

Safe Routes to School Guide

Steps to Creating a Safe Routes to School Program



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Steps to Creating a Safe Routes to School Program

Starting a Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program is an opportunity to make walking and bicycling to school safer for children and to increase the number of children who choose to walk and bicycle. On a broader level, SRTS programs can enhance children’s health and well-being, ease traffic congestion near the school, improve air quality and improve community members’ overall quality of life. The steps outlined in this chapter are meant to provide guidance by providing a framework for establishing a SRTS program based on what has worked in other communities. Some communities may find that a different approach or a reordering of these steps works better for them.

1 Bring together the right people

Identify people who want to make walking and bicycling to school safe and appealing for children. Sharing concerns, interests and knowledge among a variety of community members with diverse expertise can enable groups to tackle many different issues.

Consider whether the group wants to plan for SRTS in a single school, district-wide or at another level. Each has potential benefits; for example, a school district-wide group could create policies that would impact all schools while a school-specific group could work on detailed issues relating to that school and dedicate more resources to that one location.

Look for existing groups where an SRTS program is a natural fit, such as a city or school district safety committee, PTA, school site council, wellness council or a pedestrian and bicycle advisory board. If there are no appropriate groups to take on the issue, form an SRTS coalition. When asking for participation explain why SRTS is needed and tell people specifically how they can help. For more information on forming an SRTS coalition, see the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s Safe Routes To School Toolkit at www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/bike/Safe-Routes-2002.

Involve children in the SRTS program to learn what is important to them with respect to their journey to school and around their neighborhood. Ask them questions like: Do they like being driven everywhere by their parents? Would they rather walk and bicycle around their neighborhoods? What do they think about

their route to school? What would they change about their trip to school?

Communities with flourishing SRTS programs have attributed their success in part to a program champion — someone who has enthusiasm and time to provide leadership for the group and keep things moving. However, a champion can not do it alone, he or she will need support. Building the next generation of leaders along the way will assure that the program continues. This is particularly important when the champion is a parent who is likely to move on when their child transitions to another school.



Hurst Elementary School, Hollyhill, Florida.

Potential Coalition Members

Different communities will find different organizations and individuals ready to be involved. This list is not exhaustive, but is intended to provide ideas for the creation of a well-rounded group that represents a wide range of interests and expertise that are related to SRTS.

School:

- Principal and other administrators.
- Parents and students.
- Teachers (physical education or health teachers are a good place to start).
- PTA/PTO representative.
- School nurse.
- School district transportation director.
- School improvement team or site council member.
- Adult school crossing guards.

Community:

- Community members.
- Neighborhood or community association members.
- Local businesses.
- Local pedestrian, bicycle and safety advocates.

Local Government:

- Mayor's office or council member.
- Transportation or traffic engineer.
- Local planner.
- Public health professional.
- Public works representative.
- Law enforcement officer.
- State or local pedestrian and bicycle coordinator.

2 Hold a kick-off meeting

The kick-off meeting has two main goals: to create a vision and to generate next steps. One approach is to ask each participant to share a vision for the school five years in the future. Responses are often statements, such as: “a school with fewer cars at the entrance,” “more active children” and “safe walkways.” This focuses the group on the positive — what they would like to have — rather than what is wrong. Another way to create a positive vision is to ask people to share a positive memory of walking or bicycling to school when they were young. Provide a presentation on SRTS programs including issues and strategies related to engineering, enforcement, education, encouragement and evaluation. The group can then discuss the appropriate next steps and best way to work toward their vision. This may include forming committees to separate out the tasks.



PBIC Image Library

Forming Committees

Coalitions sometimes create committees to take on the major tasks, allowing members to focus on a specific activity related to their skills and interest. Some possible SRTS committees include:

Mapping and information gathering committee

Obtains maps, collects information about where children live, the routes they take to school and the condition of the streets along the way.

Outreach committee

Collects input from parents, teachers and students, and publicizes the program to the school and community.

Education and encouragement activities committee

Works closely with school administration and teachers to put education and encouragement activities in place, gathers materials for activities and solicits donations for programming and prizes.

Enforcement and engineering committee

Develops recommendations for enforcement and engineering solutions. Works closely with local government and other resources to find funding and make improvements.

Traffic safety committee

Identifies unsafe drivers' behavior and develops an education campaign to increase awareness.

3 Gather information and identify issues

Collecting information can help to:

- Identify needed program elements.
- Provide a means to measure the impact of the program later.

First, look at walking and bicycling conditions for students. This can be done by observing or mapping the routes that lead to school. Collecting traffic counts and speed and injury data can help identify driver-related safety issues. Walking around the school as a group to observe arrival or dismissal time can be one of the best ways to reach a collective understanding of the issues and potential solutions. Finding out about existing policies that may make it easier or more difficult to walk or bicycle to school can also be useful. For example, a school may not allow children to bicycle to school. Understanding and addressing underlying issues for a policy may be addressed by the SRTS plan.

Second, determine how many children currently walk or bicycle to school. The school may already know this. Parent surveys can also be used to understand parents' attitudes towards walking or bicycling to school and

identify barriers to walking and bicycling that need to be addressed. See Resources at www.saferoutesinfo.org/ resources for Student In-class Travel Tally and Parent Survey forms to use. SRTS coalition members can lend expertise in locating data sources and can help collect the necessary information.



David Parisi

4 Identify solutions

Solutions to issues identified by the group will include a combination of education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement strategies. Safety is the first consideration. If it is not safe for children to walk and bicycle to school, then they should only be encouraged after problems are addressed. Some problems will require engineering solutions; others may require education, encouragement, enforcement or a combination of strategies. Here the expertise of the different partners is especially valuable.

It is likely that the coalition will generate a long list of potential ideas and solutions. The next step will be easier if the list is prioritized. Are some issues more critical to address than others? Are there “quick wins” that the group can identify that would help to generate additional enthusiasm early in the program?

5 Make a plan

The SRTS plan does not need to be lengthy, but should include encouragement, enforcement, education and engineering strategies; a time schedule for each part of these strategies; a map of the area covered by the plan; and an explanation of how the program will be evaluated. Strategies that can be implemented early will help the group feel successful and can build momentum and support for long-term activities. Be sure to include fun activities; that is what encouragement is all about.

6 Fund the plan

Parts of a SRTS program will cost very little money. For example, most International Walk to School Day coordinators say they spend less than \$100 on their events. There are many low-cost engineering solutions that can be put into place in a relatively short amount of time such as new signs or fresh paint on crosswalks. On the other hand, some changes, such as new sidewalk construction, may need large amounts of capital. There are several places to seek funding for SRTS program activities including:

- Federal programs: SAFETEA-LU (including funds allocated to SRTS), Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality, Surface Transportation Program,

Recreational Trail Program and others.

- State SRTS programs.
- Environmental and air quality funds.
- Health and physical activity funds.
- County and city funding.
- Philanthropic organizations.

For more information about these funding resources, see Legislation and Funding at www.saferoutesinfo.org/legislation_funding.

7 Act on the plan

There are things that can be done right away without major funding, so some parts of the SRTS plan can start right away while waiting on other parts. Hold a fun-filled kick-off event and invite the media. For example, participate in International Walk to School Day or celebrate a Walking Wednesday. If the school is located too far for children to walk from home, identify places where families can park and walk part of the way. If improvements are needed before children can walk to school, start walking activities before, during or after school right on the school grounds. Enforcement, education, encouragement and engineering strategies will all come together as pieces of the plan are implemented.



Reidville Elementary, Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Evaluate, make improvements and keep moving

After the program begins, careful monitoring will identify which strategies are increasing the number of children safely walking and bicycling to school. Proper adjustments can be made as this and other new information is gathered. One simple evaluation measure is to re-count the number of walkers and bicyclists and compare this number to the findings in Step 3 (the baseline count). See the Evaluation chapter of this Guide at www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/evaluation for more information on how to measure impact.

The coalition also needs to consider how to sustain energy and interest in the program so that children continue to walk and bicycle to school safely. Key strategies for keeping the program going include:

- Identifying additional program champions.
- Letting people know about the successes: Get visibility for activities through local media and school communications and publicize your activities. Making the work fun and positive makes it more likely that people will want to continue and others will want to become involved.

- Encouraging policy changes: These might be school, school district or local government policies that support children walking and bicycling to school. For example, local planning departments may promote new school construction within walking and bicycling distance of residential areas. School district adoption of a safety curriculum means that the pedestrian and bicycle education will continue to be provided to children.
- Creating a permanent committee: A permanent committee within the PTA, school site council or other group means that SRTS will continue to receive attention and energy.

An SRTS program has the potential to improve walking and bicycling conditions near a school and spread interest into other parts of the community. Coalitions that persist in their efforts and make measurable improvements based on their evaluation will be rewarded with safer places for children to walk and bicycle and more children choosing safe routes to school.

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