

# The Star-Ledger

## N.J. to fund safer walks to schools

Wednesday, October 25, 2006

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The number of children walking or bicycling to school has been falling, while the number of children killed on their way to school has been climbing. Reversing both trends is the goal of a new state grant program announced yesterday.

The program, "Safe Routes to School," will provide \$15 million in grants to help municipal governments make it safer for children to walk or ride their bicycles to and from school.

Local programs could include changes like new sidewalks, better signs, improved crosswalks or more police patrols, officials said. The local governments would come up with the plans, then apply to the state for the funding.

The Department of Transportation plans to help fund programs that reduce injuries to pedestrians or reduce driving violations such as speeding or failing to yield to pedestrians on the streets around schools, Transportation Commissioner Kris Kolluri said.

"We would like to see enforceable, measurable, achievable programs," said Kolluri, who was surrounded by a bevy of elected officials when he announced the new program yesterday across the street from the Rand School in Montclair.

The portion of children who ride their bikes or walk to school was 50 percent in 1969 but 15 percent today, said Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-8th Dist.), a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

"That's part of the problem with obesity in this country, and it's part of the problem with why we're choking to death on exhaust fumes," he said.

Making it safer for children to walk or bike to school would make for fitter students and a healthier environment, Pascrell said.

Kolluri said the state has seen a slight increase in recent years in the number of children between kindergarten and eighth grade who have been killed on their way to or from school. There were eight such fatalities in 2003, nine in 2004 and 11 last year.

Gov. Jon Corzine announced a \$74 million, five-year pedestrian-safety initiative last month. The money to pay for the Safe Routes to School was included in that amount, Kolluri said.

The state will begin immediately accepting applications from local governments. Some \$3.4 million of the \$15 million total is to be allocated to programs during 2006.

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