

The Walking Project

What is the Walking Project?

The Walking Project is a four week program aimed at teaching school children how to live healthier lives through the 3 E's: Exercise, Eating well and Environmental awareness. In addition, it serves to foster school-community collaboration by inviting local businesses and organizations to partner with individual classrooms, mentoring the students and participating in healthful activities.

How did the Walking Project start?

It all started in October 2006 in New Milford, Connecticut, a rural/suburban town of 29,000 in the northwest corner of the state. A group of community leaders got together to discuss possible local, collaborative solutions to the disturbing statistics on childhood obesity and physical inactivity. These health advocates - a pediatrician, a dietician, a public health consultant, a pediatric nurse practitioner and the community outreach coordinator for a local hospital - came up with a simple program: provide school children with pedometers as a fun and easy way to increase their daily exercise and ask community businesses and organizations to be involved in the children's efforts.

This group approached the town's intermediate school (which houses grades 4, 5 and 6) and discussed their idea with the principal. She loved it! It was decided that a four-week "walking project" would be held in the spring of 2007. The 5th grade (378 students) was selected since a course on Growth and Development is included in the fifth grade curriculum, which would provide a perfect foundation for the project's objectives.

The next step was to invite local businesses and organizations to support the 17 fifth grade classrooms. "Gold" sponsors would fund the cost of the pedometers, T-shirts and incentives and, more importantly, spend at least one hour per week in their sponsored class walking with the students around the school track and teaching them about the importance of regular physical exercise. Additional businesses were asked to contribute funds as "silver" sponsors or provide in-kind services.

Nearly 30 organizations rose to the occasion, enthusiastically donating money, time, and talent. Sponsors reported that they enjoyed supporting the students' efforts and were personally enriched by the experience. After four weeks of tracking steps with their pedometers, 378 students and their classroom sponsors had logged 51,878 miles. The Walking Project was deemed a success by all who participated and was instituted as part of the regular fifth grade program.

Expanding the scope to include the 3 E's

When planning for the Walking Project's second year, one of the organizers suggested that a nutrition component be added to convey the message that exercise and good nutrition go hand-in-hand in achieving good health. At that time, Connecticut Children's Medical Center offered a free program in which a staff registered dietician taught a one-hour interactive class on food choices and healthy eating to elementary school children. They accepted our invitation to conduct the class in each classroom during the Walking Project, and the second "E" (Eating Well) was established.

In the third year of the Walking Project, the date for the opening assembly coincided with Earth Day. The group decided to capitalize on the message that a healthy environment is also

necessary for a healthy body and the third "E" (Environmental awareness) was added. The director of a local nature center volunteered to teach a one-hour, hands-on class to each classroom about environmental stewardship. Since then, numerous community members educated in nutrition and environmental issues have stepped up to volunteer their time to teach these one-hour classes.

To Date...

Since 2011, several other programs have been added to the month-long Walking Project:

1. Family Night is an evening event in which parents of all Sarah Noble students can learn about what the children are experiencing during the WP. Community businesses and organizations that support health (Parks & Rec, our local hospital, local fitness clubs and nature centers, etc) have booths and demonstrations. There is a cooking demo by WP volunteers and an exhibit of posters the students' have created that highlight all aspects of the Project.
2. Local author Joe Hurley talks to each 5th grade classroom about his book 10 Million Steps On Route 6 which highlights his walking journey across America.
3. A stress-reducing yoga class was demo'ed in 2013 in several classrooms to underscore a fourth "E" - Emotional health. This will hopefully become a permanent part of the Walking Project in the future.

Over the past seven years, **2517 fifth grade students** have walked **374,286 miles**. Not only has the Walking Project become part of the school's culture and curriculum, but has also become a platform to raise awareness about children's health throughout the community. It has enlightened the sponsors as to realities that exist within the school walls as well as to the life of an

eleven year old in this day and age. Finally, it has encouraged and supported the students to take ownership of their health in a fun and interactive way.

How do you begin?

We encourage you to start a Walking Project in your community. We have provided a toolkit for you use, but since every town and school is different, it should be tailored to the needs and uniqueness of your community. If you have any questions or suggestions, please contact us. We'd love to hear from you!

In the words of those who have participated...

“Being in the classroom and getting to know the kids, teaching the 3 E’s, and seeing their progress is worth its weight in gold.”

—Bob Marandola, 5 year sponsor

“I liked to challenge myself to become a healthier person.”

—Daniel, 5th grade student