

Safe Routes to School

Paper and Balloons Don't Save Children's Lives

IN 1997, TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES publicized the fact that being hit by a car was the number one cause of death for kids aged five to fourteen in New York City, with children in the Bronx representing the highest percentage of children hit.

This danger—combined with overwhelming community and political support—caused the city's Department of Transportation to take notice of Transportation Alternatives' innovative Safe Routes to School program and start one of its own.

The DOT Safe Routes to School program started in 2001 with a budget of \$2.5 million. At that time, the DOT launched the program to "focus on infrastructure improvements around schools throughout the City." T.A. and local parents cheered.

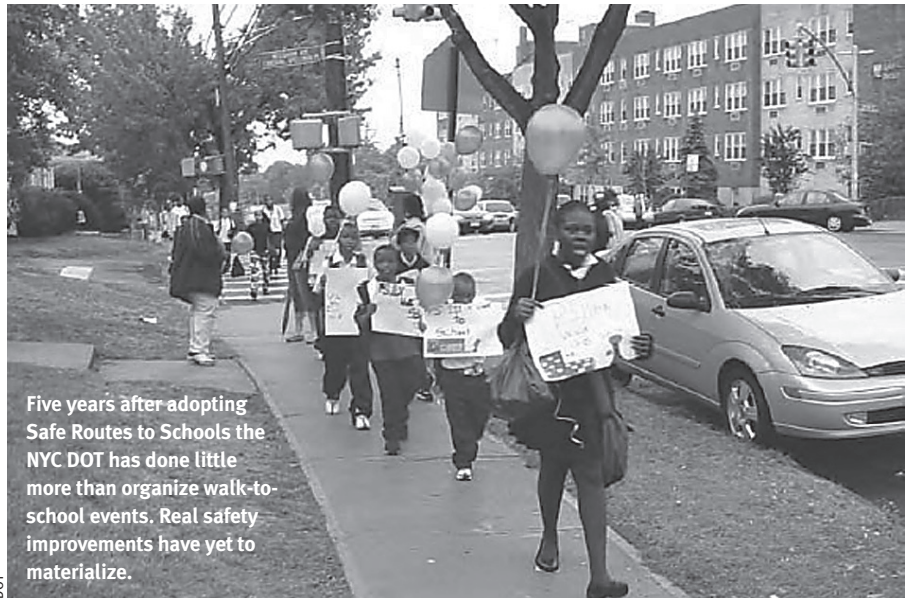
In February 2004, with another influx of \$4 million in federal support, the DOT again announced Safe Routes to School, announcing they would "start making safety improvements" at 135 "priority schools" "by the end of the current school year." Again, Transportation Alternatives and local parents were optimistic that the institutionalization and funding of this Safe Routes program reflected a new set of people-first priorities at DOT and would yield real changes to the street environment. We should have known better.



Parents and students from CCB in the Bronx rally for 15 mph slow speed zones around their schools. Their cries have fallen on deaf ears at DOT.

Today, more than five years into the program, the DOT has virtually nothing to show for Safe Routes to School except for a few dozen "safety reports" that amount to infrastructure *recommendations*, not the actual infrastructure improvements that were promised five years and \$6.5 million dollars ago.

What the DOT has done with the money, instead of designing and installing street safety improvements is fund a Walk to School pro-



Five years after adopting Safe Routes to Schools the NYC DOT has done little more than organize walk-to-school events. Real safety improvements have yet to materialize.

"Children who walk to and from these schools deserve extra protection on our streets, and we are going to ensure that they get it."

—DOT commissioner Iris Weinshall, February 25, 2004

gram that bizarrely orders children to carry balloons aloft, when crossing the street to make themselves more visible to turning motorists.

While some crosswalks have been re-striped and some traffic signs around schools have been erected, these changes amount to no more than simple routine maintenance required by law, not the promised infrastructure improvements like curb extensions and speed humps that have been proven to prevent injuries and fatalities.

In response to criticisms, the DOT touts the imminent release of several dozen more "safety reports," the drafting of which began with meetings with school representatives held over two years ago.

These reports contain recommendations for potential short and long-term measures to make certain areas around the "priority" schools safer. Most of their short-term recommendations are for standard maintenance such as striping crosswalks and resurfacing the roadbed as well as installing "No Standing Zones" or "Yield to Pedestrians," signs and installing pedestrian ramps (which is actually a Federal requirement for all new construction). Other short-term recommendations are slightly more

ambitious such as installing traffic signals and speed reducers such as speed humps. But according to the reports, these more ambitious measures are only being "considered" for installation, rather than simply included in a work plan. Long-term measures including sorely needed curb extensions are, unfortunately for the safety of the kids, again merely recommended for consideration, not planned or built.

At one "priority" school in Brooklyn, P.S. 6, the DOT report found that almost 90% of the students walk. Clearly, these kids don't need "Walk to School" instruction and free balloons; they need safe streets. Adjacent to the school is the intersection of Flatbush Avenue and Church Avenue, where between 1995-2001, 42 pedestrians were hit by motor vehicles. This is just one of many dangerous city streets covered in these "safety reports" where something should have been done by now to protect children.

The Department of Transportation has yet to establish a timeline or any deadlines for completing the recommendations in these reports, so it is anyone's guess if or when New York City's children will have truly safe routes to school. □