

Tip Sheet #2 Organizing Bike Trains

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A bike train is a group of students and adults who bicycle to school together, making stops along a previously designated route to pick up others as they approach the school. While walking school buses (the walking version of a bike train) are great for shorter distances, bike trains allow children who live farther from the school to participate, giving students an outlet for regular physical activity while providing a social opportunity for parents and students to connect outside of school hours. Not to mention they also allow students to hone their bicycle safety skills under adult supervision. Organizing a bike train can be formal, involving the school community in a program with several bike trains, or informal, with just you and your neighbors riding to school together - just make sure that everyone is having fun!

Why Organize a Bike Train?

- A bike train permits parents extra time in the morning while the kids ride to school with other parents or older students, and social time with friends and neighbors while riding with the bike train
- Allows children the opportunity to work with a "team"
- Gives opportunity to kids to practice their bicycle safety skills under adult supervision
- Reduces traffic congestion during school arrival and departure
- Provides an opportunity to get to know neighbors and build community
- Improves personal safety by adding more eyes and ears on the street
- Most importantly...it's fun

Parent-Organized Bike Train

Washington, DC

Parrie Henderson-O'Keefe was dreading the commute to her children's school's new campus: 1.7 miles directly across some of Washington, DC's most grueling in-bound commuter traffic. Confronting grid-locked southbound intersections could turn what should have been a 10 minute trip by car into 30 minute nightmare. Then an idea emerged: what about their bicycles? With lanes just wide enough, a line of bicycles could wind its way through traffic and make better time than their minivan. By the first day of school in 2008, she and her four kids along with three members of another family were ready to begin their bike train.

It soon became apparent that beating the traffic wasn't the only benefit of riding, and more families joined the group. The kids loved riding with their friends and the thought of being left behind was an incentive to getting kids out the door in the morning. Tardy slips among the bike train members plummeted. Kids became more aware of their local geography and grew more independent. The physical activity generated by riding bicycles translated into even more active time outside as kids that rode home together begged to continue their time together playing four-square and soccer in the alley. Parents started seeing physical improvements in themselves, relished the time with their kids and no one failed to notice that the gas gauge on the car wasn't going down so fast.

Tips for Creating a Safe, Fun Bike Train

Map it!

- Work with the school, city and parents to design “recommended routes” for the bike train
- All routes should attempt to:
 - Designate a meeting point to start the train, and indicate the timing of stop points to pick up more riders along the way
 - Utilize quiet, less traveled streets
 - Pass through intersections with safe street crossings
 - Take no longer than 30 minutes to bicycle to school
- Finalize a bike train map that can be distributed widely

Promote the Idea: You can't have a train without passengers and leaders!

- Present the bike train map and idea to your Parent Teacher Association, principal and teachers
- Let local businesses and community leaders know about the bike train, they might be interested in

supporting or sponsoring the program

- Coordinate with local bike shops, teams and clubs to arrange a meet up so they can ride along or use a local shop for a pick-up point
- Talk to neighborhood associations, church groups and any other volunteer groups for additional volunteers or support
- Ask to present the bike train concept to the students in the classroom
- Invite local celebrities to join your bike train

Pick a Start Date and Go for It!

Getting the train running, even if there are only a few participants, is the most important part.

Set Guidelines and Enforce Rules

Creating and maintaining a culture of safety is essential to gain buy-in from parents and the school, as well as to help create a successful and safe trip to school. A few tips to keep things running smooth:

- Set a maximum number of participants per adult to keep riding safely
- Set a minimum age limit (most children can't accurately judge speed, distance or sound of oncoming traffic without supervision until the age of 10)
- Ensure that all students have received at least basic training in bicycle safety
- Train adults in how to safely operate a bicycle and participate in a bike train
- Provide an adult to lead the front of the train and direct participants
- Provide an adult to sweep at the rear of the train in order to make sure all students stay “aboard”
- Require students to ride single file and keep bicycles at least one bike length apart for emergency stopping
- Communicate with each other and traffic by using hand signals
- Stay to the right, no swerving
- Obey all stop signs and signals

Planting the Seed: Growing a District Wide Program

Tampa Bay, FL

When the Tampa Bay walking school bus and bicycle train program first started in 2008, Jason Jackman contacted 28 schools inside of Hillsborough County Public Schools to gauge interest. Of the 28 schools, one school chose to participate: Lawton Chiles Elementary School. While getting the bike train started was a little rocky, eventually word of the program's success spread throughout the district and now 15 schools are actively participating in the program. In the spring of 2011, after years of approaching schools to start programs, the bike train program has parents approaching program leaders requesting help organizing their own trains at new schools!

photo : ©Jason Jackman



photo : @Robert D. Jones/ RDJonesPhoto.com

- Be prepared for break-downs and flat tires; Carry a tool kit and have a contingency plan
- Every rider needs a properly fitted helmet and a lock to secure their bicycle at school

(For more information on how to ride safely, visit the [League of American Bicyclists: Ride Better](#) page)

Regularly review the bike train rules with participants. Prepare and vocalize a plan of action for students that are unable to adhere to the rules.

Additional Tips

Safety

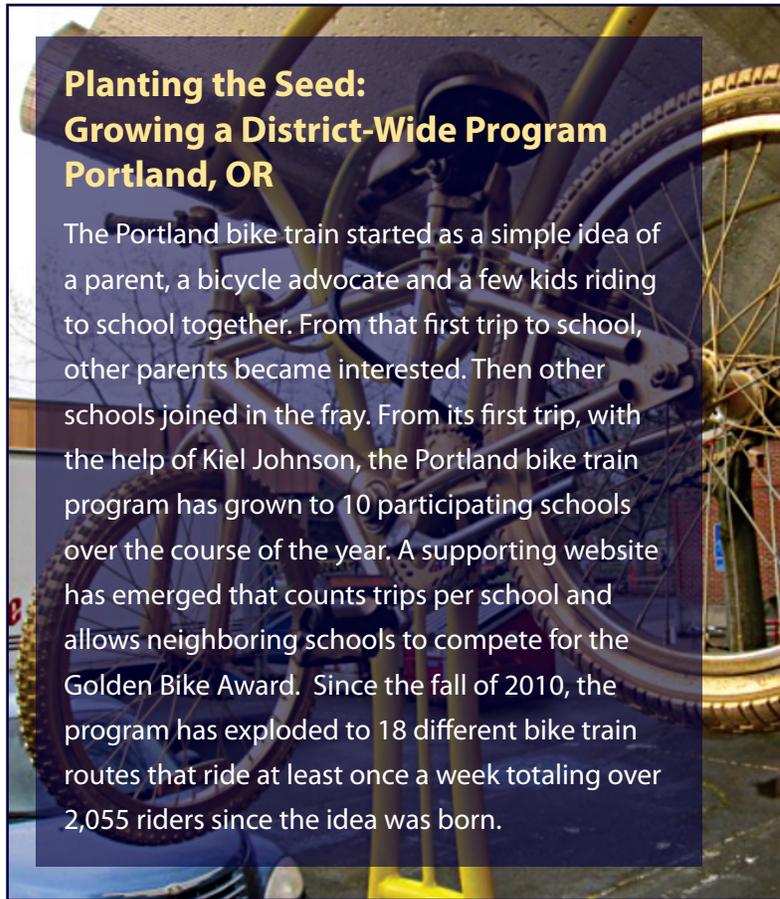
- First Aid Kit – also be aware of any medical needs students may have (such as asthma)
- Be visible – wear bright clothing, a jacket or vest and all riders should have lights if riding at night
- Carry a phone for emergencies
- Carry the bike train parents' phone numbers

Weather Conditions

- Have a policy for rainy, cold or snowy days. Make sure that all participants know the policy and either dress appropriately for a cold, wet ride or find an alternative way to get to school
- During warmer months, ensure that participants bring water to stay hydrated and dress in clothing that breathes, especially if the trip to school is long

Cancellation Policy

Be prepared for possible leader cancellations. Bike train leaders may get sick or just be unable to help certain days. Using a phone tree to notify participants or find alternate leaders is one way to deal with unexpected cancellations. Whatever the policy is, make sure that everyone knows it well.



Planting the Seed: Growing a District-Wide Program Portland, OR

The Portland bike train started as a simple idea of a parent, a bicycle advocate and a few kids riding to school together. From that first trip to school, other parents became interested. Then other schools joined in the fray. From its first trip, with the help of Kiel Johnson, the Portland bike train program has grown to 10 participating schools over the course of the year. A supporting website has emerged that counts trips per school and allows neighboring schools to compete for the Golden Bike Award. Since the fall of 2010, the program has exploded to 18 different bike train routes that ride at least once a week totaling over 2,055 riders since the idea was born.

Extra Credit

There are endless ways to make your bike train interesting and exciting to participants, below are just a few creative ideas:

- Start a bike train Facebook group where leaders can share stories, pictures and ideas
- Give train participants blank flags, bike buckets and posters for them to decorate and hang on their bicycles for the ride
- Have 'get to know you' and 'celebration' parties
- Start contests between different bike trains
- Hold regular bicycle skills courses (bicycle rodeos) for students to hone their skills and compete against one and other

photo : @Kyle Johnson



photo : ©Mike Cynecki

Resources

Walk + Bike 'School Bus' Guidebook

http://www.bta4bikes.org/docs/WBSD_Guidebook.pdf

Walking School Buses and Bike Trains

http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/walking_school_bus/pdf/wsb_guide.pdf

Portland Bike Train Website

<http://www.biketrainpdx.org/>

Guidelines for Bike Train Engineers and Cabooses

<http://www.atlantabike.org/sites/default/files/Guidelines%20for%20WaRtS%20Bike%20Trains.pdf>

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The mission of the Safe Routes to School National Partnership is to advocate for safe walking and bicycling to and from schools, and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America's children and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities. More information can be found at www.saferoutespartnership.org.