



Local News

Learning wheel responsibility

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Jody Warner / H-P correspondent Bobbie Jo Clay pushes her daughter Shamara while she learns how to ride a bike. The Benton Harbor Safe Routes To School program hosted a youth bike rodeo Saturday at Seely-McCord Elementary School to promote bicycle safety and maintenance.

Bike Rodeo teaches more than 100 young riders about bicycle, pedestrian safety

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BENTON HARBOR - Bicycle and pedestrian safety took precedence Saturday at Seely-McCord Elementary School, where more than 100 children converged on the yard and the gym to soak up all they could on the subjects.

Among them was 7-year-old Moe'nae Patterson, who had just one question for her father, Charles Patterson. Pointing to the new pink bike she'd just received, Moe'nae asked, "Can I ride it home?"

Patterson smiled. "No, baby, you're not that good yet," he said.

Patterson, a student advocate coach at Calvin Britain Elementary, was among the parents volunteering their time to help at Saturday's Bike Rodeo.

"I do all I can for our students," Patterson said. "They work so hard. I want to show them, when they're there, I'm there."

Saturday's Bike Rodeo was as part of the Safe Routes to School program, according to Sarah Murray, an AmeriCorps volunteer and one of 20 area representatives on the Safe Routes to Schools Committee.

"It's an international movement - not only trying to promote healthy lifestyles, but how to walk safely to school, (and) knowing the rules of the streets to follow," Murray said.

That sentiment got a rousing thumbs-up from Davontae Kelly, 10, a fourth-grader at Seely-McCord.

"Well, I like to get involved in the school events, and I think this is a good way to exercise," Kelly said. "This is a good workout for your body. I always ride my bike."

Students could learn different safety subjects at four stations, including an obstacle course and a slow race area, to learn basic rules of the road.

Saturday's event was funded by a grant from the Michigan Fitness Council, and the Michigan Department of Transportation, Murray said. Both schools also received infrastructure improvements as part of the grant, including new sidewalks, she added.

The idea was "just to make the physical infrastructure safer for kids who are walking to school, and biking," Murray said.

Organizers gave away 180 helmets and 50 bicycles. The helmets were bought through the grant, while the bicycles were donated, Murray said. Each participating student also received a bike lock.

Students could also check their bikes at a maintenance station, where Robert Havenga and his partner, John Egelhaaf, kept busy checking handlebars, chains and the overall health of tires.

Havenga and Egelhaaf are starting Cycle-Re-Cycle, a new, nonprofit bike shop they plan to locate in downtown Benton Harbor.

"We've been trying to teach kids the basics of keeping your bike clean, checking brakes to make sure they work well and how to lubricate the chain," said Havenga between fixes. "A lot of kids got new bikes today, and we've been doing a lot of fixing of bikes. It's been a lot of fun, actually."

The payoff comes in watching children like Moenae zip around with their new bikes, Havenga said.

"I've been doing it (working with bikes) for years, but this is what I love," he said.

Sponsors for the Bike Rodeo included Benton Harbor Area Schools, Benton Harbor Police Department, Berrien County Health Department, LaGrow Consulting, Meijer, MDOT, Pacific Cycle and Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.