

Why Schools, Public Health, Local Officials & Other Healthy Living Advocates Should Get Involved with Safe Routes to School

What is Safe Routes to School?

Safe Routes to School is an international movement that promotes walking and biking to school. Its history stretches back to the mid-1970s in Denmark, which had an alarming number of child fatalities from road accidents. The movement did not officially reach the United States until 1997, when The Bronx received local funds to implement a Safe Routes to School program to reduce the startling number of child accidents and fatalities around schools. The success of the program convinced other communities to adopt similar measures and by 2000, Safe Routes to School programs had swept the nation from Chicago, Illinois to Marin County, California. In 2005, the USDOT saw the importance of these programs and signed into law a federally funded Safe Routes to School Program. The new law allocated money to all 50 states and the District of Columbia to create, implement and administer Safe Routes to School programs. The goals of the program are to enable and encourage children to walk and bicycle to school, to make walking and bicycling to school a safer and more appealing transportation alternative thereby encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age, and to facilitate the planning, development and implementation of projects and activities that will improve safety and reduce traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution in the vicinity of schools.

Wisconsin Safe Routes to School

As a result of this federal transportation bill known as SAFETEA-LU, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation received \$7.8 million in funding to fund Safe Routes to School of which \$4 million was distributed in 2007 and \$3.5 in 2008. SAFETEA-LU is up for reauthorization in 2009 and, if that is successful, the Wisconsin SRTS program will continue to fund projects on an every other year basis.

Funding is available for planning, infrastructure and education projects that address the 5 E's: engineering, education, enforcement, encouragement and evaluation. Eligible applicants for infrastructure projects include any political subdivision of the state (city, village, town or county), Indian Tribes or state agency that has jurisdiction over the affected property. Eligible applicants for planning and education activities include any state agency, county, local governmental unit including schools, Indian Tribes or federally recognized non-profit organizations.

Why Should I Get Involved With Safe Routes to School?

The benefits of walking and biking to school are important to the entire community for many reasons:

Safer Routes: One of the reasons parents do not allow their children to walk and bike to school is because the routes to school are too dangerous. Problems such as incomplete, poorly maintained or missing sidewalks and trails, congested streets and lack of traffic calming devices in the vicinity of schools discourage walking and biking to school. SRTS Programs help communities fix these problems in order to create safer routes so parents are comfortable allowing their children to walk and bike to school.

Healthier children: In the past thirty years, the number of active children in the United States has decreased and the number of overweight children has almost doubled. During that time, the percent of children walking to school has decreased from 66% to 10%. Kids also spend too much time sitting indoors watching T.V. or playing video games. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children in the United States watch about four hours of television a day. Instead, children should be more active. The American Heart Association recommends that children participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. One of the ways to achieve this goal is by getting students to walk and bike to school. SRTS Programs encourage children to be more active by walking and biking to school and by building routine physical activity into every day.

Cleaner Environment: Emissions from cars pollute the air our children breath and can cause serious health problems such as asthma and bronchitis. Motor vehicle use is now generally recognized as the source of more

air pollution than any other single human activity (New State of the Earth Atlas). In order to decrease air pollution, communities should look to reduce the number of vehicles that populate their roads especially in the vicinity of schools. Fewer cars emitting pollutants will improve the air quality thus decreasing health problems in children. Safe Routes to School Programs decrease the number of cars in the vicinity of schools thereby creating a cleaner environment.

Other desired outcomes of Safe Routes to School include:

- Reduced fuel consumption
- Increased community security
- Enhanced community accessibility
- Increased community involvement
- Improved partnerships among schools, local municipalities, parents, and other community groups

How to Make a Difference

While there is no one right way to establish a SRTS program, experience shows that a solid first step is to identify one or two people who are willing to commit themselves to leading the project. As SRTS champions, they can then invite others to formally participate by establishing a Safe Routes to School Task Force responsible for developing a SRTS plan. Through the SRTS planning process, the community and school can work together to set priorities, identify action steps and ultimately implement solutions.

A SRTS Task Force should include the school principal, parents, school board members, PTA representatives, teachers, police officers, elected officials, local health department staff and representatives from community businesses. A well-developed SRTS plan is the key to making a difference. With strong project leaders, a diverse task force, plenty of opportunities for stakeholder input, a firm schedule, specific goals, patience, and persistence success can be realized.

Where Can I Get More Information About Safe Routes to School?

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School Program has a website with detailed information about the program including the Safe Routes to School Toolkit. For a copy you can visit <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/localgov/aid/saferoutes-information.htm> or contact Renee Callaway, Wisconsin Safe Routes to School Coordinator, at 608-266-3973.

Other resources include:

- The National Center for Safe Routes to School Clearinghouse at <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/>
- The Federal Highway Administration at <http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/saferoutes/>
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/bike/Safe-Routes-2002/toc.html>

For additional technical assistance on how you can work with your community and school district to create policies and programs that support healthier environments, contact:

- Robbie Webber, Co-chair, WI Partnership for Activity & Nutrition Environment Committee, robbie@robbiewebber.org
- Larry Corsi, Co-chair, WI Partnership for Activity & Nutrition Environment Committee, larry.corsi@dot.state.wi.us
- Jon Morgan, Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Program, morgajg@dhfs.state.wi.us
- Amy Meinen, Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Program, meineam@dhfs.state.wi.us