

## Youth Zone: Safer Walk to School is Grants' Goal

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At Omaha's McMillan Magnet Center, it's common for eighth-graders to start thinking like civil engineers. Next fall, they will get to work like engineers, too, thanks to the Nebraska Roads Department.

The Omaha school district - working with the city, the Omaha Police Department, Activate Omaha, the Douglas County Health Department and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln - this month was awarded two different grants from the state's federal Safe Routes to School funds.

As a result, students at McMillan, the state's only engineering-focused middle school, will work with an engineer to complete a traffic study of the streets around their school. At the same time, the students will be encouraged to get moving - to walk or ride a bike to school, if they live close enough.

"It will really be a positive. Hopefully it will help make the whole community safer," said Jill Best, magnet coordinator at McMillan, 3802 Redick Ave.

About 60 percent of McMillan students live too close to the school to qualify for a bus ride. That means lots of kids could use their legs to get there. But Best said the traffic pattern around the school doesn't make that as easy as it sounds.

That's where the Safe Routes to School grant comes in. During the summer of 2009, the \$130,572 infrastructure grant will pay for addition of:

- Sidewalks along Redick, 42nd Street and Newport Avenue.
- A pedestrian signal on Martin Avenue in the middle of the block between Redick and Newport. (The school speed zone will be lengthened as well.)
- An extra-wide speed bump to slow traffic and a change in crosswalk placements to increase visibility.
- A drop-off area in front of the school, creation of a city bus lane and a no-parking designation along Redick in front of the school.

Now, it's common for parents to stop in the middle of the street to let their children out of the car. The new pattern will reduce that congestion and make the walk to the building safer.

But that's only part of the plan. A walking club and family activities will start in September.

A grant of \$15,925 will fund a walking club at the school, education sessions on walking and biking safety, community outreach programs and traffic enforcement by police.

Tammie Dodge, program coordinator with Activate Omaha, said collaboration with the schools is a perfect fit for her organization. She also is working with Papillion's Carriage Hill Elementary.

Dodge said Activate Omaha will be a resource when McMillan gets ready to hold family night and other events to encourage more walking and biking to school.

"Teachers can think it's great," Dodge said, "but it really has to be the parents that make that a priority."

Tying the neighborhood improvements to McMillan's engineering curriculum helped set it apart from the 52 applications considered, said Deana McKinstry. She works with the Lincoln architecture firm Sinclair Hille, which coordinates the state's Safe Routes to School program.

Community collaboration and partnerships make a difference, she said, and each of the funded projects is a cooperative effort. But McMillan's involved students.

"It's great when we know kids are getting involved," McKinstry said.