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Smith School becomes first in district to try 'Walking School Bus' program

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NEW BRITAIN — Pedro Arroyo Sr. became part of Smith Elementary School history Thursday morning as he joined his son, Pedro Jr., and other parents and students to create the district's first-ever "Walking School Bus."

The walking school bus concept, successfully implemented in Detroit and Chicago, entails parents walking their children to and from school along a designated route where they make stops and meet up with other parents and students.

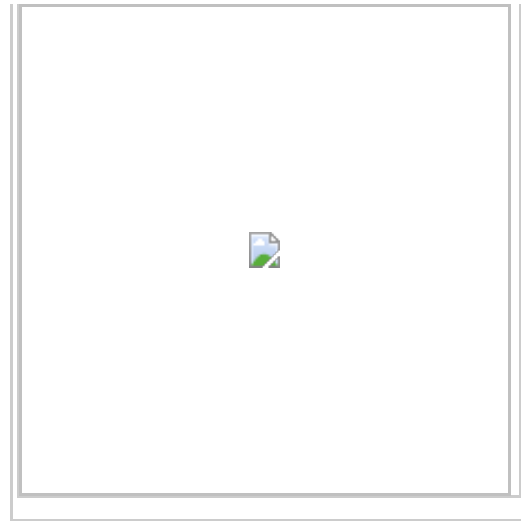
"It's fun and I get to talk to my neighbors. It's very exciting," said Arroyo Sr., an East Street resident who walked the 10-minute route to the Rutherford Street school. "It also gives my son and I exercise and it keeps him safe."

For Pedro Jr., 9, the best part was "all the cameras and people taking our picture."

Educators, political and community leaders joined the parents and students for the last five minutes of the walk. While only 12 children and five adults walked the two separate routes, school officials said they expect the pilot initiative to catch on.

"We would like to see more children take part. We

think we can get 40 to 50 children walking,” said Smith School Principal Christine Bruemmer. “The walk will improve school attendance, promote healthy habits, physical activities and parental involvement.” Bruemmer said she plans to promote the concept by weekly Sunday connect calls to parents, through parents/teacher conferences and community outreach.



The walking school bus initiative came about after Joe Vaverchak, the school district’s attendance director, attended a conference in Denver last year on grade-level learning. Vaverchak heard school officials from Springfield, Mass., discuss the success of the walking school bus in that community. Since the conference, Vaverchak has worked closely with Bruemmer and other school officials in preparation for Thursday.

“We thought this would tie in well with the neighborhood-school concept and it definitely ties in with the recent study on obesity and New Britain kids,” Vaverchak said.

The lead parents for the two separate routes — Linda Betanes and Melissa Melendez — were among eight speakers at a press conference, which was held at Smith School at the conclusion of the morning leg of the walk.

Betanes walked with her 5-year old daughter Evangeline and several parents and other children from Henry Street down to East Street to Rocky Hill Avenue and then to Rutherford Street.

“I’m a walker and I love to walk,” Betanes said. “When I heard they were asking for parents to volunteer for this, I immediately said, ‘Yes.’ I am committed to this in all weather, from snow to rain. I am optimistic the walking school bus will grow.”

Representatives from Parks & Recreation, the United Way, Boys & Girls Club, YWCA and the Community Foundation of New Britain were among those attending the kickoff. Others in attendance Thursday included Superintendent of Schools Kelt L. Cooper, school board Chairwoman Sharon Beloin-Saavedra, Mayor Timothy O’Brien and school board member and Republican mayoral candidate Erin

Stewart.

School officials said they are optimistic that other city schools will follow Smith’s lead and implement their own walking school bus.

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