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State: Let your kids walk to school Driving children to campus increases risk of obesity, health department warns

By Charla Bear, CORRESPONDENT

Stephan Meeker, age 5, like most other pupils at Hayward's Cherryland Elementary, does not walk to school.

Even during the recent statewide Walk to School Week, Stephan could only stare from his father's car as teachers rallied a small percentage of students arriving on foot.

Stephan is just one example of more than 20,000 Hayward pupils estimated to receive rides to school.

The overwhelming preference to chauffeur youngsters to school contributes to inactivity and childhood obesity, according to the California Department of Health Services.

One in three children under 12 in California is overweight or at risk for being overweight, according to Department of Health surveys.

"If a child walks to school and makes that a regular habit, they'll be at a decreased risk for obesity and diabetes," said Lisa Cirill, chief of physical activity for the Department of Health.

But the reasons for driving children to school are not easily dismissed.

Driving is not only convenient for children, it gives parents peace of mind.

Two children — Troy Pack, 10, and his sister, Alana, 7 —

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were killed in 2003 in a Danville hit-and-run while walking to get ice cream. And investigators still are trying to identify a murdered teen girl found in a duffel bag behind a Castro Valley restaurant two years ago. It's not known whether she was an area resident or a student, but the specter still is enough to give parents pause about letting their kids go off on their own.

But the state strategy for improving health suggests children should be walking.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has made fighting obesity in California a top priority. Last month he signed a law banning junk food sales in California schools by July 2007. But the law made no new provisions for physical activity.

Cirill said physical activity is vital to getting children into shape. Walking to school is a simple way to achieve that activity, she said.

But Stephan Meeker's father said walking to school is not simple for his son. He said the community around Cherryland is not designed for safe walking. Sidewalks are spotty in the northern Hayward neighborhood. Even across from the school the walking path is only

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a dirt setback.

"There's nowhere for kids to walk except in the streets, and people drive fast here," Meeker said.

"Drivers here are used to not following traffic guidelines. You get one day of heavy enforcement," said Darryl Stewart, representative for School Supervisor Nate Miley, at Cherryland's Walk to School event on Oct. 6.

As he finished his sentence, a California Highway Patrolman yelled, "You're in a red zone" to a parent dropping off a child.

Supervisor Miley, who also was on hand, said it's not just cars that present a safety danger for children walking to school.

Since his days as an Oakland city councilman in the early 1990s, Miley has asked students to fill out "walkability" surveys to assess pedestrian dangers. Miley said the surveys revealed drugs, dogs and kidnapping attempts as safety threats.

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To respond to the problems, Miley has helped the community obtain a \$15 million grant for sidewalk improvements. He also is facilitating development of walking groups that assign seniors to supervise students.

But many students said it's distance, not fear, that inhibits them from walking to school.

"I don't get scared to walk to school because I've been doing it since I was in kindergarten," said sixth-grader Charvez Brown, 11.

But Charvez said she'll stop walking to school when she starts middle school next year because the route to her new school will be longer and near railroad tracks.

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports advises kids to target approximately 13,000 steps, or about five miles, per day.

Charvez's new school will be less than a mile and a half away. That means Charvez actually would have to walk quite a bit farther than to her new school and back to achieve the recommended distance.

**Charla Bear** is a freelance writer who lives in Oakland.

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