



## Minnesota Elementary School Adds Bikes to the Curriculum

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Ever wondered what would happen if you taught school kids from very diverse backgrounds to become skilled bike riders, then took them on rides all over the neighborhood as part of the curriculum?

I had a chance to learn about Pillsbury elementary that added biking to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. The focus is on kids learning through activity and adventure. Underpinning this idea are the convictions that communities can offer a wealth of bike-accessible resources and that becoming a safe urban biker empowers kids and builds connections to their communities.

During the summer, I volunteered at Pillsbury to help check and repair the bikes for the school year. In the cafeteria, next to the lunch line is the bike closet. It's filled with 30 kid-sized mountain bikes carefully arranged in two rows on garage-style utility hooks. This organized collection of bikes is the work of two teachers and a supporting cast who embraced the idea of bikes for elementary students. With gears adjusted and brakes checked these bikes are ready for students.



The next time I visit Pillsbury, September is ending and the students have been riding every week. On a sunny, blue-sky morning it's cold enough for gloves, but students in the fourth-grade class are too busy holding their line to notice as they set off into the Windom Park neighborhood. They are following Pillsbury teacher, Mark Trumper. He has the students trained to think and speak the language of biking. This seems practical for everyone but especially the non-native speakers. Today, as they ride the neighborhood, it's obvious that school has evolved as science, art and social studies no longer reside just in classrooms but also outside among this group of newly competent urban bikers.

The ritual of learning to ride a bike as a 5 or 6-year-old does not hold true across cultural and economic boundaries. Mark said it best, "I really was struck by how little my students were allowed outside to play and how few of them owned bicycles or knew how to ride one well. It was one of those moments that changed how I look at education. We were missing a big part of education. Kids need the outdoors and to engage in adventurous activities."

Trumper recruited art teacher Susan Tuck to help build support and momentum for his idea. After receiving a number of grants to begin building the bike fleet, they began taking the school's fourth graders riding (or learning to ride) in the fields at Windom Park. As students' skills progress, they go on short trips near the park and school to practice riding safely and in a large group. You can hear them calling out, "turning left," "stopping" and on occasion, "biker down!" as their line of bikes snakes along neighborhood streets, trails and parks. Along the way, residents turn, smile and offer encouragement or a friendly greeting. Cyclists pull alongside and chat with the students—these kids know all about *holding their line, drafting, and feathering the brakes*. Only a few of them know firsthand about *endos*.

Pillsbury is now piloting an after-school class, an offshoot of the school day riding program. This class is currently working on a series of park-to-park rides ranging in distance from 5 to 10 miles, with at least one



playground break before completing the ride. The group's goal for the autumn is to visit every park in northeast

Minneapolis before the snow and ice force them to hang up the bikes for the winter. On six recent trips, the kids have biked to 21 parks,

logged more than 40 miles, climbed some big hills and displayed growing confidence in their abilities. "I know now that I can make it up any hill that we are asked to climb," said one of the newest members of the group.

Funding to purchase a fleet of good quality kid-size mountain bikes and to support the program has come primarily from small grants, ranging in size from \$500–\$5000.

Building biking into the school curriculum feels like the right idea. We know that small bursts of movement should be part of the school day. Long periods of sitting aren't just bad for adults. At Pillsbury, teacher champions, a highly supportive administration and a plan to build biking into the curriculum have created a winning combination. Although bike riding in a bicycle friendly city like Minneapolis makes perfect sense, what if every community supported schools to spend a little time out of the building and on a bike?

*This story was written by Raymond Boyle, a bicyclist and writer in Minneapolis.*