



Wauconda (IL) School Bans Bikes

...and the school's bicycle ban is on the wrong track!

BY STEVEN J. BOIME, CHICAGOLAND BICYCLE FEDERATION

The attack came from the most unexpected source. Still, barely two months into my job of expanding opportunities for bicyclists in the north and northwest suburbs, Wauconda schools banned bikes for all students from fifth grade through high school. No bikes on school grounds under threat of suspension!

As I sat at the school board meeting, listening to the superintendent's rationale for the ban and the parents' impassioned pleas for a reversal, I saw the 30 or so wide-eyed, extraordinarily quiet children watching as one of the most cherished and joyous rights of childhood was being stolen from them.

I recalled the movie "Footloose," where the Kevin Bacon character moves to a small town that has prohibited its children from dancing. The audience could sneer at the self-righteous, misguided adults who thought they could break the spirit of their young. If dancing is natural, so is biking. Heck, kids have been biking to school for 100 years. Earning the right to ride your bike is a rite of passage that means you are responsible and you have a kind of independence and mobility that frees your soul.

Of course, Wauconda schools didn't make this decision lightly — the superintendent feared for the safety and health of the children. After all, there had been two accidents involving children on bikes in the past five years. The first happened when

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Photo: Dan Burden, Walkable Communities, Inc.

a student rode out from between two parked cars — clearly his fault. Now, cars can't even park at this location. The latest accident happened this past spring, but officials don't know exactly where, when or whose fault it was. Still, the children must be protected, and the ban was enacted, without notice to parents.

The superintendent explained that there is just too much traffic around the schools to ensure the safety of bicycling children. Parents drive so many children to school that it has become unsafe for cyclists and walkers. The buses had to be rerouted to the back of the buildings as a safety measure. Allowing kids to bike to school with the known risk of injury could open the school district to lawsuits.

Parents offered to sign waivers, like the ones they do for school sports teams or class field trips, but the superintendent stated those aren't worth the paper they are printed on. Despite that, they still have high school football, kids still go on field trips and the school floors still get waxed. How many kids have been hurt as a result of those activities in the last five years? Some teachers have even been known to abuse children; should we ban teachers?

It used to be that kids walked, biked or took the school bus. You only got a ride if you had a broken bone or a huge school project to carry — and it was raining. Now, in many places, more children arrive by car than any other means. Hurried parents drive their children, talk on their cell phones and eat fast-food breakfasts, but some consider this to be quality time with their children. Maybe this explains their terrible driving behavior — it's hard to focus on both your child and traffic at the same time.

Our organization, the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, has offered to work with Wauconda's schools to develop a Safe Routes to School program at no cost to the district. The school board has accepted, but the ban stays in effect until they and their insurance carrier are convinced the risk can be reduced to some unknown, "acceptable" level.

So there you have it: protecting kids' health by discouraging an excellent form of exercise they can do their whole lives, during a time of exploding childhood obesity and related illnesses, taking away an opportunity for them to learn responsibility and promoting even more traffic around the schools — all to avoid liability.

I wonder if they'll ban school lunches if a child chokes on the tuna surprise.

Originally published in the Chicago Sun-Times (8-16-03). Steven J. Boime is the north suburban community coordinator of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation in Wheeling.

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