

## Fairhope Elementary students take part in Walking School Bus

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Cooper Davis, a Fairhope Elementary first-grader, and his mother Dottie Davis lead the Pirate Parade Smart Walk that took place on Friday, Sept. 6. Cooper will be one of the many students who will be participating in the daily Walking School Bus. (Courtesy of Charlene Lee)

**FAIRHOPE, Alabama** -- For Fairhope Elementary students, not all school buses have wheels. Thanks to **Smart Coast**, a non-profit organization, the Walking School Bus has brought back the idea of students walking to school while promoting both safety and increased focus in the classroom.

The program kicked off with a "Smart Walk" Friday, Sept. 6, with 114 students participating in the "Pirate Pride" walk leading from Fairhope Library to Fairhope Elementary School, Smart Coast Program Director Charlene Lee said.

"It went excellently," Lee said. "It was the best walk for the first walk of the school year. It was led by three students that will be leading the daily Walking School Bus that will be launched Monday."

Monday, Sept. 9, the official start of the Walking School Bus began with students, parents and teachers escorting the children safely to school.

Lee said that safety is always a concern, and extra measures were taken to ensure the safety of the children.

"One of the things we have seen in today's world is parents do not feel safe with their children walking to

school without supervision," Lee said. "If we were going to encourage this, we would need to put a safety net around that so parents would feel comfortable."

These safety nets include all students participating in the program must be registered, the adults walking with the children are trained, there are teachers walking, and the city has assisted by painted crosswalk lines to increase safety for motorists to recognize crossing spots, Lee said.

"We also found a location that had the accessibility for dropping their children off, which is at Bayside Orthopaedic between the times of 7 a.m. and 7:10 a.m.," Lee said. "Teachers and volunteers will walk them eight-tenths of a mile on sidewalks all the way to school."

By incorporating daily exercise into the students' lives, the Walking School Bus offers additional benefits.

"We can do nothing better to encourage better health than walking to school," Lee said.

She added, "The children have fun. Research shows they often do better in school because their focus is better and their grades are higher as a result of getting regular exercise."

Dottie Davis, a parent to a Fairhope Elementary School student, highly recommends the program.

"Cooper (Davis' son) received a notice in his folder at the beginning of school," Davis said about learning about the Walking School Bus. "He is unique. He has attention deficit hyperactive disorder, and has to take medicine for it, so he has all of this morning energy he has to burn off. This program helps him to focus better because he has burned off that hyperactivity."

She said that when Cooper was asked about walking, there was never a question in Cooper's mind. He wants to walk. She added that she is not concerned about safety, either.

"It is completely safe," Davis said. "My husband is the police chief in Summerdale. We completely trust these people. People are hesitant because of the world we live in, but I feel completely safe letting my child out of the car in the morning to these people, because they have all gone through background checks."

Fairhope Elementary Principal Terry Beasley has participated in the walks and is happy with the program.

"I have joined the walk and speak with the adults involved regularly," Beasley said. "I have heard absolutely no concerns regarding student safety. There is a lot of chattering and laughter. The children seem to be enjoying the time together."

He added that any program that encourages daily exercise is good.

"It is especially important in our culture today where inactivity is the normal and people sit for hours in front of some electronic gadget," Beasley said. "I do hope the program grows and we can expand to one or two more locations."

For Fairhope Elementary students wishing to register as part of the Walking School Bus, Lee said that there is an open registration. Information is available at the school and on the Smart Coast website.



Fairhope Elementary teacher Cathy Hudon assists with traffic during the kick off walk. Hudon will be one of the Fairhope Elementary teachers who will walk with students along the eight-tenths of a mile route as part of the pilot daily Walking School Bus. (Courtesy of Charlene Lee)

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