



## MEDIA RELEASE

4<sup>th</sup> September 2007

### ***Photo Opportunity***

*There will be a photo opportunity of the children walking to school on Monday 10<sup>th</sup> Sept at 8.30am at Eglinton pedestrian crossing. The Mayor of Derry, DOE Road Safety Division representatives and three Health Promotion Officers involved in the project will be available for interview/comment.*

#### ***Western Trust and Partners in 'Healthy Walking Bus' initiative***

Passers-by in Eglinton village will soon see excited groups of children walking to school as part of a brand new, four-week, cross-community initiative called the 'Healthy Walking Bus'. The aim is to promote the importance of a healthy, active lifestyle for primary school children. The pioneering initiative is being introduced to Northern Ireland by the Western Trust's Health Promotion Department. Partners in the initiative are the WHSSB, the DOE Road Safety Division and the PSNI.

Eglinton Primary School and Broadbridge Primary School have been selected to take part in the initiative, which will start on 10<sup>th</sup> September. About 250 pupils are expected to take part and they will walk along six specified routes, with designated pick-up points throughout. Helpers, including parents and teachers will supervise all of the routes.

Debbie Hunter, Physical Activity Co-Ordinator with the Health Promotion Department, is enthusiastic about the initiative and about the potential benefits for children.

“The state of our children’s health has never been more worrying,” she said. “Children are less active and are regularly eating food and drinks that are high in sugar and fat, with little nutritional value. The ‘Healthy Walking Bus’ initiative aims to promote healthy lifestyles in a fun way for children,” she added.

The health behaviours of the children taking part will be targeted in four ways to support a healthy lifestyle – walking to school to increase activity levels, practicing road safety messages, eating more fruit and vegetables and drinking more water, and taking care of their teeth.

Tony McLaughlin, Principal of Broadbridge Primary School sees many benefits in the initiative.

“Broadbridge is committed to the health of its pupils,” said Mr. McLaughlin. “The ‘Healthy Walking Bus’ will benefit everyone, the children, parents, the school and the environment! As part of the initiative children can walk to school safely - this is good for childrens' health and also good for their parents' peace of mind. An added bonus for the school is that it reduces dangerous traffic congestion around school gates. And fewer cars means less pollution to the environment“, he concluded.

Lorna Blair, Principal of Eglinton Primary School said, “Our pupils are really looking forward to being part of the ‘Healthy Walking Bus’. It’s a fun way to introduce the concepts of a healthy lifestyle and will support a lot of the work our school is currently doing to promote health. I think the Health Promotion Department and its partners in this initiative are to be heartily congratulated and I hope that more of our pupils will continue to practice the healthy behaviours set by the initiative.

## **ENDS**

For further information, contact the Health Promotion Department on **7186 5127** or the Communications Department on **7161 1188**

## Notes for editors

1. 2004 statistics for primary one pupils (aged 4-5) within the Western Trust area showed that 13% of boys and 20% of girls were overweight and 4% of boys and 7% of girls are obese. Much research suggests that being obese reduces life expectancy and can also lead to the development of considerable health problems such as coronary heart disease and cancer.
2. In the Western Trust area, over 2000 children per year have teeth removed under general anaesthetic. 80% of these anaesthetics are given to children under the age of 8, resulting in days missed from school and parents having to miss days from work. Whilst dental decay is a significant oral health problem in Northern Ireland, it is completely preventable. Our children have more than double the level of decay compared to the UK average. By the time they begin primary school, most will have experienced tooth decay.
3. DOE statistics indicate that there are approximately 1000 child casualties on our roads in NI each year. It is estimated that a child is injured in a road accident on average every 8 hours, with a child pedestrian casualty occurring once every 1.5 days and a child fatality once every 33 days. The 'Healthy Walking Bus' Initiative will support road safety messages already promoted in schools by DOE Road Safety Education to help address this issue.