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Foot power gaining ground in Palo Alto

The more feet that are on the ground going to school, the happier Kathy Durham is.

"We're encouraging more students and their families to choose walking and biking to school more often," said the safe routes to school coordinator for Palo Alto. "Or try carpooling as a way to help reduce the congestion around our schools at arrival and dismissal times. Every solo car trip you don't take helps." Tomorrow is International Walk to School Day, which Palo Alto schools celebrate as Walk and Roll day. The day began in the U.S. in 1997 in response to a sharp drop in children walking to school.

In Palo Alto, that trend has been reversed.

Penny Ellson, the head of the PTA Council Traffic Safety Committee, reported that the efforts to promote alternatives to driving are working. The number of Palo Alto Unified School District elementary school children reporting they regularly walked or biked to school increased over the last decade, Ellson said.

Bicycle counts at both high schools were at 10-year record highs in September. Gunn reported 633 bicyclists (33 percent of students), up from 180 (11 percent of students) in 1999. Paly's count was also up, from 220 (15 percent) in 1999 to 582 (32 percent) this year. That amounts to one-third of all PAUSD high school students bicycling to

school, with many more students walking, taking public transit and carpooling, Ellson said.

The police, schools, PTAs, and the city of Palo Alto all cooperate to make walking and biking to school as safe and popular as possible.

"The top priority of the police during the morning commute is safety around schools, and that commitment is invaluable," said Richard Swert, who teaches bicycle safety programs. He explained that the school district allows time for bike safety programs in third, fifth and sixth grade for every student. The PTA supports and promotes these programs, and the city pays for crossing guards, planning and logistical support.

At El Carmelo, students who choose commuting alternatives on Oct. 7 will get prizes from district Superintendent Kevin Skelly. "I ride my bike to work about 40 percent of the time," Skelly said, adding that he could name seven school sites he can get to faster on a bicycle than in a car.

For additional information, visit International Walk to School in the USA, www.walktoschool.org; National Center for Safe Routes to School, www.saferoutesinfo.org; or International Walk to School, www.iwalktoschool.org.



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