



## National Center for Safe Routes to School Talking Points

Talking points are an important tool to distribute a consistent message about Safe Routes to School programs. Talking points can be used in preparation for meetings with key stakeholders and interviews with the media.

The following information can be helpful in communicating regarding the following topics:

- What is Safe Routes to School?
- Key points regarding safety, physical activity and concern for the environment
- History of Safe Routes to School

### Defining Safe Routes to School

#### What are Safe Routes to School Programs?

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are sustained efforts by parents, schools, community leaders and local, state, and federal governments to improve the health and well-being of children by enabling and encouraging them to walk and bicycle to school.

SRTS programs examine conditions around schools and conduct projects and activities that improve safety and reduce traffic and air pollution in the vicinity of schools. As a result, these programs make bicycling and walking to school a safer and more appealing transportation choice thus encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.

#### Why is a program like Safe Routes to School needed?

Residents of communities today struggle with motor vehicles clogging roads, motor vehicle emissions polluting the environment and more children engaging in less physical activity and growing overweight.

The implications of SRTS can be far-reaching. Safe Routes programs can improve safety not just for children, but for a community of pedestrians and bicyclists. They provide opportunities for people to become more physically active and to rely less on their cars. Programs benefit the environment and a community's quality of life by reducing traffic congestion and motor vehicle emissions.

#### How does a school start a Safe Routes to School Program?

Each school starts Safe Routes programs with different circumstances. Some schools have great places for walking and bicycling but few students taking advantage of it. Other communities have children walking and bicycling to school in unsafe conditions or along poorly maintained routes, while some communities do not have children walking or bicycling to school at all.

Successful Safe Routes programs involve the whole community. Parents, children, neighborhood groups, schools, law enforcement officers, community leaders and transportation and public health professionals help identify the issues and solutions.

While every community is unique, the basic steps to starting a Safe Routes to School program include:

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.
2. **Hold a kick-off meeting:** The kick-off meeting has two main goals - to create a vision and generate next steps.
  3. **Gather information and identify issues:** Collecting information can help to identify needed program elements and provide a means to measure the impact of the program later
  4. **Identify solutions:** Solutions to issues identified by the group will include a combination of education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement strategies.
  5. **Make a plan:** The SRTS plan does not need to be lengthy but should include education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement strategies, a time schedule, a map of the area covered by the plan and an explanation of how the program will be evaluated.
  6. **Get the plan and people moving:** 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.
  7. **Evaluate, adjust and keep going:** After the program begins, careful monitoring will identify which strategies are working well and which are not going as planned.

### **What types of activities are typically a part of Safe Routes to School programs?**

Successful Safe Routes programs may include policy development, planning and implementation of strategies such as improvements to streets and sidewalks, education and encouragement of children and parents, and increased enforcement of traffic laws. Programs can include:

- Walkability and bikeability audits of the safety of streets around schools
- Programs to improve sidewalk conditions near schools
- Use of traffic calming devices to slow traffic and give pedestrians priority
- Programs that educate children on walking and biking safely, and challenge them to walk or bike often
- "Walking school buses" in which one or two parents or volunteers escort a group of children on the walk to school
- Increased traffic enforcement around schools
- School construction that includes renovation and improvement of existing schools, and locating new schools to reduce walking hazards and avoid major traffic threats
- Cooperation among school officials, law enforcement officials, and transportation planners.

### **Improving Safety**

Walking and bicycling need to be safe transportation options which means creating safe environments and teaching safety skills to walkers, bicyclists and drivers.

#### **What do safe walking and bicycling environments include?**

- Neighborhood schools that are within walking and bicycling distance from homes
- Sidewalks or bike-paths that connect homes with schools
- Improved opportunities to cross streets (such as the presence of adult crossing guards, raised medians or traffic and pedestrian signals)
- Slow vehicle speeds accomplished through roadway safety measures (traffic calming) and/or police enforcement where needed

Safety education includes working with:

- Children - to provide them with basic safety education, such as how to cross streets, obey crossing guards and be visible to drivers.
- Parents - to create awareness of the need for pedestrian and bicyclist safety education and opportunities to walk and bike and by practicing safety skills with their children.
- Drivers - to alert all drivers to the presence of walkers and bicyclists and the need to slow down.
- Law enforcement - to enhance pedestrian and bicyclist safety with school zone enforcement.
- Local officials - to identify changes needed to improve walking and bicycling conditions around schools.

## Trends in School Travel

### How many kids walk or bike to school?

While we do not know the exact number of kids that walk and bike to school, what we do know is that fewer children walk or bike to school than did so a generation ago.

- In 2001, less than 16 percent of students between the ages of 5 and 15 walked or biked to or from school.
- In 1969, 48 percent of students walked or biked to school.<sup>i</sup>

This is an opportunity lost. Walking or biking to school gives children time for physical activity and a sense of responsibility and independence; allows them to enjoy being outside; and provides them with time to socialize with their parents and friends and to get to know their neighborhoods.

### Why have we seen a decrease in children walking and bicycling to school?

The circumstances that have led to a decline in walking and bicycling to school did not happen overnight and have created a self-perpetuating cycle. As motor vehicle traffic increases, parents become more convinced that it is unsafe for their children to walk or bicycle to school. They begin driving them to school, thereby adding even more traffic to the road and sustaining the cycle. Understanding the many reasons why so many children do not walk or bicycle to school is the first step in interrupting the cycle.

Many factors contribute to the reduction in children walking and bicycling to school. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has published the findings from two nationwide surveys of parents which identify barriers that prevent them from allowing their children to walk to school.

In the 2004 survey, 1,588 adults answered questions about barriers to walking to school for their youngest child aged 5 to 18 years. Parents cited one or more of the following six reasons.

Barrier	Percent of parents identifying with the barrier
Distance to school	61.5%
Traffic-related danger	30.4%
Weather	18.6%
Crime danger	11.7%
Opposing school policy	6.0%
Other reasons (not identified)	15.0%

### What are the health benefits of kids walking and bicycling to school?

Two recent studies have found that walking to school is associated with higher overall physical activity throughout the day.<sup>ii iii</sup> There are many potential benefits of physical activity for youth including:<sup>iv,v</sup>

- Weight and blood pressure control
- Bone, muscle, and joint health and maintenance
- Reduction in the risk of diabetes
- Improved psychological welfare
- Better academic performance<sup>vi</sup>

### How can Safe Routes to School affect traffic surrounding the school?

As much as 26 percent of morning traffic can be school-related.<sup>vii</sup> Traffic can lead to even less walking or biking. As more children are driven, more parents become convinced that traffic conditions make it unsafe for walking or bicycling and they join the line of cars at the school.

If more children walked or biked to school, it would reduce the number of cars near the school at pick-up and drop-off times making it safer for walkers and bicyclists and reducing traffic congestion.

## Environment and Air Quality

### What are the potential environmental impacts of Safe Routes to School?

Each year, automobiles emit millions of tons of pollutants into the air and auto emissions have risen in many parts of the country as a result of the doubling of miles traveled over the past two decades.<sup>viii</sup> Air pollutants can be especially harmful to children because their respiratory systems are still developing.

- Air pollution can exacerbate chronic respiratory conditions, such as asthma.<sup>ix</sup>
- The increases in rates of asthma in this country are alarming: Over the last 25 years, among children ages 5 to 14, there has been a 74 percent increase, and a 160 percent increase in children up to age 4.<sup>x</sup>
- In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.<sup>xi</sup>

Schools placed in neighborhoods near residential areas with a good street and sidewalk network have more students arriving by bicycle and on foot. Air quality is measurably better at such locations.<sup>xii</sup>

## History of Safe Routes

### How did the Safe Routes to School concept start?

The term “Safe Routes to School” was first used in Denmark in the late 1970s as part of a very successful initiative to reduce the number of children killed while walking and bicycling to school. Safe Routes to School spread internationally, with programs springing up in throughout Europe, in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

The first modern Safe Routes to School program in the U.S. began in 1997 in the Bronx, NY. In 1998, Congress funded two pilot SRTS programs through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. NHTSA issued \$50,000 each for Safe Routes to School pilot programs in Marin County, California and Arlington, Massachusetts. Within a year after the launch of the pilot programs, many other grassroots Safe Routes to School efforts were started throughout the United States.

As word spread in the pedestrian and bicyclist community of success with the NHTSA pilot programs, interest in a broader program grew. In July 2005, Congress passed federal legislation that established a national Safe Routes to School program. The program, which was signed into law in August 2005, will dedicate a total of \$612 million towards SRTS from 2005 to 2009. These funds will be distributed to states based on student enrollment, with no state receiving less than \$1 million per year. SRTS funds can be used for both infrastructure projects and non-infrastructure activities. The legislation also requires each state to have a Safe Routes to School Coordinator to serve as a central point of contact for the state.

With the new federal Safe Routes to School program, there will be a significant increase in funds and institutional support to implement SRTS programs in states and communities across the country. So a new chapter in the history of Safe Routes to School programs might soon be written as the benefits of communities and states establishing and advancing Safe Routes programs and issues are learned.

- <sup>i</sup> US EPA. Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting, October 2003. Accessed 9/16/05 at [http://www.epa.gov/livability/pdf/school\\_travel.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/livability/pdf/school_travel.pdf).
- <sup>ii</sup> Alexander et al., The broader impact of walking to school among adolescents. BMJonline. Accessed 9/16/05 at [bmj.bmjournals.com](http://bmj.bmjournals.com)
- <sup>iii</sup> Cooper et al., Commuting to school: Are children who walk more physically active? Am J Prev Med 2003: 25 (4)
- <sup>iv</sup> American Heart Association. Exercise (Physical Activity and Children). Accessed 9/16/05 at [www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4596](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4596).
- <sup>v</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Importance of Regular Physical Activity for Children. Accessed 9/16/05 at [http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/health\\_benefits.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/health_benefits.htm).
- <sup>vi</sup> California Department of Education. A study of the relationship between physical fitness and academic achievement in California using 2004 test results. Accessed 9/16/05 at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/documents/2004pftresults.doc>.
- <sup>vii</sup> Parisi and Associates. Transportation tools to improve children's health and mobility: Look at what California is Doing. Accessed 9/16/05 at [http://www.lgc.org/freepub/PDF/Land\\_Use/fact\\_sheets/sr2s\\_transportation\\_tools.pdf](http://www.lgc.org/freepub/PDF/Land_Use/fact_sheets/sr2s_transportation_tools.pdf).
- <sup>viii</sup> National Safety Council. What you can do about car emissions. Accessed 9/16/05 at [www.nsc.org/ehc/mobile/mse\\_fs.htm#problem](http://www.nsc.org/ehc/mobile/mse_fs.htm#problem).
- <sup>ix</sup> Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center. Air quality and the environment. Accessed 9/16/05 at [www.walktoschool.org/why/environment.cfm](http://www.walktoschool.org/why/environment.cfm).
- <sup>x</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Surveillance for Asthma—United States, 1960-1995: CDC Surveillance Summaries, April 24, 1998. *MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Vol. 47 (SS-1), 1998, pp. 1-27.
- <sup>xi</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Healthy Youth! Health Topics: Asthma. Accessed 9/16/05 at <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/asthma/index.htm>.
- <sup>xii</sup> US EPA. Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting, October 2003. Accessed 9/16/05 at [www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/pdf/SchoolLocationReport.pdf](http://www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/pdf/SchoolLocationReport.pdf).