

# COMMUTER SCHOOL

**SOLAR PANELS, MICROCHIP TAGS AND MILEAGE PRIZES (IPOD, ANYONE?) ARE GETTING KIDS RIDING TO CLASSES AGAIN. BY NICOLE RESNICK**

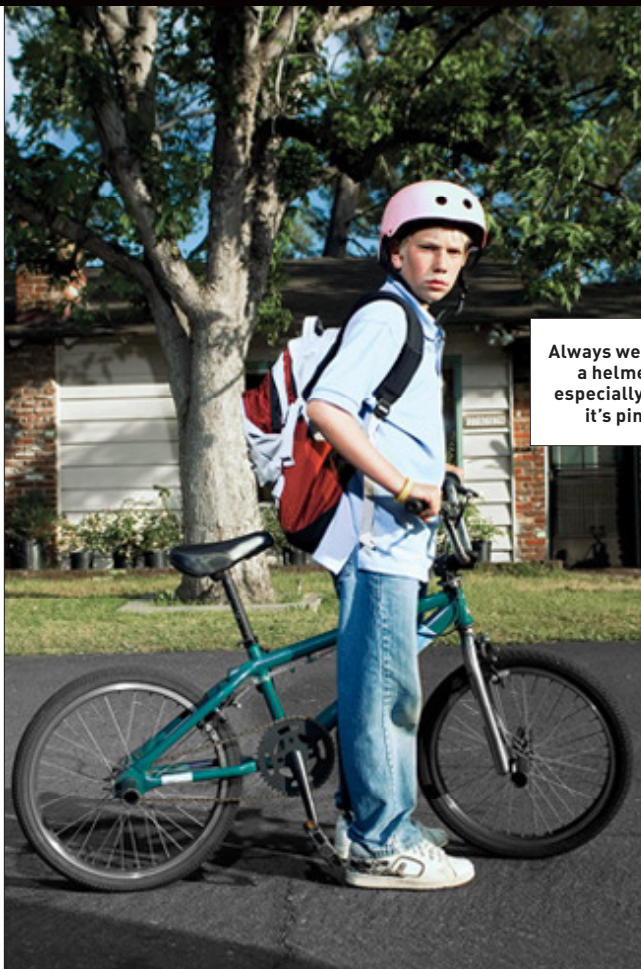
**W**HO SAYS TEENAGERS ARE TOO COOL for bike helmets? When students at Bay High School, in Bay Village, Ohio, organized their Bike to School Challenge in spring 2008, no one anticipated the response. “On the first day, 363 kids signed up and we were scrambling to keep up,” says Scott Cowan, owner of Century Cycles in Ohio and the event’s mastermind. “By the end of the three-week period, 550 students had participated.” The program expanded this year to include the middle school; 960 students biked the first day. “We’re effecting a cultural change,” Cowan says.

In 1969, nearly 50 percent of students in the United States walked or biked to school, according to the advocacy group Safe Routes to School (SRTS). By 2001, that figure had plummeted to 15. (An updated National Household Travel Survey is due out by early 2010.) But with the backing of politicians, motivated organizations and determined supporters, the movement to get kids biking to school is regaining momentum.

SRTS, which funds programs at more than 5,000 schools in all 50 states and the nation’s capital, is one of several groups working to convince federal and state legislators to help create safe opportunities for kids to ride and walk to classes. “As an organization, we now have very strong partnerships with the health and environmental communities, which can make a difference as we push for more money,” says Deb Hubsmith, director of the SRTS National Partnership. “Health costs related to physical inactivity run \$76 billion per year and the costs of poor air quality between \$44 billion and \$64 billion per year.” Hubsmith adds that as the group’s officials testify before congressional committees, they are emphasizing to lawmakers that making streets safer—and the air cleaner—for kids benefits all of us.

One innovative program is Freiker (short for frequent biker), which was created five years ago at Crest View Elementary School, in Boulder, Colorado. Now a national nonprofit organization, Freiker keeps track of students who bike or walk to school and offers incentives based on the number of trips they log.

Software entrepreneur Rob Nagler designed Freiker’s high-tech system: A solar-powered device dubbed a Freikometer, mounted on a



Always wear a helmet, especially if it’s pink.

**LAWMAKERS ARE BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND THAT MAKING STREETS SAFER FOR KIDS BENEFITS ALL OF US.**

pole in the schoolyard, reads RFID tags—small electronic chips that some retailers use to track inventory—affixed to the helmet or backpack of every rider or walker who passes beneath it. The contraption then relays students’ ID numbers to a database that tallies the number of times a student bikes to school. Central to Freiker’s success are the prizes kids can earn. (The iPods are particularly motivating.)

“What’s especially valuable about Freiker is that it provides an evaluation component,” says executive director Tim Carlin. “By tracking the number of round-trips, we gather information that shows policy-makers how many people are participating. We can also calculate the amount of gas saved and number of calories burned.” Freiker’s quantitative power could eventually benefit all cyclists, by showing politicians that their constituents value cycling infrastructure.

One of Freiker’s first corporate sponsors was Trek Bicycles, whose advocacy arm, 1 World 2 Wheels, pledged \$25,000 toward the pro-

gram's expansion. SRTS has provided funds as well, and last year the Bikes Belong Foundation awarded a \$10,000 grant. Ten schools in Colorado, California, Oregon and Wisconsin participate, and Freiker recently expanded into Ontario, Canada.

Not surprisingly, there is also resistance to the bike-commuting movement, especially in congested areas. New Jersey's Bridgewater-Raritan High School generated attention last year when its student environmental club raised money to purchase a bike rack, only to discover that principal James Riccobono, citing safety concerns, would not allow it to be installed.

Safety obviously is an issue. After the Cascade Bicycle Club worked with parents from Island Park Elementary School, in Mercer Island, Washington, to design a safe bike route to school, principal—and avid cyclist—Nancy Loorem vetoed the proposal. The school is located on the island's major thruway, she explains, and last fall a fifth grader was hit by a car while walking his bike through a crosswalk. Loorem decided instead to promote bike safety and riding as exercise. "That's the best we can do until our city creates bike routes and road conditions that ensure that children can safely ride their bikes to school," she says.

Julie Salathe, education director of the Cascade Bicycle Club Education Foundation, says that research by the League of American Bicyclists found that children

Bikes are big at Boulder's Crest View Elementary.



**"I THINK THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THAT FREIKER DID FOR OUR SCHOOL WAS GIVE STUDENTS THE OPTION TO RIDE THEIR BIKE AND FEEL COOL ABOUT IT."**

typically aren't able to safely ride solo until at least age 10—their peripheral vision isn't fully developed, and they can't always reliably judge the speed of approaching vehicles. But that doesn't mean all elementary schoolers should be relegated to the bus. Salathe suggests that "bicycling be a family project," one in which parents show their kids how to safely ride in traffic. "We also suggest that older elementary students ride in groups or with a supervising parent," she says.

The majority of the Freiker programs are in elementary schools, but McFarland High School, just outside Madison, Wisconsin, became the first of its kind to sign up last year. "I think the most important thing that Freiker did for our school was give students the option to ride their bikes and feel cool about it," says 2008 graduate Sydney Cook, former bike club leader. Participants learned that by ditching their cars, they measurably reduced carbon-dioxide emissions. The money they saved on gas was another bonus. "Students were actually bragging about riding their bikes to school," says Cook. "The motto on our club T-shirts reads, 'Not just for elementary schoolers anymore.'"

Yes, he's talking about you.

# TAKE IT SLOW

**LIKE A FINE WINE OR A DILL PICKLE, RIDING IS MEANT TO BE SAVORED**

**I**F YOU'RE READING THIS MAGAZINE, you're a cyclist, or else you're visiting a cyclist and you found this in the bathroom. Either way, you've probably noticed a leitmotif by now. No, a leitmotif is not a new German carbon-fiber wheelset—it's a theme. And that theme is "going fast."

Yes, we cyclists do like to go fast, don't we? That's why as you flip through these pages you'll see reviews, articles and ads promising to make you go faster. So if you aren't a cyclist, it may strike you as odd that cycling seems to be less about riding than it is about getting the ride over with as soon as possible. (It also might strike you as odd that your host keeps a product called DZ Nuts in the medicine cabinet—and yes, that stuff goes exactly where you think it does.)

Well, you're right. Enjoyable things should be savored—that's why Teddy Pendergrass never recorded a 35-second song called "Get It Over With." (Though I think he may have recorded an album called "DZ Nuts" back in the '70s.) The same goes for cycling. Sure, if you're racing you should try to finish quickly. But even if you're a racer, you shouldn't treat every ride as training for racing. If anything, you should treat racing as training for your rides. Let's be honest—chances are you're going to lose the race anyway. However, racing will make you a better rider, and riding's what it's all about.

Yet even if we don't race at all, we still feel compelled to name our rides and train for them. Take centuries, for example. It's bad enough that we can't just hop on our bikes and take a long ride without calling it a "century" and stressing out about it, but some of us actually worry about our finishing time too. Really, racing a century is the cycling equivalent of shotgunning a beer. Eventually, you learn that sipping is more enjoyable—and it gets you just as drunk in the end.



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