

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

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Townships Join Schools to Create Walking, Biking Paths to Promote Healthier Kids, Reduce Traffic Congestion

The state Department of Transportation recently awarded PSATS a contract to administer part of the federal Safe Routes to School Program in Pennsylvania. In this capacity, PSATS will reach out to schools, townships, and other municipalities and groups to show why safer pedestrian and bicycle routes are a win-win for an entire community.

BY AMY BOBB / SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

When students in Center and Potter townships in Beaver County started school last fall, they were literally making history.

What set their back-to-school days apart from those of other students in the state was the fact that the two school districts serving their communities and the neighboring Borough of Monaca were the first ever in Pennsylvania to voluntarily merge.

After years of debate about whether and exactly how to join the two districts, school officials and residents had finally decided that a single Central Valley School District would save taxpayers money and ultimately provide better education for the students.

Beyond forcing decisions about what the new school colors would be or which schools would remain open,

the merger also created an interesting predicament for school and municipal officials who advocate health and safety.

“How were we going to merge the needs of a walking community with those of a district that had only known busing?” says Barb Magnotta, the district’s elementary school nurse.

Officials first examined the infrastructure surrounding their existing school buildings, most of which are in Center Township. Over the years, many of the community’s educational buildings had been built close enough to each other to create an unplanned campus. The school district’s two elementary schools and high school, the intermediate unit, and the county community college are all within a mile of each other. Yet, it became immediately obvious that sidewalks and walking and bicycling routes were absent in the neighborhoods nearby.

“How could we encourage children to walk and bike to these various edu-

In 1969, about 50 percent of children walked or biked to school. Today, fewer than 15 percent do. The result? Less active, less independent, and less healthy kids.

Source: Federal Highway Administration and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



Students and parents walk to school in Tredyffrin Township, Chester County, along a stretch of road without sidewalks. A recent “walkability” audit through the Safe Routes to School Program identified ways to make this and other routes safer for pedestrians and bicyclists. *Photo by Pennoni Associates Inc.*



cational buildings when it meant they would have to travel along busy roads and on private property?” Magnotta says.

Enter the Safe Routes to School Program, a federal initiative to make walking and bicycling to school a safe and routine activity for children. In Pennsylvania, PennDOT has taken the lead in distributing this federal funding for a wide variety of projects, from building safer street crossings to promoting activities that enable and encourage children to walk or bike to school.

In February this year, PennDOT teamed up with PSATS to create the Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School Resource Center to develop, administer,

and promote Safe Routes to School activities. (See the sidebar on Page 77 for more information about PSATS’ role in the Safe Routes Program, including the launch of a new website, www.saferoutespa.org.)

“By joining forces with PSATS, PennDOT will expand its successful noninfrastructure programs and develop new resources, training, and funding to help promote Safe Routes to School throughout the commonwealth,” says Chris Metka, the state’s Safe Routes to School coordinator. “We are particularly excited about the link that PSATS will provide in spreading the word to both municipalities and schools about the importance and value of ensuring

ABOVE LEFT: Anthony Mendicino, a fourth grader in Beaver County’s Central Valley School District, shows off his mileage log and the “toe tokens” he earns for every five miles he walks as part of “Walking Warrior Wednesdays.” In this Safe Routes to School program, students meet once a week to walk before school starts. Photo by Central Valley School District.

ABOVE RIGHT: Central Valley School District nurse Barb Magnotta leads elementary school kids on a walk as part of Walking Warrior Wednesdays. Center Township will be installing sidewalks near the school with funding from the Safe Routes to School Program. Photo by Central Valley School District.

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safe and sustainable pedestrian and bicycle routes.”

Since the program began in Pennsylvania in 2007, PennDOT has reached thousands of elementary and middle school students with its Safe Routes to School message. As part of this effort, it has provided grants to 40 schools. In addition, PennDOT has awarded 30 municipalities and school districts nearly \$16.8 million in funding to address a variety of infrastructure projects, including crosswalks, sidewalks, and curbing.

As local governments look for ways to tighten their belts in today’s tough economic climate, Metka says, the Safe Routes to School Program offers opportunities for townships and school dis-

tricts to work together to find low-cost, high-impact ways to improve pedestrian safety, reduce traffic congestion, and expand their local infrastructure, all while encouraging children to become more active.

“As a school nurse,” Magnotta of the Central Valley School District says, “I believe that if we ever want to overcome childhood obesity and decrease rates of asthma and diabetes, schools and municipalities must work together to improve the health of the community.”

Motivated by unhealthy kids, economics

Magnotta speaks from experience. Since 2009, Central Valley School District in Beaver County has taken advantage of all the Safe Routes to School Program has to offer. In addition to the primary school obtaining a \$5,000 noninfrastructure grant to promote safe walking to its students, Center Township was approved to receive \$967,000

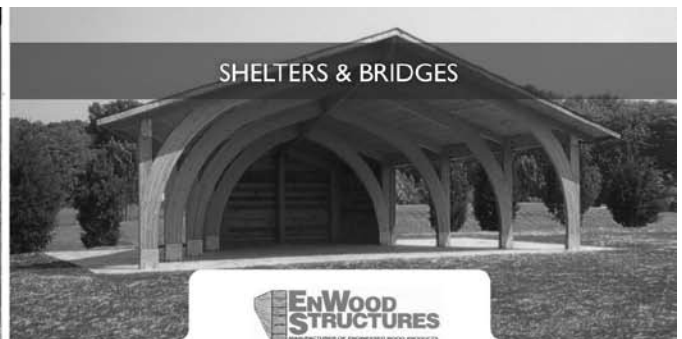
in infrastructure funds to build sidewalks near the school complex.

Magnotta first heard of Safe Routes to School while attending a school health leadership institute sponsored by the American Cancer Society. She returned home determined to implement Safe Routes to School in her district and seek funding for her community. One of the first things she did was contact Center Township supervisor Michael Sisk, who served as the township representative on the school’s health and wellness council.

“I knew we had to integrate both the township and the school into the project if it was going to succeed,” she says.

Sisk immediately saw the benefit of involving the township in Magnotta’s plan to build sidewalks that would connect the school complex with an adjoining township park.

“Sure, Safe Routes to School promotes fitness to school kids,” he says, “but I took it a step further and could see how it would benefit all township



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residents. Sidewalks tie neighborhoods together, and putting them around schools, which are usually the biggest and most visible buildings in a municipality, makes schools more accessible to the entire community.”

When Congress first enacted Safe Routes to School in 2005, the impetus for making routes to school safer was to reduce childhood obesity rates and encourage children to get moving again. In 1969, the Federal Highway Administration reported that close to 50 percent of children walked or biked to school. Within the span of a generation, that percentage had dropped to just 15 percent by 2001, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

At the same time, the rate of obesity among children in the United States has soared, with more than 33 percent of children and adolescents now overweight or obese, according to a 2006 report in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The program's goal to have healthier, more active children continues to apply today, but as the overall economy has weakened in recent years, the incentives for providing safer routes to school may have shifted for communities.

“In the last two or three years, the focus has moved away from reducing obesity and more toward economics,” Metka says. “Schools are looking to save money by cutting back on busing, and parents are hoping to save on gasoline costs by driving their children to school less often. At the same time, municipalities are searching for ways to stretch their dollars while providing a safe, efficient, and comprehensive transportation network to their residents.

“The Safe Routes program fits into this tougher economic environment by providing low-cost alternatives that ultimately expand healthy and sustainable transportation options for an entire community,” he says.

Motivated by this financial incentive, more municipalities are becoming interested in the Safe Routes to School

How townships can get involved with Safe Routes to School

As stewards of their local transportation network, townships have a vested interest in making sure all modes of transportation, including those for walking and bicycling, are adequately funded and maintained. Accessible bicycle and pedestrian routes benefit not only schoolchildren but all residents who are looking for more opportunities for safe recreation.

Working in partnership with their schools, townships can help ensure safe and sustainable pedestrian and bicycle routes. Here are some ways that townships can get involved in Safe Routes to School:

- Participate with schools in the annual **Walk to School Day**. This year's event is slated for **October 5**. Activities are more successful when local police officers and municipal representatives are engaged in the event, too.

- Identify police officers and township representatives to send to training about **bicycle safety** and proper riding technique. Free training will be available around the state this fall.

- Work with school officials and township police to identify people interested in teaching proper techniques to local crossing guards. Free **crossing guard training** will be conducted statewide in the spring of 2012.

- Participate with local schools and other community representatives on a **walkability audit**. In this two-day assessment, experts help evaluate student walking routes to identify barriers to walking and bicycling and then recommend solutions that range from low-cost measures, such as training crossing guards and using pedestrian signs, to infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalk and crosswalk construction. These audits can be arranged throughout the school year.

- Seek funding for **infrastructure projects**, such as sidewalk construction and crosswalk improvements. *(The next round of funding for Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects has not been determined yet. PSATS will alert townships once this funding becomes available.)*

For more information about any of these activities and programs, visit www.saferoutespa.org or call PSATS at (717) 763-0930.

Program. “I’m excited to see many more municipalities participating with their schools on Safe Routes activities and projects,” Metka says. “They recognize that the program can have a positive effect on transportation in their community.”

Everyone benefits

By taking advantage of the municipal connections that PSATS brings to

the table, PennDOT is confident that the newly created Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School Resource Center will reach entire communities with the message that safe walking and bicycling routes benefit all residents.

“I see great potential for participation and cooperation with this project,” Metka says. “We are hoping to forge a bond between schools and municipalities in creating accessible and sustain-

“Sure, Safe Routes to School **promotes fitness to school kids**, but I took it a **step further** and could see how it would **benefit all township residents.**”

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able pedestrian and bicycle routes. A school with a walk-to-school policy, for example, will find its efforts more effective if it coordinates with the municipality to address crosswalks, sidewalks, and road striping.

“Likewise, municipalities will recognize that schools are experts in student needs and transportation, including walking, bicycling, parent pickup and drop-off, and busing, all of which influence land development, transportation route use, and traffic congestion,” he continues. “That’s why these issues should be an essential part of a greater local planning effort led by the municipality.”

Schools and municipalities are encouraged to take advantage of the various programs within the Safe Routes to School initiative by participating in the following:

- annual Walk to School Day (*held the first Wednesday in October*),
- bicycle education and crossing guard training,
- grant money available from the Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School Resource Center for noninfrastructure activities that educate about, encourage, and enforce safe routes to school, and
- funding available from PennDOT for capital improvements, such as sidewalks and crosswalks, to provide safer routes to school. (*For more on how townships can participate in the Safe Routes to School Program, see the sidebar on Page 73.*)

In Beaver County, Center Township was a logical partner to join the school district’s Safe Routes to School initiative. The township building and park are located across the street from the district’s state-of-the-art Center Grange Primary School and border the area’s unofficial educational complex.

“Conceivably, students could start walking to school in kindergarten and keep walking almost continuously throughout their educational careers until finally getting a master’s degree,”



The Youngsville (Warren County) Police Department, Warren City Police, and Youngsville Volunteer Fire Department give kids’ bikes a thorough safety check during Youngsville Elementary Middle School’s Bike-to-School Day. This and other special events were funded through a grant from the Safe Routes to School Program. Photos by Brian Ferry, Warren Times-Observer.



says Magnotta, referring to the post-graduate programs housed through West Virginia-based Mountain State University at the Beaver County Community College. “Ideally, we hope to interconnect this entire educational complex with sidewalks and trails.”

To make this vision a reality, Center Township and Central Valley School District joined forces and provided matching dollars to seek funding from the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to conduct a feasibility study of walking routes in the area.

While the study looked at how sidewalks and trails could be addressed, Magnotta began to promote walking with her elementary school students and their families. Money that the school received from a Safe Routes noninfrastructure grant in 2009 was used to implement a Walking Warriors program, which provided incentives for children to meet and walk before school

and track their walking miles with family members and friends.

A community event complete with a 5K walk/run, bicycle rodeo, and crossing guard training was held last fall to promote support for Central Connect, the name of the proposed interconnected walking routes among the various school buildings.

All of this activity culminated in Center Township receiving \$967,309 in Safe Routes to School infrastructure money to construct sidewalks along two priority streets that would help connect Center Grange Primary School and the township park with other areas of the educational campus and surrounding neighborhoods.

It makes absolute sense for townships to be involved in these kinds of infrastructure projects, says Frank Vescio, development coordinator for Center Township.

“Schools understand the need to keep all students safe,” he says, “but schools do not usually know the construction end of things as well. Every day, our township deals with engineers and developers, and we have a good concept of what is required to make sure a construction project like this is successful.”

Center Township believed participation in the infrastructure proposal was a win-win for the township, the school district, and ultimately the residents. ►

As much as 20 to 30 percent of morning traffic is generated by parents driving their children to school.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

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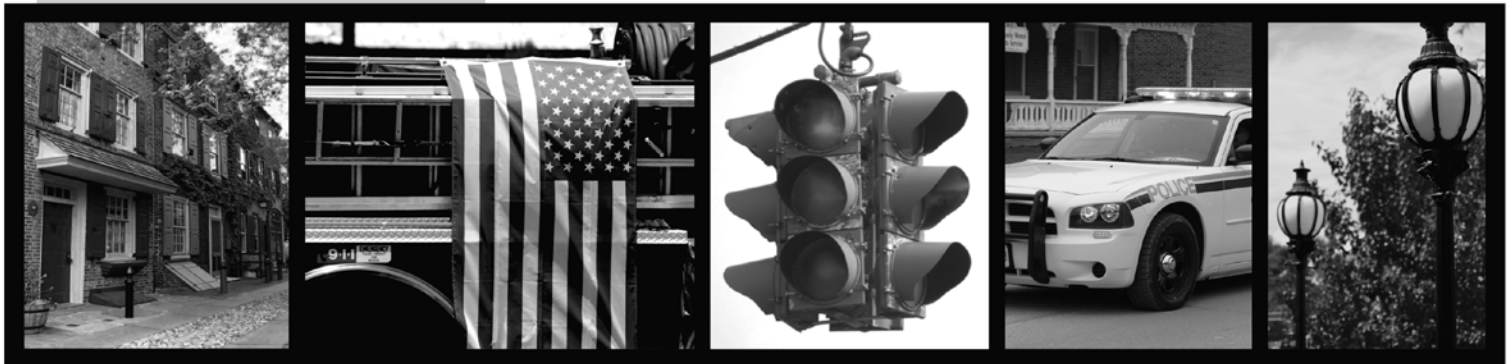
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"All municipalities should have a good working relationship with their school district," Vescio says. "It improves the quality of life for all residents. The trails and sidewalks that will be developed from this joint project will benefit the entire community."

Young families moving into the township want more opportunities for walking and recreation, he says. "People are more health-minded than ever before, and amenities such as sidewalks and walking and biking paths are a must for them," he continues. "Ultimately, they want these routes to be connected to other parts of the township."

Vescio sees the sidewalks that will eventually be constructed with the Safe Routes to School infrastructure funds as the first phase in a plan to create more interconnected paths throughout the township.

"I hope this will be a stepping stone for the township to get additional funding for more sidewalks and trails," he says.

Walking audits: First step toward safer routes

Yet, with Harrisburg and Washington, D.C., in turmoil about passing budgets, funding programs, and reducing debt, townships must recognize that money for infrastructure projects could become more difficult to obtain. Metka acknowledges that funding for future Safe Routes to School infrastructure

A return to 1969 levels of walking and bicycling to school would save 3.2 billion vehicle miles, enough to keep more than 250,000 cars off the road for a year.

Source: *Safe Routes to School National Partnership*

projects in Pennsylvania is on hold until Congress decides how to appropriate additional funds.

But this uncertainty, he says, makes it even more critical that townships do upfront planning and preparation before going after scarce state and federal funds or making decisions about how to stretch their own limited dollars.

Here, too, the Safe Routes to School Program in Pennsylvania can help. The walkability audits offered through the program provide a useful planning tool that townships can build on to create safe pedestrian and bicycle routes around schools. These audits are an important first step to take before applying for funding available through PennDOT.

Metka, who is on the committee that reviews applications for Safe Routes infrastructure funds, says that participation in a walkability audit shows the applicant's commitment to finding practical solutions for addressing barriers to walking and bicycling in a community.

"Applicants that apply for improve-

ments outlined in a walkability final report put themselves in a better position to receive infrastructure funding than applicants that did not perform such comprehensive school route planning," Metka says.

"An audit tells me that the applicant has done its homework and has conducted background research to back up its request for the funding," he continues. "The bottom line is, I want to make sure the project will be cost-effective and sustainable, especially when we're dealing with the big bucks required for infrastructure projects.

An audit tells me they have brought in engineers and a multidisciplinary team from the community to look at their situation and make recommendations. It means they have reached out to the right people to get the job done right."

Mark Hood, an engineer for Pennoni Associates Inc., has conducted walkability audits at dozens of elementary and middle schools for the Safe Routes to School Program. Pennoni was the engineering firm that implemented and conducted audits under the previous Safe Routes to School administrator and is the firm now partnered with PSATS to provide audits and other technical expertise.

"Having a walkability audit conducted in and around schools will provide a municipality and a school district with ideas on how to improve the infrastructure and make it more inviting for kids to walk and bike to school," he says.

As part of the two-day audit, Pennoni representatives first hold a kick-off meeting with stakeholders in the community. After a briefing about the purpose of the visit, a team of engineers, technical experts, and school and community volunteers conducts two assessments, at the end of the school day and at the start of the next day, to observe student and driver behaviors and examine infrastructure along walking routes. The audit ends with a final presentation to stakeholders during which Pennoni summarizes the team's findings and offers recommendations for improvements.

"It is important that the right people are invited to participate in the audit," Hood says. "This includes municipalities."

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PSATS named Safe Routes to School administrator

New website
launches this
month

Townships that want to know more about the Safe Routes to School Program, how to get involved, and what activities are planned can turn to the program's new website, www.saferoutespa.org, which the Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School Resource Center is launching this month.

Development of the website has been a PSATS priority since February, when the state Department of Transportation awarded the Association a contract to administer the noninfrastructure component of the state's Safe Routes to School Program. In this capacity, PSATS is providing support to communities to promote Safe Routes to School and implement activities that encourage students to walk and bike to school.

In the months since the three-year contract was awarded, PSATS and PennDOT have joined forces to develop the Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School Resource Center, which will provide information and resources about the Safe Routes program to municipalities, local police, schools, and other community groups. PSATS has also teamed up with Pennoni Associates Inc., a multidisciplinary consulting engineering firm, to provide engineering expertise on the project, and Acuta Digital, Inc., an information technology firm located in Pittsburgh, to create the new website.

"In the past few months, PSATS has worked closely with PennDOT and Acuta Digital to develop a website that will serve as the main vehicle for promoting the Safe Routes to School Program and its various components," PSATS Director of Training Services Carol Kilko says. "We wanted to create a website that is attractive, accessible, and user-friendly."

The result has certainly achieved that purpose, says Dominic M. Ebanks, Acuta's chief executive officer. "PSATS came to us with a vision to develop a website that would be interactive and all-encompassing for showcasing the various Safe Routes to School activities," he says. "It also wanted to

use the website as the major marketing tool for the program.

"We are pleased with how the design and layout of the website have achieved that purpose," Ebanks says. "The site will serve as an information clearinghouse for anyone who wants to know more about Safe Routes to School. At the same time, PennDOT and PSATS will be able to use the website as a pivotal marketing tool to promote the program."

The site is organized in two ways: by the various components of the Safe Routes program and by intended audience members. A township official or police officer, for example, will be able to go to the home page and select "Information for Municipalities" or "Information for Local Police" to find the various pages within the site that apply to them.

The site features information about the following components of the Safe Routes to School Program:

Programs — Walk to School Day, which is held the first Wednesday in October; and walkability audits, which are technical assessments of existing and potential walking and bicycling infrastructure around schools.

Training — Statewide training on how to lead basic bicycle safety courses for students; bicycle education lesson plans targeting third and sixth graders; and statewide training to teach crossing guards how to be safer and more effective.

Funding — Noninfrastructure grants to schools to provide education and enforcement activities that encourage students to walk and bike to school; and infrastructure funding for capital improvements that promote safe routes. *(Note: PSATS will be administering the noninfrastructure grants, and PennDOT will administer and distribute the infrastructure funds.)*

In addition, the website provides information about the history of the Safe Routes program and the benefits of participating, resources such as promotional and informational materials, and links to other relevant sites.

Communities across the state are taking advantage of Safe Routes to School funding to build sidewalks and bike paths that will benefit all residents. Photo courtesy of the PA Safe Routes to School Program.



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their school, township officials can explore a variety of solutions for improving pedestrian and bicycling routes.

“When budgets are tight,” he says, “municipalities can take advantage of this free technical help to get a handle on some low-cost, high-value infrastructure improvements they can easily implement.”

Last June, Hood led a walkability audit at Hillside Elementary School in Tredyffrin Township, Chester County, with about 20 participating stakeholders, including township and school representatives, parents, and members of the township’s Environmental Advisory Council and Sidewalk, Trails, and Path Committee.

Walking the routes to identify problem areas was an eye-opening experience, says Stephen Burgo, Tredyffrin Township’s engineer, who participated in the audit. The stakeholders group was divided into three teams, each of which traversed a different route to Hillside School and identified challenges that may hinder safe walking, from gaps in sidewalks to low-hanging vegetation.

“We looked at connectivity between neighborhoods and the school,” Burgo says. “We observed crossing guards and talked to them about problems that they see. Some really good issues came up.”

When the group reconvened, they were armed with photographs and notes about what they saw and experienced. The end result was a final report, prepared by Pennoni, which identified problems and recommended varying levels of solutions, from low-cost simple fixes, such as alerting property owners to trim bushes and trees, to major infrastructure improvements, such as constructing sidewalks or improving site visibility on an S-curve in the road.

Keeping funding alive

The biggest hurdles to Tredyffrin Township implementing any of the major improvements recommended in the

“We are hoping to forge a bond between schools and municipalities in creating accessible and sustainable pedestrian and bicycle routes.”



report are a lack of available money and competition with other high-priority local infrastructure projects, Burgo says. Still, in the end, he recognizes the value the audit report will have as a future planning tool if the township moves forward with a sidewalk project or seeks state or federal funding to implement some of the report’s suggestions.

“The audit was an excellent way for the township and the school district to join forces and effort and figure out how to make the community’s walking routes as safe as possible,” he says.

To make sure federal money is available in the future whenever Tredyffrin Township or any other municipality is ready to pursue infrastructure improvements, Metka, the state’s Safe Routes coordinator, says that Congress must be made aware that pedestrian and bicycle routes are just as important to a community’s infrastructure as the local road and bridge network. He suggests that township officials contact their legislators and members of Congress and explain the importance of the Safe Routes to School Program.

“We can’t afford to strip down federal funding for transportation to the barebones of roads and bridges,” he says. “We need these community programs to ensure that we have sustainable, nonmotorized travel options such as walking and bicycling routes in our transportation networks.”

When making infrastructure decisions, township supervisors must see themselves as transportation directors and managers at the local level, he says.

“As such, they must be cognizant of all modes of travel,” he explains. “People in a community need to have a choice on how they can travel. Transportation efforts cannot be directed exclusively to road and bridge projects.”

As part of its overall infrastructure improvement plan for the past few years, PennDOT has included small and medium-size projects that, for fewer dollars, have had a profound impact on transportation in the state.

“A surprising amount can be done to improve a community’s pedestrian and bicycle routes for a small fraction of the cost of implementing highway and bridge maintenance,” Metka says. “To build healthy, sustainable, livable communities today, it’s imperative that a municipality provide access to a variety of safe transportation options, including pedestrian and bicycle routes.”

In the end, an entire community benefits from safer routes to school.

“If we want to change the health of a nation, we have to start by changing the health of a community,” school nurse Barb Magnotta says. “Schools and municipalities that pool their resources and work together will succeed. The end result is better for our children, for their parents, and for the community as a whole.” ♦