



# There's a new mode of travel afoot

Walking or riding a bike to school was once considered uncool, but that is changing in many schools, writes **Caroline Milburn**.

GETTING teenagers to walk or ride to school seems like a Herculean task. It was a problem for teacher Robert Sharp when he tried to coax students at Keysborough College, in Melbourne's outer south-eastern suburbs, to join the Ride2School program.

Walking was considered uncool by students used to being driven to school by their parents. Then a few ideas worked. "We ran monthly competitions between classes to see who had the highest bike rate, or the highest walking rate, or which classes recorded the biggest improvement in the numbers of students walking or riding," says Mr Sharp, a maths science teacher at the school's Heatherhill campus in Springvale.

"Other teachers got on board, pushing the environmental and health benefits. Then some of the more influential students got involved. When the cool kids started doing the program, others started to follow."

A year ago 30 per cent of students at the Heatherhill campus walked or cycled to school; now almost 60 per cent do. Mr Sharp has been surprised at how quickly the Ride2School program has changed the habits of so many teens. "It's become an acceptable way to get to school. When I first suggested walking or riding to school, some of the students laughed at the idea, but now some of those students are actually doing it themselves. They think

it's OK to walk several kilometres, whereas before they thought two kilometres was a very long distance."

The enthusiasm of the Keysborough students is being repeated statewide in the Ride2School program. It's an attitude that will be celebrated on National Ride2School Day, Wednesday, March 25.

The program's soaring participation rates have outstripped the goals first set by then premier Steve Bracks, when the Government began the \$4 million scheme in 2006. Mr Bracks said he hoped 500 schools and 34,000 new regular riders would be taking part in the program by 2010. So far, 996 Victorian primary and secondary schools, representing more than 313,000 enrolments, or 37 per cent of students, have joined the scheme.

The web-based program, run mainly by Bicycle Victoria, is part of the Government's health strategy for young people. It helps schools develop activities and online reporting to boost the numbers of students walking or riding to school. It also provides bike education, and the State Government supplies grants to build bike sheds at schools.

About 80 per cent of Victorian students live within three kilometres of their school. Despite this, Leigh Snelling, director of Ride2School, says she and her colleagues were initially uncertain whether they could persuade parents and children to leave the car at home when commuting to and from school.

Many children lead sedentary lifestyles. Only 20 per cent of Australian children walk or ride to school, compared with 80 per cent 30 years ago. Almost one-quarter of children are overweight or obese.

"When we first started, we thought we might end up with about 100 schools participating," Ms Snelling says. "But it turned out that parents have such warm memories of walking or riding to school themselves, that they got behind the program. Children should be getting at least 60 minutes a day of moderate exercise. It's easy and it makes sense for a child to get some of their daily exercise requirements by walking or riding to and from school."

Surveys show that 45 per cent of students at participating schools are walking or riding to school, more than twice the state average of 20 per cent.

Ride2School's popularity has spread beyond Victoria's borders, partly because once a school joins, it gets its own web-based portal to record its progress. Schools in America, Pakistan and Britain have joined, as well as 147 in NSW, 39 in South Australia and smaller numbers in other states and territories. NSW set up its own version of Ride2School last year after getting federal and state government funding to do so.

The number of schools registering to take part in National Ride2School Day is also growing rapidly. More than 700 Australian schools have registered, a 30 per cent increase over last year's tally.

**LINK**

► [ride2school.com.au](http://ride2school.com.au)



Students at Keysborough College with their bicycles and teacher Robert Sparo (above). National Ride2School Day is on Wednesday, March 25

## More good reasons to get moving:

- A third of primary school children walk for less than five minutes a day.
- The "school run" accounts for 17 per cent of traffic from 8.30am to 9am in Melbourne.
- Low levels of physical activity are linked to higher risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes in children as young as 12.
- Children who walk or cycle to school are more alert and ready to learn than children who are driven.

Source: Dr Carolyn Whitzman, urban planning department, Melbourne University

