

Introduction to Safe Routes to School (SRTS)

Safe Routes to School is an international movement that promotes walking and biking to school. Its history stretches all the way back to the 1970s in Denmark, which had an alarming number of child fatalities due to 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, Congress saw the importance of these programs and consequently 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. Federal Safe Routes to School funds can only be used for projects within two miles of an elementary or middle school (kindergarten through eighth grade). However, concepts in this Toolkit are applicable to other projects such as those of High Schools or outside the two-mile radius of a school.



Why SRTS?

WISCONSIN WILL USE ITS MONEY to help communities create safer, easier and more enjoyable walking and biking routes to school so more students choose walking and biking as their main mode of transportation. 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. Kids 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.

Cleaner environment

Emissions from cars pollute the air our children breathe 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 on the 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

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

How do we accomplish this?

IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH THE goals of *Safe Routes to School Programs* communities must focus on the 5 E's: Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement and Evaluation. This comprehensive approach allows for communities to maximize the number of students walking and biking to school.

Engineering

Problems with the physical environment around schools such as damaged or missing sidewalks, lack of traffic calming measures or unsafe crosswalks prevent children from walking and biking safely and easily to and from school. These problems can be dangerous enough to cause child pedestrian injuries and fatalities. Clearly, a safe physical environment is necessary for enabling children to walk and bike to school. Therefore, *Safe Routes to School* funds can be used to make infrastructure improvements that will fix these problems and make the physical environment safer for children.

IMPROVING THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT NEAR SCHOOLS may be necessary for a successful *Safe Routes to School Program* but not necessarily sufficient enough to get students walking and biking to school. In addition to engineering, *Safe Routes to School Programs* use encouragement, education and enforcement to get students walking and biking safely and enjoyably to school.

Encouragement

Another key component to the *Safe Routes to School Program* is encouraging children to walk and bike to school. Convincing children as well as parents and guardians that walking and biking to school is safe, fun and healthy can be a difficult task especially since SRTS may interfere with a parent's already busy schedule or established routine of driving their child to school. That is why the *Safe Routes to School Program* offers activities and events that promote walking and biking to school that are fun, safe, and easy. Encouragement activities and events

will ease the concerns of parents and guardians as they see how safe and easy it is for their children to walk and bike to school.

Education

Educating children and parents is an important part of *Safe Routes to School*. Children as well as parents need to learn about biking and walking safety and the benefits of walking and biking to school. Equally important is educating drivers about safe driving around schools. These programs will help ensure that walkers, bikers and drivers think about safety first.

Enforcement

Driver education and safety campaigns do not ensure the elimination of unsafe driving behaviors. Therefore, *Safe Routes to School Programs* should partner with the local law enforcement to make sure traffic laws are obeyed (this includes enforcement of speeds, yielding to pedestrians in crossings, and proper walking and biking behaviors), and to initiate community enforcement such as crossing guard programs. Enforcement programs keep an eye on those individuals that disregard the safety of the community, especially around schools.

EACH OF THESE APPROACHES IS NECESSARY for a successful program. By tackling the project from multiple angles, communities can maximize the safety of the routes to school and increase the number of students that use the routes. All of these techniques, however, cannot be applied without first implementing the fifth 'E.'

In Madison, on Walk Our Children to School Day, school mascots, stilt walkers, bagpipers, police officers, fire fighters, parents and even the city mayor walked with children to school. Madison schools also holds classroom competitions where the class with the most students walking or biking to school on a certain day receives a giant shoe as a reward.

Milwaukee implemented a number of programs to educate drivers and students on safety.

In 2004, Milwaukee employed a billboard campaign to raise awareness of safe driving around pedestrians and bikers.

They also surveyed parents to determine the barriers preventing walking and biking to school.

With the information obtained through the surveys, Milwaukee developed a comprehensive and effective bicycle and pedestrian education program that was taught at six pilot schools, affecting more than 1,400 students. The results of the education program demonstrated a 37% average increase in bike safety knowledge as well as an increase in bike travel to school.

Evaluation and Sustaining a Program

Understanding the barriers and obstacles that prevent children from walking and biking to school are essential in implementing an effective *Safe Routes to School* plan. Evaluation techniques such as surveys will help communities see the current walking and biking behaviors and understand the attitudes that parents and children have towards walking and biking. With this information, communities can make the necessary adjustments (through Engineering, Education, Encouragement and Enforcement techniques) to change behaviors and attitudes. Also, evaluation of the program will be key to continuing *Safe Routes to School*, so being able to show improvements by comparing before and after data is important. Even more, evaluation can show what techniques did not work so that improvements can be made in the future.

CLEARLY, A SUCCESSFUL *Safe Routes TO School Program* is dependent on the use of all 5 E's.

Where is Safe Routes to School taking place?

Safe Routes to School is not limited to any one location, demographic or size community. Safe Routes to School is taking place all over the globe from Canada to Great Britain to California to Wisconsin. Even within Wisconsin, communities of all different sizes and demographics are implementing Safe Routes to School Programs. From the populated urban streets of Milwaukee to the quiet neighborhoods of Eau Claire, Safe Routes to School is already present all over Wisconsin. Check out the following examples to get an idea of what is happening internationally, nationally and here in Wisconsin.

Canada's Active and Safe Routes to School

Canada has had *Safe Routes to School* related programs since the early 1990s. In 1992, as part of the Go for Green program, Canada took steps "to establish projects that allow Canadians to try more active lifestyle [behaviors] as their form of transportation." This included initiatives at schools to get children biking and walking and by 1994 Go for Green was providing funds specifically for *Safe Routes to School Programs* in Toronto. Toronto eventually adopted a program that focused on the Walking School Bus, No Idling at School and



Classroom Mapping. By 1997, *Safe Routes to School* reached national recognition and the “Active and *Safe Routes to School*” national program was established with the intended goal to “set the stage, develop and implement a national program for active transportation to and from school that is safe, accessible and sustainable.” Over the next couple years, the program expanded to include more partners and in 2000 funded approximately 100 schools. The program is still active today and maintains a Web site with materials on how to create and implement a program, *Walk to School Day* and examples of successful programs in Canada. For more info, visit: http://www.goforgreen.ca/asrts/home_e.html.

Marin County's Safe Routes to School

In 1998, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) funded two *Safe Routes to School* pilot programs in Arlington, MA and Marin County, California. Marin County used the \$50,000 NHTSA grant to launch a *Safe Routes to School Program* in August 2000. Nine schools participated in the pilot program in an attempt to increase walking and biking to school, increase community participation in transportation solutions, decrease the number of private motor vehicle trips to school and increase the health and safety of students. After one year of implementing the program, the nine pilot schools in Marin County experienced over a fifty percent increase in walking and biking to school as well as a significant drop in drive alone trips to school. With the success of the program in its first year, Marin County was able to secure additional grants to continue the program. In its second year of existence, the Marin County *Safe Routes to School* funded 20 schools, and by January 2004, *Safe Routes to School* became a program of Marin County's Department of Public Works funded through a grant provided by the Bay Area

Air Quality Management District. The program currently funds 37 schools, representing over 16,000 students and will continue to be funded for at least 20 more years because of the enactment of a half-cent tax for transportation projects in Marin County. For more info, visit: <http://www.saferoutestoschools.org/>.

Eau Claire's Safe STEPS Workgroup

In 2002, representatives from the health department, police department and local PTA established the *Safe STEPS (Safe Student Transportation-Every Possible Solution) Workgroup*. The primary goal of *Safe STEPS* is to make walking and biking to school a safe and valued activity for children. In 2002, *Safe STEPS* implemented the first *Safe Routes to School Program* at Flynn Elementary. In the last two years the *Safe STEPS Workgroup* received a grant through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's (WisDOT's) Bureau of Transportation Safety to implement *Safe Routes Programs* at additional Eau Claire schools. This grant has allowed the workgroup to expand efforts and include seven additional elementary schools and begin work at one middle school. The long-range goal for *Safe STEPS* is to create a plan for each of the thirteen elementary schools in Eau Claire, then the middle schools and then the high schools. The key to success in Eau Claire has been the successful partnerships formed between multiple groups including the City-County Health Department, the Childhood Nutrition Coalition, the Eau Claire Police Department, the Public Works Department, PTAs, and the WisDOT. The Workgroup conducts an annual survey of all elementary schools and results have shown their efforts have improved safety around schools and increased the number of students walking and biking to school.

CLEARLY, A COMMON THEME EXISTS IN communities across the nation and around the world: something must be done to improve the health and safety of our children. Today, especially compared to thirty years ago, our children are less active and therefore less healthy. Walking and biking to school, a source of daily activity for children, is more difficult because of the many safety hazards. Steps must be taken to remove these barriers that prevent physical activity. *Safe Routes to School Programs* are an important step in this direction.