

# Portage County: Safe Routes to School

## Key players:

- School superintendent
- Elementary principals
- School staff
- Parent groups
- Safe Routes to School Coordinator
- Local law enforcement to help coordinate safety events like bike rodeos
- Organizations or businesses that are youth-oriented, like Lion's Club, may be willing to provide incentives or financial support

When Portage County implemented a countywide bicycle/pedestrian plan, it recommended infrastructure improvements and connecting trails to provide greater mobility without needing a motorized vehicle. [Safe Routes to School](#) (SRTS) was a key component of the plan's vision for increasing safe physical activity among Portage County children. A grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP) allowed county to hire a SRTS coordinator to provide assistance to local schools that were interested in implementing the program. More than 800 students participated in new SRTS programs in four elementary schools in Portage County.

## The first steps

After receiving the WPP grant, the Portage County Health Department (PCHD) offered mini-grants for schools to identify needed infrastructure improvements, map routes, and implement SRTS. The SRTS coordinator reached out to school superintendents to describe the program and how it would benefit the students. After the superintendent provided approval, the coordinator reached out to elementary principals to identify who should be involved in the program. Some schools recruited classroom or PE teachers to serve as facilitators while others relied on after-school program staff. Working with the schools and parent groups, the coordinator identified existing and needed infrastructure, like sidewalks and parent drop-off sites, and created maps of safe routes within a two-mile radius of each school.

## Starting the conversation

When the coordinator first contacted schools, some schools were resistant to the idea of implementing SRTS. The coordinator framed the conversation as an opportunity for action to reduce childhood obesity, which is a community-wide need. Once the schools were on board with implementing SRTS, the coordinator and schools reached out to parent groups to help coordinate and promote the program.

## Gaining community support

The PCHD provided brochures, banners, and other outreach materials for the schools to distribute to parents and students. Students participating in another community fitness program, Fit Kids, were given free registration to a popular field day event, called Tiger Track, if they logged at least 100 hours of physical activity. They were able to log their SRTS walking or biking time, which encouraged regular participation in SRTS.

Parent groups, school staff, and the SRTS coordinator have also gained parental and community support by emphasizing safety. At one school, the PTA rallied to install a stoplight at a busy intersection near the school, added buckets of flags at crosswalks and volunteered to lead walking school buses. Another school is creating a network of businesses that will have a SRTS-friendly marker or plaque, so students know where they stop if they get a flat tire or fall on the way to school. One school held bike rodeos to promote the program and discuss bike safety.



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## Challenges

Increasing participation in SRTS may involve a culture change. It's often easier or more convenient for parents to drive their children to school than to walk or bike together. Demonstrating the benefits of biking or walking as a family and recruiting adult leaders to take turns walking or biking with children can be helpful in gaining parental buy-in.

Some schools were hesitant to implement SRTS because they didn't feel they had the resources to coordinate the program. When they learned that the program would be coordinated at the county level, and the schools would only be responsible for promoting internally, more schools were interested in starting the program.

It can be challenging to involve families who are not usually physically active. Providing the opportunity to participate in a fun, popular event like Tiger Track can be useful in recruiting students who might otherwise not be inclined to participate.

## Key lessons

- Schools and parents place a priority on student safety. It is important to demonstrate that SRTS will provide safe biking and walking routes. Safety events like bike rodeos can reinforce safety guidelines for students and parents. Adding buckets of flags or crossing guards at crosswalks can also promote safety in the program.
- Involve parent groups in the planning and implementation process. They can help create a culture change by promoting the value of "family time spent" when walking or biking to and from school together.
- Make the program work for your community. Each of the four participating schools has different challenges with infrastructure and participation, and all have found creative solutions that work for their communities.

## Resources:

[Active Community Toolkit](#)

[Wisconsin Active Communities Alliance website](#)

[National Center for Safe Routes to School](#)

## Get started in your community

Do you want to start Safe Routes to School in your community? Start with these steps, and consult the [Active Community Toolkit](#) and the [Wisconsin Active Communities Alliance website](#) for more resources!

- Hire or recruit a volunteer to serve as the SRTS coordinator.
- Contact the school superintendent and discuss how SRTS will benefit children's health and safety.
- Coordinate with each participating school to identify school staff roles.
- Recruit parent groups and community organizations to help with planning and implementation.
- Identify infrastructure needs and map safe routes. Work with local planning and law enforcement on infrastructure improvements, as needed.
- Promote SRTS through school and community events. Recruit volunteers to lead walking school buses or bike trains.
- Track participation throughout the school year to measure the program's impact.

