

Safe Routes to School: Houghton Elementary & Middle Schools

Review and Recommendations: Executive Summary

December 13, 2019

This report is a result of a collaborative project between Houghton Elementary and Middle Schools and a team of students at Michigan Technological University to support a Safe Routes to School program. The purpose is to document how students currently get to and from school, identify barriers to walking and biking, and to make recommendations for improvements to promote safe walking and biking in Houghton. The team mapped student addresses, surveyed students and parents, conducted walking audits of routes around each school, hosted a community meeting to gather feedback, and created a public online map where people can review the results and make their own observations of barriers and add suggestions for improvements. The report and online map are available at houghtonsaferoutes.com.

Currently, only 3-5% of Houghton Elementary and Middle School students walk or bike to school, even in good weather. This is well below the national average (13%). Safe Routes to School is a federal program that is implemented by states (including Michigan) to promote safe active transportation among K-8 students. Active transportation promotes student health, reduces obesity, improves learning, saves money, and reduces carbon emissions and air pollution from vehicles. Moreover, kids in Houghton say they would prefer to walk or bike than to take the bus or be driven in a vehicle.

Key findings include:

- Kids, especially elementary age, say they want to walk or bike to school. Parents, however, generally don't feel comfortable allowing them to walk or bike.
- About half of Houghton K-8 students reside outside of the district, meaning bus transportation is not available and it is too far to walk or bike. 102 of these students live in the City of Hancock.
- A large number of students (n=415) ride to school in a personal vehicle each day, even in good weather. This means 65% of elementary students and 73% of middle school students arrive in a personal vehicle. This increases the amount of traffic coming/going from each school, adds to air pollution students are exposed to on school grounds, and reduces the ability of others to safely walk/bike.
- 141 (40%) of elementary students live within a 20-25 minute walk to the school, with 80 living within half a mile. Only 16 current middle school students live within a short walk to school, but this number will increase in the next few years as students who are currently in the elementary school age into middle grades.
- There are few safe places to cross major streets in Houghton, including streets near schools. This is a core problem with providing pedestrians access to schools and to the downtown.
- There are few maintained sidewalks in Houghton that are separated from street traffic, curbed, and kept clear of snow and ice. This limits safe places for children to walk, especially in winter.
- There are gaps in street lighting in neighborhoods near the schools. Given the few sidewalks and lack of pedestrian signals at crossings, lighting is important for the morning commute, especially near intersections.
- There is a general culture of prioritizing automobile traffic and disregard for pedestrians/bikers in the broader community that contributes to pedestrians and bikers feeling unsafe. This extends to the schools themselves, which most parents don't feel promote active transportation.

Recommendations

There are multiple barriers to active transportation. It will take a long-term sustained effort to address all of them. Our team makes six recommendations for places to start. Ultimately, school and city leadership will need to work with parents, students, and community members and organizations to decide how to proceed and which improvements to pursue. Involving more people in this decision-making process is more likely to achieve broad buy-in and the level of support and engagement necessary to change culture, programs, and infrastructure that support active transportation. Several of these recommendations are designed to work in conjunction with one another.

1. **Improve Safety on Sharon Avenue.** Install sidewalks on both sides of Sharon Avenue separated from the road with green space, and paint and maintain the current bike shoulder. This would offer bike and walking access to both schools and connect residential areas to recreational bike trails. Lighting should also be improved. Intersections of Sharon with Gundlach/Portage and Military/Superior should be improved with pedestrian islands, crossing guards, or full stoplights with pedestrian signals added to replace 4-way stops and lighting.

2. **Safe Crossings on Bridge Street.** Currently zero elementary students living east of Bridge St. walk or bike to school. Parents of children living in East Houghton and near the elementary, say they would allow their kids to walk or bike if routes were improved to be safer, especially increasing the safety of crossings and adding sidewalks. There is currently no safe way for kids to cross Bridge Street. There are 52 students who live east of Bridge St. and within the Active Transport Zone and several more students living in Agate St. neighborhood just outside the Active Transport Zone who could be impacted by adding crossing guards or pedestrian signal.
3. **Facilitate Active Transport in West Houghton.** 58 elementary students live in West Houghton proximate to the school, yet only 38 of them report that they sometimes walk or bike. Several improvements could be made in this neighborhood to make active transport safer and more available. Walking school buses are a low-cost, high-impact solution that would group students together and offer adult supervision along the route. Sidewalks and lighting should also be improved.
4. **Create Drop Sites for Distant Students.** Students living out-of-district or farther from schools, could walk to school if there were defined and supervised drop sites from which students could safely walk. This would increase access to active transport and reduce the number of personal vehicles on school grounds, thus reducing congestion, air pollution, and increasing safety of walking/biking for other children. Drop sites should be conveniently located for parents driving into Houghton for work.
5. **Implement No-Busing and Idle-Free Zones.** One way to incentivize active transport is to not bus students who live proximate to the school. This is a common practice in school districts across the country, including several in northern climates like Minnesota and Wisconsin, where some no-busing zones extend as far as two-miles. Eliminating busing within a half-mile distance from the elementary school would impact 80 elementary students, including 39 who currently primarily bus. This could be enough to eliminate a bus route, saving the school district approximately \$37,000 annually (funds which could potentially be used to hire walking school bus leaders, crossing guards, or drop site attendants). Restricting idling on school district property (among buses and personal vehicles) would reduce air pollution that students are exposed to.
6. **Start an Active Transport Champion Program.** Create a community-driven volunteer organization to sustain Safe Routes to School programs over time, organize for improvements, and encourage cultural change.

The report was written by a team of undergraduate and graduate students at Michigan Technological University taking Advanced GIS (with Dr. Don Lafreniere) or Communities and Research (with Dr. Richelle Winkler) during Fall semester 2019. The broader Core Planning Team also includes school and local community leaders. The Core Planning Team invites additional members of the general public, K-12 students, teachers, and parents to get involved. Please contact them to learn how you can contribute. The students who wrote this report included:

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Picture by Jackie Gebhardt

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