

## NEWS RELEASE

### Saint Columb's College and Sustrans Celebrate Walk to School Week 2009

On Friday, 22<sup>nd</sup> May, Saint Columb's College held a Walk to School event as part of National Walk to School Week. Over 200 students and teachers took to their feet, walking to the school from three meeting points along the Buncrana, Greenhaw and Strand Roads to highlight the need to reduce congestion and promote healthier lifestyles among the school community. As an incentive to take part, the school provided the participants with a healthy breakfast on their arrival, kindly sponsored by the Parent Teacher Association.

The event is part of a larger Safe Routes to Schools project that the Eco-Schools' team together with the Student Representative Council of the College are working on in conjunction with Sustrans to increase the levels of walking and cycling to and from school. When launching their project, the Eco-Schools' team and the Student Representative Council were keen to promote healthier and safer journeys to and from school and to reduce the environmental impact as well as raising awareness of issues for pedestrians on access routes to school.

So why is it so important to encourage children to walk and cycle more? Like everywhere else in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, car use is on the rise. In the last twenty years, the number of children being driven to school has doubled, this is despite the fact that the average school journey is just over three miles, or a twenty minute bike ride. The consequences of our ever more sedentary lifestyles include rising levels of obesity and traffic pollution which contributes to high levels of asthma. Both of these chronic conditions add considerably to Northern Ireland's health budgets each year. In fact, on average, one in seven children suffer from asthma; this figure increases to one in three in inner city areas. In slow moving traffic, pollution levels are higher inside cars than outside and cycling or walking briskly for half an hour per day can half the risk of heart disease.

Walking and cycling are excellent forms of physical activity and the journey to school can make an important contribution to increasing these activity levels. Patterns of activity are set in early childhood, so early lack of exercise can lead to a higher risk of future obesity, high blood pressure, poor psychological well-being and coronary heart disease. Walking and cycling can help children to gain confidence and make friends, helping both to increase independence and traffic sense. Current research also suggests that more active children arrive at school more alert and focused and achieve better academic results.

**Sinead Mc Gonigle, School Environmental Officer** for Saint Columb's was clearly delighted at the positive outcome of the day, commenting, "Having become the first post-primary school in the Western Board to achieve the prestigious Eco-Schools' green flag in June 2008, we are more committed than ever to reducing the school's environmental impact. By organising the Walk to School event in conjunction with the Student Council and Sustrans, we are tackling one of the Eco-Schools' programme's key areas. Apart from the obvious health benefits for pupils and staff, walking to school will help us reduce emissions and ease traffic congestion, thus improving safety for all. We hope that this event will encourage parents in particular to support us in improving the health and well-being of their children. Our ambition is that this walk will become a daily habit for more of our pupils".

**Ryan Horner, Student Representative Council Development Officer** for St Columb's was over awed by the upbeat response from both pupils and staff, admitting, "The positive response that we have received since launching this project from everyone in the school has been mind blowing. It underlines the community spirit that exists in the College. The Walk has given us a great sense of pride and togetherness". However, he was also very keen to stress that this was only the beginning of the Safe Routes to Schools project at the College, adding, "Together with the Eco – Schools' team and Sustrans, I believe that we can develop this project a lot further. Indeed, we are already planning our next steps. This event will be the first of many activities that will ultimately lead to more of our pupils and staff opting to walk or cycle to and from school. Future activities will include, 'A Bike to School Day' and a 'Bike Doctor', attending the school to help pupils and staff maintain and service their bikes. We are also currently undertaking a whole school survey in order to develop a School Travel Plan, in conjunction with Sustrans." He finished by commenting on the DRD – Roads Service's plans to upgrade the A2, Buncrana Road, demanding, "This project fully highlights the importance of adequate foot and cycle provision and school safety zone measures being incorporated into this scheme".

**Ross McGill, Sustrans Sustainable Transport Officer** in Derry congratulated St Columb's College on their success, commenting, "It's fantastic to see such enthusiasm from the school community. We know that many young people want to cycle or walk to school, so it's crucial to give them the right kind of support to help them get what they want. This highlights the benefits of such alternatives to the 'school run' which accounts for up to a quarter of the traffic each morning and adds to congestion outside schools. Walking or cycling to school not only eases congestion, it is also a healthier option which provides people an opportunity to adopt a healthier lifestyle. The young people today are showing adults very clearly the way forward in modern sustainable travel."

Sinead, Ryan and Ross expressed their deep gratitude to all of those who contributed to the success of the day, including the School Management Team. They mentioned the generosity of the school's Parent Teacher Association who funded the breakfasts and indeed, the school canteen staff who kindly provided them. They also paid tribute to Sustrans and the Derry City Council for all of their support in organising the event.

Further information about Sustrans including other projects and areas of work is available on [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

#### Notes

- Safe Routes to School was developed by Sustrans to encourage more people to walk and cycle to school safely, to improve road safety and reduce child casualties, to improve children's health and development, and reduce traffic congestion and pollution
- Sustrans is the UK's leading sustainable transport charity. Its vision is a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment. It is achieving this through innovative but practical solutions to the UK's transport challenges. It was founded in Bristol on 7 July 1977
- Sustrans flagship project, the National Cycle Network, is now around 12,000 miles and runs within one mile of over half the UK population. During 2007, over 354 million trips were made on the Network. It is maintained by a team of 2,400 Volunteer Rangers.