

Walking continues from pg. 01

Parents expressing interest in volunteering

by LAKENDRA LEWIS

North East Independent School District officials hope plans for a program at Larkspur Elementary encouraging volunteers to walk students to and from school — prompted by the hit-and-run death of a girl earlier this year — will catch on at other campuses.

The Walking School Bus program is a proposed addition to other safety measures announced for the neighborhood near Braesview and Larkspur drives, where 9-year-old Tatyana Babineaux—a fourth-grader at Larkspur Elementary—was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver in January while walking to school. An arrest has been made in the case.

"This is certainly something the school board supports," said Susan Galindo, NEISD board president. "I believe we have some schools in our area who do (Walking School Bus). It's been talked about for a while, and I think it's exciting that (Larkspur Elementary) wants to do something."

According to Larkspur Principal Susan Del Toro, the school is in the early stages of coordinating a Walking School Bus, a volunteer program in which adults walk children to school.

"I think everyone is concerned because of what happened and we want the children to be safe, so I think people are willing to at least talk about it," Del Toro said. "It's getting a commitment. We're not quite there yet. We would need to figure out all of the logistics."

Del Toro, who has been principal at Larkspur for three years, said she and her staff are researching the Walking School Bus program, which is already in existence nationwide in many school districts.

Del Toro is especially interested in a walking bus for the students who live in the apartments and duplexes about a mile from Larkspur Elementary, many of whose parents are low-income and don't have vehicles.

"Most of the kids get driven or they're bused. But 20 to 50 of our kids who live in



Photo by Aiesha Ammeter

MY BIGGEST CONCERN IS THE APARTMENTS ON BRAESVIEW

SUSAN DEL TORO-PRINCIPAL

the apartments aren't eligible for buses and actually walk to school," Del Toro said.

According to the principal, about 87 percent of Larkspur's 860 students—700 of whom live in neighboring apartments—are economically disadvantaged. Many of the students walk or take the bus to the campus, which opens at 7 a.m. for breakfast.

"My biggest concern is the apartments on Braesview," Del Toro said. "There's a lot more traffic and it's on a hill. If I could have some parents to meet where those three apartments come together, that would be amazing."

Larkspur plans to send out fliers possibly in May announcing a community meeting regarding the start of a walking bus in time for classes in August. The school also would like to get San Antonio Fear Free Environment police officers and nearby apartment managers involved to create more interest in the program.

The Walking School Bus system, which originated in the United Kingdom, was initially structured to have two adults: A "driver" who leads the children to school on

foot and a "conductor" who follows them from behind, much in the same way the kids would be driven to school via bus.

The United States version of the program does not strictly follow the driver/conductor model, but does maintain the idea of adults walking kids to school through designated routes with "pickup" or meeting points, a timetable and a rotating schedule of trained volunteers.

The bicycle train, a variation on the walking school bus in which adults supervise children riding their bikes to school, also is popular in some communities.

"We want to set up a strong program. Ideally, it would be great to have two people walk the kids," Del Toro said. "But initially we would be happy to have one person willing to commit to be at a certain spot every day and walk a group, follow the route and use the crosswalk."

Adults who volunteer for the program would be trained regarding routes and safety measures, and would need to pass a criminal background check.

"We do have some parents who walk their kids every day. So if we could get that parent to wait for a group of kids

and walk them every day, that's our goal," said Del Toro, adding that some parents have already expressed interest.

Although Del Toro said the school would not need the approval of the school board to spearhead a walking school bus, NEISD leaders are in favor of the idea.

The city recently approved \$90,000 in safety improvements at the corner of Braesview and Larkspur after Gina Babineaux, Tatyana's mother, met with District 9 Interim Councilman Joe Krier, city engineers, neighborhood associations and school officials. Krier at a press conference in February addressed requests for better safety at that intersection.

Special concern was expressed for Braesview, where many accidents have been reported and residents complain of speeding, and cars hitting their fences.

The improvements will include a new crosswalk along with overhead blinking school zone lights, brighter signage, a countdown stoplight and a handicap ramp, all estimated for completion in time for the new school year in the fall.

To volunteer for the Walking School Bus program or get more information, call Larkspur at 407-4600. ☎