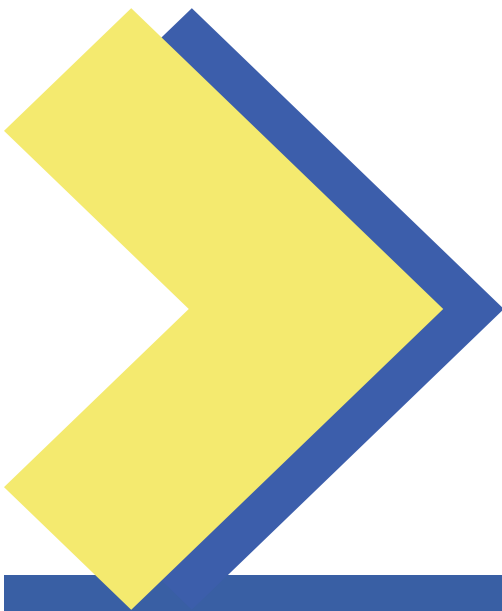


# Improving Walking and Biking to School in the Town of Amherst



Strategies for Sweet Home  
Central School District



2014 Interim Report

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## **Recommended Citation**

Norton, Travis, Maryam Khojasteh, Samina Raja, and Natan Attard. *Improving Walking and Biking to School in the Town of Amherst: Strategies for Sweet Home Central School District*. Interim Report. Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, 2014.

## **Acknowledgements**

Numerous individuals and organizations, including those listed below, contributed generously to this report with their ideas, information, and time.

### **Sweet Home School District**

Anthony Day, Superintendent  
Don Feldman, Public Relations Director

### **Town of Amherst**

Ellen Kost, Planning Department  
Patrick M. McKenna, Amherst Police Traffic Bureau  
Chris Schregel, Engineering Department

### **University at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning**

SoRa Baek, Department of Urban and Regional Planning  
Sol Baek, Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab  
Donna Banach, Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab  
William Becker, Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab  
Jeanne Lecesse, Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab  
Bumjoon Kang, Department of Urban and Regional Planning  
Jennifer Whittaker, Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab

# Executive Summary

Rates of walking and biking to school among students have declined significantly in recent decades. Nowadays, children are mostly driven to school, missing opportunities to be physically active on a daily basis, interact with their peers, and live more active and healthy lifestyles. The Town of Amherst, New York, often cited for its high quality of life, is taking steps to make the town a safe place for children to walk and bike to school, especially in its Sweet Home Central School District. The Sweet Home Central School District, with support from the University at Buffalo, is implementing a series of education and encouragement strategies to promote walking and biking to school among schoolchildren.

This [interim report](#) provides an update on the education and encouragement activities completed thus far to promote walking and biking to school in the Sweet Home Central School District. It also includes guidance for future activities that can educate and encourage students and their parents to consider walking and bicycling as transportation options to school.<sup>1</sup> Although this report is primarily intended for the Sweet Home Central School District, other school districts in the Town of Amherst can also utilize the ideas presented in this report. The interim report, which is summarized here, contains eight sections, not including the appendices.

The report describes benefits of walking and biking to schools for students ([Section 2](#)). An active travel mode to school increases the level of daily activity and positively impacts health outcomes in children.<sup>2</sup> Increased physical activity through biking and walking to school

also has attendant benefits for children. Physically active students have higher academic achievement, have a stronger sense of community, and socialize more with their peers.

The Sweet Home Central School District and parents of children can work together to promote physically active modes of transportation for the 2,208 K-8 students in the district. [Section 3](#) of the report details the demographic conditions that both offer an opportunity and a challenge in promoting physical activity. The Sweet Home Central School District draws its students from a geographic area that is home to 36,332 people, 14 percent of whom are children under fourteen years old. About 11.5 percent of youth below the age of fourteen in this area live in poverty, a rate higher than in the town but lower than in the county. Approximately 91 percent of the households in the district own one or more vehicles, a rate higher than in both the town and the county. Travel by automobiles, for adults and children alike, is the norm in the area.

Multiple barriers to walking and bicycling, combined with ready and convenient access to automobiles and school bus service, result in very few students using a physically active mode of transportation to school. [Section 4](#) reports on recent trends in children's modes of transportation within the district, based on a recently collected survey of parents. The data suggest that only 3 percent of Sweet Home students walk to school, which is significantly less than the national average of 13 percent. School bus is the primary travel mode of students

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in the district.

**Section 5** describes opportunities for and concerns about promoting walking and biking to school in the district. According to a recent survey of parents, at least 25 percent of students in the district's elementary schools live within one-half mile and at least 50 percent live within one mile of the schools. This suggests that, at least for these children, walking and bicycling to school are feasible. Fortunately, parents and caregivers, who play an important role in regulating children's mode of travel, greatly value walking and biking to school as a healthy activity. In fact, a significant majority (70 percent) of parents responding to a survey agreed that walking and biking to school is healthy for their children. Nonetheless, most of them also report that they would not allow their children to walk to school, irrespective of the child's age. Parents report concerns about high vehicle speed and lack of safety from traffic as factors that affect their decision not to allow their children to walk or bike to school. In other words, although walking and biking to school are valued as healthy activities, parents do not view the conditions in the town as conducive to these activities.

There are a number of strategies that can promote safe walking and biking to school, and many have been deployed elsewhere in the country. **Section 6** provides an overview of major strategies to improve walking and biking to school, through educating and encouraging children and their parents and enforcing traffic rules and laws.

Fortunately, the Sweet Home Central School District has already begun deploying many of the strategies documented in this report. **Section 7** details the progress that has been made in promoting active walking to school among students in 2014. These include the organization

of assemblies on walking and biking education, piloting a Walk to School Day, and placing high-visibility vehicle speed radars around the schools to create safer conditions for walking and biking.

In the concluding **Section 8**, we propose the next steps for continuing and sustaining the Safe Routes to Schools programming in the Sweet Home Central School District in spring 2015. In general, the school district, school administrators, teachers, school staff, and parents must celebrate and be role models for physically active lifestyles. Unless these role models foster a broader cultural shift in which physically active lifestyles—including walking and biking to school—are the norm, children are unlikely to walk and bike to school. The school district can do its part to foster such a culture by continuing to take specific actions, including

1. Implementing a multi-week classroom curriculum focused on walking and biking safely;
2. Continuing to encourage walking and bicycling by
  - a. Expanding the Walking School Bus pilot into a weekly program;
  - b. Redistributing Safe Routes to School maps to families as a reminder.

Resources and a proposed timeline for implementing these strategies—including lesson plans, student workbooks, maps, and other materials—are provided as an appendix to the report. The UB research team will be available as a resource as the school district moves forward on implementing these tools.

A key component of this initiative is to evaluate and learn which strategies work to promote walking and bicycling to school. To that end, the report also outlines the evaluation steps that the UB team will be undertaking in spring 2015 (see page 68). The dates and times proposed for evaluation activities in this report are intended for discussion only. The dates and times will

be confirmed in consultation with the school district, the Town of Amherst Police Department, the Planning Department, and the Engineering Department.

**Notes**

1. The interim report is a draft document. Note that in the final quarter of the project (Fall 2015), the UB team will submit a final report that will serve as a resource document for all interested stakeholders, including school principals, teachers, parents, school administrators, and town officials and policy makers in their effort to promote walking and bicycling to school in the Sweet Home Central School District and the Town of Amherst.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Prevalence of Obesity Among Children and Adolescents: United States, Trends 1963-1965 Through 2007-2008*, NCHS Health E-Stat (Hyattsville, MD: NCHS, 2010).