Why not start out the day with a healthy choice? Holyoke School District Health Advisory Committee has been hard at work studying current practices within the district that support fitness and nutrition standards.

The Walking School Bus started last school year as one of the programs the committee elected to offer as another opportunity to educate and demonstrate physical activity throughout the day, not just during extracurricular activities.

The committee felt last year's participation was a positive effort to continue the program for another year. This school year began with students meeting at Holyoke Ball Park Friday, Sept. 7 at 8:30 a.m.

Students living outside of town were able to participate in the program by buses dropping off students that had parent permission to participate.

High school and junior high students have been a crucial part of the program as they are good role models for the younger students. The Holyoke football team was present to help record all the students that participated and to serve as chaperones.

Holyoke students gather at Holyoke Ball Park to kick off the Walking School Bus Friday,

Sept. 7. They were led by an HVFD fire truck and the HHS football team as they walked to school, a safe activity that promotes physical activity in daily routine. Other sports teams and adults have sponsored the group, which will continue through October. Students can jump on the Walking School Bus and walk to school together every late-start Friday at 8:30 a.m. at the ball park.

The group of 66 students was led by the flashing lights of the Holyoke Volunteer Fire Department fire truck.

The Walking School Bus continued for the next two late-start Fridays with 82 participating Sept. 14 with the Holyoke volleyball team as sponsors and 45 participating Sept. 21 with the Holyoke softball team as sponsors.

With childhood obesity on the rise, schools have to invest time and resources on evaluating the district's nutrition and physical education standards, as well as the opportunities students have throughout the day to be active.

Administrators and educators realize the impact they have on a student's future by not only providing rigorous academia, but by instilling healthy life choices into every day. Communities, such as Holyoke, are supporting school districts' efforts in helping to raise healthy kids by implementing Walking School Bus programs.

The Walking School Bus is one of the programs supported by the National Center for Safe Routes to School (www.safe routesinfo.org). This program offers an organized, safe way for students to walk to school with one or two adults or teens.

There are numerous benefits to the participants. Students are practicing the healthy habit of working in physical activity into a regular daily routine. Brain research shows physical activity can prepare the brain for cognitive work, so kids should start the school day with activity by

walking to school.

The Walking School Bus will continue through the months of September and October every late-start Friday, meeting at the Holyoke Ball Park at 8:30 a.m.

The elementary school grade levels are in a competition to see which grade will have the most miles walked by the end of the event. The class that wins will receive a surprise.

In addition, high school and junior high school participants will receive a gift card for a breakfast sandwich from Subway when they sponsor four or more events.

Parents are always welcome and needed to monitor the students and to just enjoy the time with their kids.

Of course, the Walking School Bus does not have to be a once-a-week activity. The committee strongly encourages students and parents to organize smaller groups with neighbors to walk to school daily.

If parents or JR/SR high students would like to be volunteers or if anyone has questions, please call Tracy Trumper, CSU Extension agent, at 854-3616.

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