

Introduction

As part of the Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure grant program administered by the Connecticut Department of Transportation, staff from Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc. (FHI) coordinated with staff of Frank T. Wheeler Elementary School in Plainville, Connecticut and subsequently conducted a site audit of the school on May 3, 2011.

Wheeler School has an enrollment of about 280 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. In the morning, doors open at 8:30 AM to allow students into the building. School officially begins at 8:40 AM and dismissal occurs at 3:30 PM. Between 8:30 and 8:40 AM a number of school doors, including the front, west side, and rear doors, are open to accept students and faculty. Students who arrive after 8:40 AM can only enter the school through the front doors.

The physical education teacher of the school, Ms. Kristen Plocki, applied for the program assistance and was official point of contact for the school. She suggested that the FHI team observe a morning arrival period, as this is the most hectic time at the school.

The observation of school arrival was focused on areas of concern for walkers and bikers. FHI explored potential improvements for those areas during the audit. This memorandum presents recommendations for operational improvements that will promote safe walking and biking to school. Some or all of these recommendations can be included in the school's Safe Routes to School Plan as it is developed.



Observations and Issues

Upon meeting with school officials, FHI was informed that one of the primary concerns was the safety of students walking to and from the school campus while parents were dropping students off. While the school is a neighborhood school and many of the students can walk to school, there are a great number of students that are transported to school in a motor vehicle by a parent. In addition, these drop-offs occur at various areas on and off the school campus, which makes it difficult for school staff to monitor drop-off activity. In particular, the issue of parents parking on both sides of the road on the corner of Cleveland Memorial Drive and Trumbull Avenue was noted as a concern. FHI observed these issues at the site audit.

During the site audit, both on and off campus activity was observed by the FHI team. Figure 1 illustrates the existing conditions around Wheeler School.



Figure 1: Existing Conditions.

Parent Drop-Off

When asked, Ms. Plocki suggested that about half of the students who are within the walk zone of Wheeler School are driven to school by a parent.

Parent drop-off occurs in a variety of locations on and off the school property. The first of these drop-off locations is in the school driveway / parking lot area on the west side of the school. Here, parents are encouraged to drive counterclockwise all the way around the parking spaces and drop off their children at the end closest to the rear playground. The students are supposed to congregate on the playground, which is supervised, until the 8:40 AM bell rings.

While this drop-off system functioned, there were a number of drop-offs at points short of the recommended area. Some of the short drop-offs were to allow students to walk directly to the side entrance, and sometimes they occurred so that parents could avoid waiting behind other cars. While FHI did observe these behaviors, they did not present a significant safety concern. Ms. Plocki noted that this area was more problematic prior to the recent addition of staff supervision during drop-off.

The second drop-off location is on Wheeler Lane, near the rear playground. Here, parents pull up close to an opening in the school property fence and the children exit their vehicle. They walk across the playground fields to where all students are supervised until the 8:40 AM bell rings for everyone to enter the building. There is plenty of space for the number of cars dropping off and the volumes are low enough to not negatively impact pedestrian traffic.

The third drop-off location is at the corner of Cleveland Memorial Drive and Trumbull Avenue. Here, parents were observed parallel parking on both sides of the roadway. Students exit their vehicles and cross two lanes of traffic, in addition to the cars pulling and out of parking positions. In addition, a number of students were observed being dropped off earlier than the allowed 8:30 AM time, which is when staff begins supervising the grounds and students. There is no supervision in before or after school at this particular location and parents have been asked not to drop off at this location.

There are "No Parking" signs on both sides of Cleveland Memorial Drive in front of the school.

Pedestrians and Bicyclists

A small number of students were observed walking to Wheeler School. Many students walked from the neighborhood south of Wheeler School and funneled onto the school property via Trumbull Avenue. Other students walked from the neighborhood east of the school and entered the school



Parent drop-off area in parking lot.



Cars at the corner of Cleveland Memorial Boulevard and Trumbull Avenue.



Crosswalk across Route 10.

property via the gate on Wheeler Lane.

With respect to bicycling, the school policy is that third, fourth, and fifth graders can ride their bicycles to school (with helmets). There are two grid style bike racks in the courtyard behind the school. There were no students, however, observed riding to school on the observation day.

Wheeler School has a strong network of connections to surrounding neighborhoods. Trumbull Avenue has sidewalks extending greater than half a mile south from Wheeler School. Neighborhoods to the west are accessible via sidewalks on Route 10 and a crosswalk located at Cleveland Memorial Drive.

Additionally, a pathway extends from the southern limit of a sidewalk on the east side of Route 10 to Wheeler School's athletic field. A pathway also connects the school to Wheeler Lane and subsequently to Cooke Street and neighborhoods both north and east of the school.

Cooke Street has a sidewalk on the west side of the road from Betsy Road south past Paderewski Park, with a marked crosswalk to Pinnacle Road. Figure 2 highlights facilities within a 1/5 mile radius of the school, a feasible 15-minute walk for a student.

In addition to the crosswalk on Route 10 at Cleveland Memorial Drive, there two school zone warning signs in each direction on Route 10. These signs include a posted speed limit of 25 mph and are located 50 feet advance of the crosswalk.

The pathway from Route 10 is used by maintenance vehicles and pedestrians alike. Ms. Plocki noted



School zone signage on Route 10.

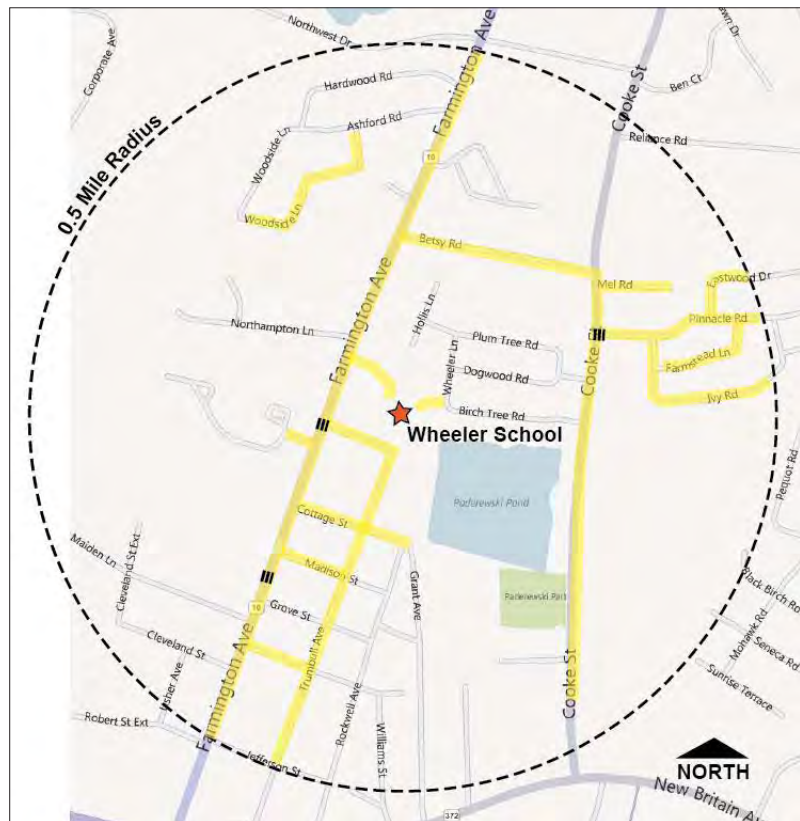


Figure 2: Pedestrian facilities within 0.5 mile radius of Wheeler School. Sidewalks and pathways are shown in yellow. Crosswalks are shown in black.

that a number of people use the path to cut through the school property to reach the neighborhoods each of the school fields and Wheeler Lane. The pathway extending to Wheeler Lane is heavily used by students who are dropped off at that location in the morning.

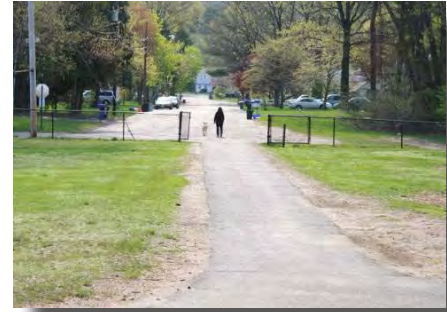
While several of the surrounding streets lack sidewalks, many of these roadways have only local traffic, are wide and flat with good sight lines, and for the most part, lack on-street parking.

Given Wheeler's School proximity to neighborhoods and relatively extensive pedestrian infrastructure, the school is well positioned to encourage walking to school amongst its students.

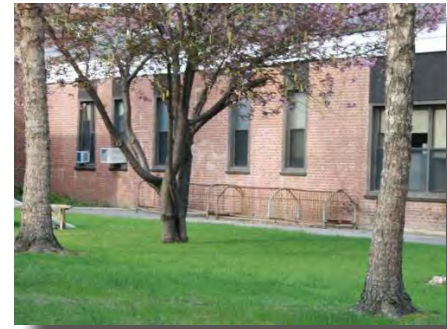
Bus Transportation

There were six buses, including five full and one small bus, observed discharging students at Wheeler School on the observation day. Students in kindergarten through third grade that live more than one mile from the school qualify for busing. Students in fourth and fifth grade that live more than 1 ½ mile from school qualify for busing.

Bus loading and unloading occurs at the front of the school on the south side of the building and buses have exclusive access the loop driveway in front the school. At the driveway, there are signs that read, "Buses Only, 8:40 – 9:10 AM and 3:15 – 3:45 PM". Buses entering the bus loop to drop students off appeared to be more than half full. The bus operations appeared to be conflict-free and did not interfere with students walking to school or parent drop-off.



Gate entrance at Wheeler Lane.



Unused bike racks at rear of school.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on field observations of issues and discussions with the Wheeler School staff, the following recommendations are offered to improve walk conditions and safety both on campus and within the neighborhood surrounding the school.

Recommendations

1. Encourage walking and bicycling to Wheeler School. The school is ideally situated, as a neighborhood school, to have a large percentage of students arrive on foot or by bicycle. This would help reduce vehicular traffic during drop-off and pick-up times. An example of a programs or incentives to encourage walking would include:

- Designate one day a week or one day a month (during fair weather) as walk to school day. Encourage parents to walk with their children if possible. Consider having buses and parents drop off at the Trumbull Avenue and Jefferson Street intersection and walk the remaining ½ mile to school (15 minute walk).
- Assist parents in organizing "Walking School Buses". This is a voluntary program through which parents take turns walking a group of students to school.
- Promote walking and cycling as a healthy lifestyle through the physical education program. Link this education to walk to school programs and events.

2. Restrict parent drop-off and pick-up to the school parking lot only. Create a parking lane at the end of the lot, closest to the playground and field. Place cones in the end parking spaces during drop-off and pick-up periods to allow moving cars enough space to pass the parked cars. Consider a sidewalk on the edge of the grassy area to receive students and direct them to the playground (see figure 3).

3. Lock the west side entry doors at all times. Allow students to enter the school only through the front or rear doors (off of the playground). This would discourage parents from dropping off at the wrong location.



Figure 3: Drop-off Improvements.

4. Place "No Parking" signs at the corner of Cleveland Memorial Drive and Trumbull Avenue. Monitor and enforce new restrictions.
5. Develop an ongoing program to educate parents on the accepted drop-off and pick-up procedures detailing the safety issues created by violating these practices. This program could be promoted through various measures such as on-line announcements, emails, flyers, social media, and periodic campaigns such as posting personnel at school entrances for periodic enforcement/education.
6. Improve school zone signage on Route 10. Install school crossing signs directly at crosswalks. Signs should be large, bright (retro-reflective). Speed limit signs should include school zone language and post a speed of 20 mph. Crosswalk pavement markings should be maintained and repainted regularly. Additional information can be found in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD, December 2009 edition, http://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/pdfs/2009/pdf_index.htm). Part 7 of the manual provides guidance on a variety of traffic control signs for transition areas into schools.
7. The Town of Plainville should consider adopting a uniform signage system, similar to that suggested above. This system should be implemented at all school areas in town so as to improve recognition by motorists.
8. To pursue the implementation of these recommendations, a Safe Routes Committee should be formed with the goal of coordinating with Town Staff and Public Safety to further investigate the feasibility of these recommendations. If feasible, the Committee should work with the Town to pursue funding for the installation and maintenance of improvements.



New retro-reflective crosswalk signage would make crosswalk at Route 10 more visible.