's dependant on your child and how much they can do or how much you can do. Although that's not 100 percent walking, we think that that got kids walking a little bit, and maybe getting in that mode, and then they could increase how much they walked.
- Making it into a habit was enormous. One of the things that Vivian did was she sent to our kindergarten parents, something at the end of the school year before they started that said, here's a program at Bear Creek. I think that kindergarten parents just expected that everyone did it, so as they planned their year, they said, well, here's how we have to get to school, we have to walk or bike, so that's going to take this long and we have to work that into our daily schedule. From the very

beginning, that was just how they did it. Again, with other people, other students, it became a habit.

- With kids, that habit didn't stop, and even this year, once they get in the habit of that, they don't need rewards to keep it up because they find that it's a better way to get to school.
- When we went to Washington D.C., we talked to a group from Copenhagen who talked about the amount of biking that goes on there that adults do to work, that everyone does, and they said the main reason why people there bike to work is because it's the easiest way to get to work.

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- It's not that it's environmental, it's not that they do it for altruistic reasons, it's – and they plan stop lights, not for the cars, but for the bikes, so the infrastructure part of making it easier for kids to bike to school, walk to school, are things that happened here, have happened in our district, and have happened in our city where sometimes it's easier, it's quicker to get to school by bike than it is by car. I think that's the end of what I will say formally

Q: Most of what you talked about is about events, awards, and promotions, did you make any infrastructure improvements in and around the school, like bike racks, paths, anything like that?

Vivian Kennedy: There are a few things that we did. First of all, there were some changes in the budget that was allowed for crossing guards. We lost some crossing guards at a key intersection, which was kind of a setback, so Jim Cornish did a lot of work with a parent committee, Kent Cruger, and people from the City to make changes to some of the crosswalks in the immediate area around the school and intersection, and improve the signage, visibility, and basically worked to making sure the cars were slowing down, that kids were more visible, and basically improving the access routes to the school. That also included making improvements to a bridge that was part of a walking path to the school.

We had a fair amount of bike racks, although, they have gotten to the point where they are now, in good weather, overflowing, but there were some – it's funny how little improvements can make a huge difference. There was one small narrow entrance into the area where the bikes could be locked up, and Jim Cornish and a few other dads, took it upon themselves to open up some sections of that area to allow the flow in and out of that bike area to work

better. That kind of thing, coupled with the decrease in car traffic, just makes a huge difference.

Q: Were you involved with a process for educating the community about the fact that there would be more children getting to school actively and that they should watch out for them?

Kent Cruger: I'm not sure about the community outside of Bear Creek, but we did have concerns about safety from parents, and some of the infrastructure changes helped with those concerns, but we also have wildlife concerns that parents have around here. We have mountain lions, actually, and kids are walking when it's at dusk, which is a time when mountain lions are out, so actually, by increasing the number of students who are walking, and walking together, improved the safety of students who were walking to school. The more kids we had out there, the more parents we had out there, the better they felt about safety.

We're working on a program called Blast, which is educating kids about bike safety rules, and ways to be safe biking to school.

Vivian Kennedy: And there were other little things, and again, they don't cost much money, and they can be pretty effective. When we started the walking school bus, we wanted some sort of a unifying theme that was yellow, since school buses are typically yellow, so we have bright neon yellow caps that the kids and parents can wear as they walk to school, which helps them be more visible, and helps them feel like, you know, they're part of a group and it's a lot of fun.

Another thing that we added – kids and parents just decided to do this and it turned out to be a great addition – and that's carrying bells and horns on the walking school bus. That served two purposes. One is to alert kids when the school bus is approaching (You better run out of your house if you're not already on the corner waiting.) But also it can be a way to announce arrival to an upcoming intersection for cars and things like that.

Another thing that we did was to give all kids that were walking to school, especially in the winter when it's cold and it's a little bit discouraging if it's chilly or super windy out, everybody in the school was given a really soft, warm yellow scarf. The yellow theme went along with the walking school bus.

So anytime you're either on the walking school bus, riding your bike, or just walking on your own with your parents or whatever,

you could wear your yellow scarf and you're more visible, you're warm, and it was definitely a unifying theme for this community. Parents and kids were just absolutely thrilled, they could see each other walking to school, it just felt like a real community atmosphere.

Q: How did you fund that?

Vivian Kennedy: This was all part of the Safe Routes to School Grant that was a two-year grant we received as part of the National Safe Routes to School Program that's in the United States.

Q: A walking school bus is really a very simple system, but there's so much effort for the results that you get. Do you have any advice? Is it better to get someone, a very involved parent for example, who's well known in the school, is that better than, for example, an external organization?

Kent Cruger: I think it helps to have both. I've seen that parents in the school, are known, and they know the community, know the kids, and some of our parents did the brunt of the work in terms of all the organizing. But having, at our level, a district person or an outside person help with that and have the experience of knowing "here's what other groups have done" is also key. That person for our district was Landon Hilliard, who was able to say, all right, here's some suggestions, or here are the legal parts of making sure you're covered with how you do your walking school bus. The parents really pulled the major part of organizing it, but having other people that you can go to, to give you support or have experience, was also key.

Vivian Kennedy: And the other thing is that kids, you know, from kindergarten through fifth grade, can walk at different paces, so I think it's important that you have enough parents involved that you have the capability of having parents at the front of the group and the back of the group. Normally, I think you can get a lot of different parents in a neighborhood to pitch in -not necessarily be committed but enough people are involved - that you always have enough of a group.

The other thing is that the parents and students are involved when you're making assessments for what's needed in your community, and this is where you really need to tailor it for your community and your school. You have to put together a team of parents and students, anybody who wants to be involved, and do a walk of your

neighborhood, a walk from all different angles – it's called a walkability survey, figuring out where the problems are, which side of the street would be the side of the street that you should have your walking school bus come up on.

For example, in our area here, one side is definitely better than the other because of ice on the sidewalk, and on another route, one side is definitely better than the other because of the way cars will look up the street for oncoming traffic and not the other direction. Doing that kind of a walkability survey with the parents and the students that are involved, it can be key.

Q: We have two questions about the distance that you expect students to walk to school or travel to school. What are your recommended distances for biking and walking?

Kent Cruger: Well, we were surprised by how far – the majority of our students live within a mile to a mile and a half of our school. I think it may be even closer to a mile and less, but we do have in our school open enrollment, which means students can open enroll from further areas away to the school, so we had students many miles away.

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Our average trip to school was .7 miles, but again, we had students coming all the way from across town who did it with their parents. We do have some students who are 8 to 10 miles away. Rather than say, well, they can't participate or they can just do a car pool, we had the Stride and Ride Program saying, "you know what? Drive to your friend's house, and then from there walk together." It builds community; it helps people be a part of it, and so we really wanted to make sure every single person was able to do it.

Vivian Kennedy: This is also where you can tap into resources in the community. For example, there's a big intersection about eight-tenths of a mile away, and there's a big shopping center there. We use that as a staging area for one of our walk to school bus routes, and there's a grocery store called King's Super, it's got a large parking lot, and we went to the management and said, hey, this is what we're doing, we'd like to create really great walking habits in our children, think that you could team with us, and could parents that are coming from four or five miles away park in your parking lot and then walk up the hill to Bear Creek together? They thought that was

fantastic, so they're partnered with us on that, so that's another strategy.

Q: Great suggestion, thank you. Some parents are worried about being responsible for other kids if they participate in the walking school bus as parents. How do you overcome this?

Kent Cruger: We never said the school or the parents were going to be responsible for the kids. So to parents, we said, if you're comfortable with your child walking with a group, or walking on their own, send them with the walking school bus, but if not, then walk with them or you might want to choose something else. We said specifically to the community, "those parents are not responsible for your child; they will be walking that route, which means additional parents, additional kids, additional safety, but the responsibility is for the parents to decide, do I feel comfortable with my child walking with a big group or do I not?"

If not, the ultimate responsibility is for each parent to decide what they're comfortable with and then parents made the decision. As we went along and parents saw how many kids were out there, the route was always the same, it left at the same time, and typically, a lot could just actually look out their window, send their child out, and could watch the bus go by, they felt comfortable. We have a general guideline that kindergarten through second grade students go to school with their parents if they're biking (walking really), and third through fifth is an age where a lot of parents at that age decide that kids can go on their own or go with friends. But that's just a guideline that we put out; it's not something where we say "now we take responsibility for those kids"; it's a parent decision.

Q: Was there any necessity to change your school schedule because of all this, or was that really not affected?

Kent Cruger: It was not affected.

Q: Was there any involvement from the municipality, and if so, what role did they play?

Vivian Kennedy: Well, when we did the infrastructure improvements they were definitely involved with that. When we do the spring bike extravaganza, which is an event in the spring that we coordinate to go along with the Boulder Valley School District Bike to School Day, that's coordinated by Landon Hilliard, we do this event after school where we have a bike rodeo, which focuses on bike safety

and bike courtesy. We have bike tune-ups, repairs, and work on helmet fitting, and how to be a safe user of the bike equipment, and a lot of other various things, but the Boulder Police are involved in helping us with the safety course, and a number of the community businesses have gotten involved with us on this.

Kent Cruger:

And also, the City of Boulder, the government there worked with us on planning out routes. There was one particularly very dangerous route where kids crossed, and they moved sidewalk a different way and they also added a whole new crosswalk at a better location to help us, and to make it a safer route for students to come to school. That was really through their department and their money that contributed toward that, and they wanted to because it made it safer for them, for where cars were going, and for where kids were going.

Jay Kassirer:

Thank you to our speakers, both Vivian and Kent. I see a number of people are providing applause to the speakers through the yellow hand at the bottom on the left. Thank you all. I hope you'll join us again.

[01:29:56]

That concludes our webinar today..

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Landmark Designation

The program described in this case study was designated in 2009.

Designation as a Landmark (best practice) case study through our peer selection process recognizes programs and social marketing approaches considered to be among the most successful in the world. They are nominated both by our peer-selection panels and by Tools of Change staff, and are then scored by the selection panels based on impact, innovation, replicability and adaptability.

The panel that designated this program consisted of:

- Danny Albert, University of Ottawa's Parking and Sustainable Transportation Department
- Daniel Coldrey, Transport Canada
- Mark Dessauer, Active Living by Design
- Catherine Habel, Metrolinx
- Jacky Kennedy, Green Communities Canada
- Jessica Mankowski, Federation of Canadian Municipalities
- Gary McFadden, National Center for Biking and Walking
- Lorenzo Mele, Town of Markham
- Chuck Wilsker, U.S. Telework Coalition
- Phil Winters, University of South Florida
- JoAnn Woodhall, Translink