

Oxford, MS: Walking Wednesdays



Planning and Promoting Walking Wednesday:

The most important part of these programs is getting buy-in from a variety of stakeholders. During this time, some of the community partners that supported Walking Wednesdays including the City of Oxford's City Planner, Mayor and Wellness Council with support from the Oxford Police Department and the Boys and Girls Club of Oxford. The Oxford School District, including its school board, superintendent and principals also assisted in the effort.

Using this support as a backbone for the program, Brad Martin went to work to organize Walking Wednesdays. He primarily worked to build relationships with school principals, parents and recruiting volunteers.

Brad worked with a team to develop branding for the program and created signs to put up around the schools to promote the event. Each week, he put up Walk to School signs to promote the program at each of the four locations. Part of the planning for multiple locations included having physical maps of each of the routes and posting signs every week to designate the "Drop off" spot for each walking location.

To help promote the program, Brad worked with local media and schools to publicize the event in the Jr. High Newsletter, on the School District Website and in the Community Section of the Oxford Eagle. In addition to the day of the event, he spent the majority of his time was recruiting and scheduling volunteers, recruiting them primarily from Ole Miss, partnering with exercise science classes and getting the word out through the school's newspaper Daily Mississippian. In the fall of 2011, he also recorded a radio PSA to promote the program to the community. Brad attended Parents night at Oxford Elementary and Middle School in order to build relationships and make the parents more aware of Walk to School programs.

From 2010 - 2011, Walking Wednesday events were held at four schools:

Bramlett Elementary, Oxford Elementary, Della Davidson Elementary and Oxford Middle School. During these events, an average of 300 children participated in Walking Wednesdays every week in Oxford, MS.

For this article, Bike Walk Mississippi spoke to *Brad Martin, former Safe Routes to Schools Coordinator for the University of Mississippi. He led the program as a graduate assistant from 2010-11. Brad now works at the Mississippi Department of Health in the Preventive Health Division. Bike Walk Mississippi asked Brad to shares his experiences planning Walking Wednesday events at four schools throughout the City of Oxford.*

Walking Wednesdays, Walk TO School Bramlett Elementary, Oxford Middle School and Della Davidson Elementary

Every Wednesday, Walk to School Events would begin at 7:30am. Brad asked volunteers to arrive by 7:15am and divided them up by location. Brad divided up the incentives among the four schools and made sure that each volunteer was equipped with training and instructions. He asked that each designated volunteer count the number of kids in attendance and to take down the names of all of the volunteers walking with the children.

Walking Wednesdays, Walk AT School Oxford Elementary

While the students at Oxford Elementary also participated in Walking Wednesdays, due to traffic, infrastructure and safety concerns, these students participated in these events on the walking track after they arrived at school. Announcements were made before school began announcing Walking Wednesday, with students walking together on the quarter mile track at Oxford Elementary. Six - Eight volunteers were placed at different areas around the track to assist with the large number of children and to monitor student behavior. Students would begin walking at 7:25 and walked for 25 minutes. Students received "I Walked today" stickers and were given additional incentives as they returned to class.

TIPS FOR PLANNING AN EVENT

with special guest, Brad Martin

- *Communication with participants is key to your success. Find ways to communicate quickly through text and social media to ensure that everyone knows about any last minute changes. Every week, we made determinations based on weather and highly recommend finding easy ways to communicate these changes to everyone involved.*
- *Build relationships with school principals. Get buy-in from the schools.*
- *Don't forget to get photo releases for both children and adults involved in your event.*
- *Be sure to thank your volunteers. We held a Thank you Luncheon and followed up with volunteers after each event.*
- *Do everything you can to build trust. In order to have a successful event, everyone involved has to trust you. One way to do this is to build relationships, include the parents and school officials and invite Law Enforcement to join you on the walk. Have clear and constant communication with all involved.*
- *As you are planning, be sure to think about your goals. Consider tracking how far students walk over a period of time and including incentives, games, prizes and challenges that make it more interactive for students, parents, teachers and volunteers. One possible idea would be to hold an assembly every year on International Walk to School day or to incorporate health topics or themes.*

Incentives:

- *We worked very hard to keep consistent branding with our event and even branded our incentives. These incentives were key to encouraging the children and included wrist bands, frisbees, footballs, reflectors and water bottles. We tried to include incentives and prizes that continued to promote physical activity.*
- *Even if you don't have a lot of available funding for incentives, utilize branding your event on your materials and incentives to help make the event your*

Lessons Learned:

- *If I had to do it again, I would make better use of social media. It was difficult to rely on printed materials as our primary promotional tool and recommend updating information on a regular website and social media.*
- *Though we never had any issues, I would recommend doing simple background checks on volunteers. I recruited heavily from Ole Miss, especially from FCA, sororities and underclassmen. I relied on people that I knew and students recommended from our partners.*
- *If there is a change in school leadership, continuing the program at a high level can be tough - this is why it is particularly important to build relationships with a variety of people in the schools, make yourself readily available to principals and be adaptable.*

