

## Heartland Editorials

# Feds Spend \$1 Billion Helping Kids Walk to School

Joy Pullmann –

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From 2005 to 2014, Congress will have spent nearly \$1 billion of taxpayer money to help kids walk to school.

What has this money bought? Safety vests for crosswalk guards, “safety training” sessions, bicycle racks, flashing safety lights, new curbs and crosswalks, posters, and the like. For \$1.1 million in 2010, Maryland counties got “an on-call team of engineers, planners, and bicycle/pedestrian experts” to make it easier for people to walk and bike to schools. For a similar amount the same year, Georgia got marketing materials and staff to promote student walking and biking activities.

Let’s hope those are really awesome marketing materials, because over the same period the federal deficit will have exploded and then settled at \$667 billion, and the federal debt will have grown by \$8 trillion.

It’s a good idea to create safety materials for kids. No one wants a child falling under a bus. That \$1 billion works out to about \$18 per schoolchild, so surely in itself it isn’t a huge addition to everyone’s federal tax returns.

Except that since 1987, an international nonprofit has done exactly the same thing as the federal Safe Routes to Schools program, with support from private companies such as Johnson and Johnson and FedEx, as well

as from local volunteers across the country. They all give their time and money willingly, even exuberantly, to Safe Kids Walk This Way, unlike the way most of us pay our taxes. And none of it increases the national debt.

The federal Safe Routes to School program was bundled into “the epitome of pork,” says Randal O’Toole of the Cato Institute: a 2005 law known as SAFETEA-LU. It was the original earmarks Thanksgiving dinner, including more than 7,000 of them at a cost of approximately \$24 billion. Its sponsor, Alaska Rep. Don Young, also included the infamous “bridge to nowhere” in the bill.

The program is directly contributing to the federal deficit and national debt because its funding was frozen at 2009 levels, when budgets stopped and continuing resolutions became the new normal. In 2009, spending on the program exceeded the revenue that was supposed to pay for it from the federal gas tax. Program spending still far exceeds revenue—a microcosm of Congressional spending in general.

Sometimes it seems like government programs form an alternate, parallel universe, one in which government tries, in its crippled and lethargic manner, to mimic the private sector. Except that because the government takes funds from the private sector and filters them through bureaucracy before they reach any person or activity, its entrance into a space automatically handicaps the people already there. There are fewer dollars for private citizens and businesses to give to school safety programs because the government has taxed them away for less efficient versions.

That means the government’s attempts to increase child safety have probably done the opposite.

If we’re going to talk about kids falling under buses, the conversation should also include discussion of how current spending and programs, which often needlessly duplicate or crowd out the ways people naturally organize to take care of problems on their own, have already thrown the

next several generations of children under a bus filled with loudly oinking debt.

This is a bus Congress seems determined to hide, even as it attempts to spend nearly a billion dollars getting kids and parents to see all the other buses as they walk or bike to school. As they used to say on Extreme Makeover, Home Edition: Move that bus!

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