

Title: IMPLEMENTING A “SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL” PLAN IN KALAMARIA, GREECE

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Abstract:

Kalamaria is one of the largest municipalities in the Thessaloniki Greater Area, which is the second most populous urban conurbation in Greece. Since the 1970s population growth, rising car ownership rates, higher living standards, and urban sprawl have resulted in acute traffic congestion. Especially acute is traffic congestion in the vicinity of schools during the drop-off morning and pick-up afternoon periods. The increase of traffic volumes and congestion has resulted in a worsening of the traffic safety and air pollution situation. The combination of the above factors has led to a decrease of walking trips to school, in line with similar international experience, which, apart from exacerbating the above problems is, also, contributing to the serious obesity levels among Greek children.

This paper will report the results of a pilot project attempting to address the problem of decreasing walking to school. The project was carried out in the 2008-2009 academic year, as part of two EU projects: “e-TREAM” and “mobinet”. Both projects aimed at introducing measures to encourage a shift in modal split away from private vehicle to more sustainable modes. Within the “mobinet” project, a municipal mobility center started operating in Kalamaria, which continues to function with significant success promoting sustainable travel modes. The pilot project, which is the subject of this paper, aimed to determine the travel modes used and the factors that influence school travel mode choice by pupils and parents in two public elementary schools in the Kalamaria Municipality; to assess the level of difficulty associated with walking to school; to form a “Safe Routes to School” plan; and to test the viability of a “walking school bus” idea. A walking school bus involves volunteers walking with children to and from school following a set walking route.

The surveys among pupils and parents showed a dramatic decrease in walking to school between the two generations and an equal dramatic increase in trips by private vehicle. It, also, established the major barriers to walking to school which, in the majority of cases, confirm the findings of international research, i.e. perceived crime levels and traffic safety that necessitate an escort; the distance between home and school; the weight of school bag. Travel to school by bus is minimal as public schools in cities do not own or hire school buses. Public transport buses are not used because their routes are not convenient for such trips. No student reported cycling to school and the car-pooling share was low.

The surveys determined that a majority of the respondents would be willing to change their travel mode and adopt walking if their safety concerns were addressed. This finding stresses the value of programs like “Safe Routes to School” for local authorities. The more common safety concerns were the lack of satisfactory sidewalks and the existence of dangerous crossings of major road arteries. The project has resulted in a number of proposals related to improving the situation which include the designation of school sites; the drawing of school district boundaries; the walking environment quality near schools and on the routes to the schools. However, the “walking school bus” did not materialize because of insufficient support of the idea by the parents. The paper concludes with an examination of the major reasons that the

Jerusalem, Israel, May 30-June 2, 2010

“walking school bus” was not able to generate enough support among the parents. Societal, cultural and infrastructure differences between Greece and the other countries, where walking buses have been implemented with success, are presented and proposals for more country-specific ways of implementing the idea are put forward to inform future similar attempts in Kalamaria and, generally, in Greece.