

Creating a Safe Routes to School Plan

The creation of a Safe Routes to School Plan is an important first step in developing a successful SRTS Program. A SRTS Plan details the methods your community and school plan to take to increase walking and bicycling to school. The Plan also shows the actions required to make it safer to bicycle and walk to school.

An important component of the SRTS Plan is community input. The more people involved with the creation of the plan, the better the chances the community will support it. Organize a SRTS Task Force. Make sure that elected officials, city staff and school administrators are involved. Hold public meetings and publish progress reports where people can read them (a simple Web site or Web log can be used).

A SRTS Plan helps your community and school set priorities and publicize findings to create community support. In addition, a plan will assist in submitting funding proposals should funding be needed for any elements of your plan.

Superior created a SRTS Plan with the help of the MPO, the city, school district, police department, principals, parents, teachers and children to “identify obstacles along primary routes to school and to propose recommendations to improve safety.”

In Ellsworth, the Rotary Club held a community fund raiser during the summer of 2006 to raise money to improve the walking and biking trails in their community. This effort also provided funding for the creation of the Village of Ellsworth’s Safe Routes to School Plan.

Form a Task Force

Project Leader

The project leader is essential to keeping the SRTS Program moving forward. This person will be a champion for the program. The project leader can be a teacher, a principal, a parent or a local official. However, every SRTS Program needs someone who is responsible for ensuring progress is being made and who brings the organizational skills and enthusiasm necessary to make that happen.

Form a SRTS Task Force

The first step is to prepare a list of potential task force members and invite them to a kick off meeting.

- » School principal
- » Three or four interested parents
- » School Board member
- » Representative of the Parent Teacher Organization/Association
- » One to two teachers such as a physical education teacher, health teacher or nurse
- » School transportation coordinator
- » Neighborhood association member
- » Local transportation or traffic engineer
- » Representative from local police department
- » Local bicycle and pedestrian club or advocate group representative
- » City Council president or elected official that represents the neighborhood
- » Staff of local health department
- » Local Metropolitan Planning Organization (if applicable)
- » Representative from local business

You may have other individuals or organizations that you want to invite to be a part of your SRTS Task Force. Once you have your list together, organize a kick-off meeting.

Send a letter to each person inviting him or her to attend the kick-off meeting. The letter should give a brief explanation of the purpose of the SRTS Task Force and what you hope to accomplish. Allow a few weeks between sending the letter and holding the meeting. A sample letter is included on the supplemental CD, which you can customize to fit your situation. If you can, make reminder calls a few days before the meeting.

Even if all the invitees cannot attend keep them on your mailing list. You may need assistance from them in the future and it will be beneficial if they are informed of your activities.

Holding the Kick-Off Meeting

- » Explain what *Safe Routes to School* is and its purpose.
- » Talk about why you have gotten involved and what challenges you think the children face in your area in biking and walking to school.
- » Let people know about health concerns, traffic congestion, and the decreasing trend for children to bike and walk.
- » Give participants an opportunity to talk about their safety concerns. Write down the problems and ideas that are mentioned and summarize them at the end.
- » Discuss the next steps the task force needs to take and develop a timeline.
- » Assign tasks that need to be done by the next meeting.
- » Set the date for the next meeting

In La Crosse, the La Crosse County Obesity Coalition teamed up with the La Crosse City Planning Department and the City of Onalaska Planning Department to create a SRTS Plan. This group eventually expanded to include the School District, County Nutritionist, Police Department, Bike-Ped Committee and the city Traffic Engineer. After learning that federal funds would be available for SRTS projects, the group decided to hire a consultant to do a citywide SRTS Plan that includes 29 schools.

Tips for a Successful Program

- » Involve potential stakeholders immediately so they have buy-in to the process and decisions.
- » Appoint a Project Leader who is focused and has the motivation to keep the program moving and the other committee members interested.
- » Develop a schedule and stick to it.
- » Develop goals and refer back to them regularly throughout the process.
- » Hold efficient meetings. Short meetings are better than long meetings.
- » Hold open meetings. Advertise meetings along with other school functions so the larger community can attend. Be open to comments from people not on the committee.
- » Be patient but persistent. Accomplishing your goals will take time.
- » Celebrate your accomplishments as you go along. Recognize those that have invested time and energy into the program. This will keep people motivated to keep working.

In 2003 the Town of Rib Mountain received assistance from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Safety to conduct a walking audit. The area around Rib Mountain Elementary School was included in this audit. The concerns that were identified as a result of the audit led to the formation of the Rib Mountain Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Committee which meets monthly. Members of the committee include law enforcement personnel, elected officials, town residents as well as the local bike shop owner.

Evaluate Existing Conditions and Identify Issues

Determine school enrollment boundaries

- » Work with the school district to get the information necessary to create a map that shows school enrollment boundaries.
- » Mark on the map the boundaries for where bus transportation is provided.
- » Work with the school district to map the actual home addresses of enrolled students.

Walking and Bicycling Audit

Walking and Bicycling Audits are important tools helping to identify the current conditions in the vicinity of your local school. The maps that were created showing enrollment boundaries, bus eligibility and student locations will be important tools in conducting the walking and bicycling audit. The audits require that volunteers walk and bicycle nearby streets that children could use to get to school. The volunteers map any problems that are noticed. When all of the streets have been walked and biked these problems are compiled on one map. Make sure that the maps are simple and easy to read. Complicated engineering drawings can be difficult for the general public to understand. Volunteers may also want to take pictures along the way to further document problems.

School facilities assessment

An assessment also needs to be undertaken of the actual school area including building entrances, the drop-off/loading zone, and bicycle facilities.

- » Look at the sidewalks, pathways and driveways on the school property. Are they properly maintained? Are they kept clear of snow and debris? Are they cracked or broken? Are there appropriate curb cuts?
- » Look to see if secure bicycle parking is provided. Is the amount of bike racks sufficient for the school? Are the bike racks designed in such a way to be easy to use? Is any of the bicycle parking covered to protect bikes from rain? Is it located in an easy to find and secure location? Is it in a well-lit area?

Walking and Bicycling Audit Checklist

Safe Routes to School volunteers should look for:

Sidewalks

- Are sidewalks continuous? Are there gaps in the sidewalk network? Are there no sidewalks at all in some locations?
- Are the sidewalks maintained (broken, cracked, snow covered, standing water)?
- Are sidewalks obstructed (poles, signs, shrubs, dumpsters)?
- Are the sidewalks well lit?
- Are there accessible ramps for wheelchairs?

Street Crossing

- What is the width of the roads near the school?
- Are there crosswalks?
- What is the volume of traffic on the adjacent roads?
- Are there any traffic signals?
- Do traffic signals allow enough time for children to cross?
- Is there a pedestrian signal or warning?
- Do parked cars block the view of oncoming traffic?
- Are there accessible ramps for wheelchairs?

School Zone

- Are there advance signs indicating drivers are approaching a school zone?
- Are there signs specifying a school zone speed limit? If so, what is the speed limit?
- Are there any speed bumps, speed tables, traffic circles or other traffic-calming infrastructure in the area of the school?
- Is the existing signage faded, damaged or outdated?

Driver Behavior

- Do drivers yield to pedestrians in the crosswalk?
- What are the posted speed limits? Do drivers follow those speed limits?
- Are drivers speeding up to make it through traffic lights or driving through traffic lights?

Bicycle Specific

- Are bicycle route signs showing the recommended routes present?
- Are marked bike lanes or wide curb lanes available to accommodate bicyclists?
- Are separate bicycle paths available?
- Are the road or paths for bicyclists well maintained?
- Are bicyclists able to activate any traffic signals along the route?
- Do drivers give bicyclists space on the road?
- Are bicyclists following the rules of the road?

Other

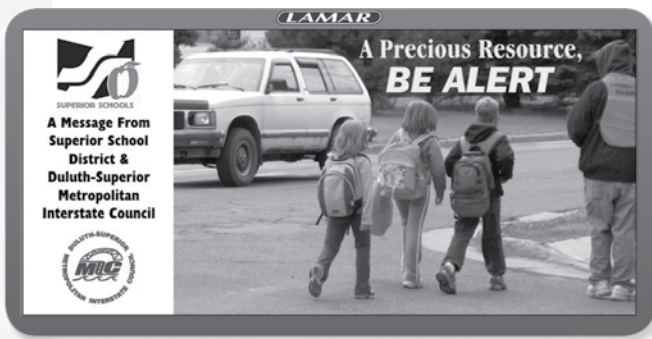
- Are there abandoned buildings or cars along the routes to the school?
- Is loitering a problem?
- Do (actual or suspected) drug activity or other crimes take place in the area?
- Do any homes have scary dogs or loose dogs?
- Are there areas isolated from commercial or residential zones?
- Is there litter or trash?
- What is the air quality like?
- Are there railroad crossings?
- What is the landscaping like? Is it conducive to promoting walking and biking?

Note the positive

- Note items that worked particularly well when walking or bicycling the routes to discover the items that work well in your community.
- Noticing these items can help the group when it comes time to make recommendations.

Walking and bicycling route audit materials

- Instruction sheet describing project and list of questions showing what volunteers should look for on route.
- Maps: smaller for doing audits and larger for compiling audits.
- Clipboards and writing utensils.
- Letter home to parents asking for volunteers.
- Letter to community and school officials letting them know of audits.
- Sample press release announcing audit.



Look to see where both buses and cars drop off children.

Student Drop-off Areas

- ▶ Are they designed so that students exiting and entering cars are able to do so safely?
- ▶ Are vehicles separated from pedestrians or are students walking in the street or across a parking lot to reach the school?
- ▶ Are there accessible curb ramps for wheel chair access? Do the ramps have tactile warning strips or textured concrete?
- ▶ What traffic control signs are in the area? Are there signs notifying vehicles that pedestrians are present?
- ▶ Is the area well lit?
- ▶ Does traffic move freely, or is the drop off area congested?

Bus Loading Zones

- ▶ Are bus driveways separate from parent pick-up/drop-off areas?
- ▶ Is traffic in the bus loading zone one-way?
- ▶ Is there a continuous curb and sidewalk adjacent to the drop-off/loading zone area leading into the school site?
- ▶ Is the area well lit?

Policy Assessment

- » Determine if your school has any policies encouraging or limiting bicycling and walking to school.
- » Find out what your school's physical activity requirements are (PE, recess, after school activities).
- » Find out your school's Wellness Policy.
- » Find out if your municipality has any bicycle and pedestrian ordinances or policies.
- » Review what bus services are provided to the school, their routes and schedules and who is eligible to use them.

Surveys

Survey Parents

- » Getting parents to return a survey can be challenging. Think creatively about how you can collect the information.
- » Ideas from other schools include:
 - ▶ Many schools send the survey home with the child and then remind the children to have their parents fill it out and send it in or send it back with the child.
 - ▶ Students in middle school may be old enough to assist with the survey process. Have students interview their parents and fill out the survey as part of a class project. Not only does this give parents and students an incentive to do the survey since it is an assignment, but it can serve as a learning tool. If you do this, ensure that students have an opportunity to see the results and discuss them in class.
 - ▶ Have parents fill out the survey when they arrive for parent-teacher conferences. You still won't get every parent to fill out the survey but are likely to get a higher return rate than a mailing. This can also be a great time to have a table with information on the SRTS project. The *Safe Routes to School* parents survey is located on pages 42–44 of the toolkit as well as on the supplemental CD.

Survey and Involve the Students

- » Have teachers do a hand count of how children got to school every day for a week. A tally sheet is included in this toolkit on page 45 as well as on the supplemental CD.
- » In addition, you may want to ask children what routes they like to use to get to and from school. Sometimes this can bring out interesting information. For instance, in one community children preferred to travel on a route that had berry bushes but the adults did not realize why the children used that route until they started asking them questions.
- » Some schools have had children create posters depicting their trip to school. These posters are then displayed during community meetings to help keep the focus on children.
- » A sample Parent Survey and Student Tally Sheet are included at the end of the Toolkit as well as on the Supplemental CD. Instructions for use are also included on the Supplemental CD.

Teacher Input

- » Work with the Principal to find a time to make a presentation to teachers and other school staff about SRTS. Ask them what they have noticed about student attitudes, any unsafe behaviors they have witnessed, and any other concerns they may have. Ask if they teach any pedestrian and bicycle safety skills or include any transportation issues in their class curriculum. This is a great time to gauge their interest in including transportation issues in their classroom. Find out if any teachers walk or bike to school and could serve as role models for the school.

Community Input

- » Hopefully, you have representatives from your local neighborhood on your SRTS Task Force. If not, it will be particularly important that you gather input from them early in the process. They may already be working on some of the issues you find and may have strong opinions on what should happen on streets in the neighborhood. You may want to make a presentation at a neighborhood association meeting or invite neighborhood residents to a SRTS workshop.

Parent Teacher Organization/Association

- » Hopefully, you have a representative on your SRTS Task Force. However, you may get more parent involvement if you make a presentation and ask for input on safety and traffic issues at a regular meeting.

Police Department

- » It is very important to have a representative of the local police department on the SRTS Task Force. The local police department can offer valuable input on what routes they feel are the safest and other safety issues worth considering. However, if a representative is not on the SRTS Task Force then set up a meeting with the local Police Chief to discuss SRTS.

In Superior, students and parents were surveyed to identify safety issues around each of the six schools examined in the Superior SRTS Plan. Some of the safety issues that were identified by the students and parents were lack of crossing guards, unshoveled sidewalks and busy, unsafe roads. These surveys were eventually used to help make recommendations.

Getting parents to return surveys can be challenging. The Oneida Nation used a variety of community events such as the Parent Breakfast, the Tsyuhekwa Harvest Supper and the Honor the Youth Pow-Wow as opportunities to distribute surveys as well as educate the community about SRTS and garner support.



In Ashwaubenon, a police officer and a crossing guard devised a strategy to improve the safety of students walking to school at no cost and minimal time. On a two lane road adjacent to a local school, motorists during morning and afternoon rush hour were driving in the shoulders that were designated for biking and parking, creating a four lane road in violation of lane restriction signs. Since motorists were not following the signs and consequently increasing the danger of students crossing the now four lane road, the police officer and crossing guard set up cones in the shoulder thereby blocking traffic from forming two additional lanes. This made the crossing guard's job much easier and students were able to cross the street on their way to school more safely and easily.

Other

Crash data

- » Find the crash data for your community for pedestrian and bicycles. Look for crashes near the school and at the overall number of crashes for children in your community.

Traffic counts

- » Traffic counts measure the number of vehicles driving in the area of the school. A simple traffic count involves volunteers at each school entrance counting cars arriving during the half-hour before school begins. A more complex count tallies the number of cars passing the school and the number of students biking and walking to school. Your municipality may have automatic vehicle counters that can be installed near the school to get an accurate count of the number of automobiles traveling on the streets near the school.

Speed checks

- » Work with local law enforcement to see what speeds cars travel on the roads near the school.

Local business traffic

- » Make contact with local businesses that might create a lot of traffic. Find out their delivery schedules, work schedules or other issues that might affect traffic near the school.

Make Recommendations

THE SRTS TASK FORCE SHOULD analyze the collected information and look at needed encouragement, education and enforcement activities as well as engineering or physical improvements that are needed.

Once all the information has been collected from site audits, assessments and surveys, take time to analyze the information. Then present it to the community. Publish information in the school newsletter or use your own flyer. Invite the community to a SRTS forum to present the data, discuss issues revealed in the surveys and explain the *SRTS Program*. People who were surveyed or involved in the audits want to know what happened. You may also get useful ideas from people who are not on the SRTS Task Force.

Remember that some individuals may resist aspects of the program that require changes in their behavior. While these people can challenge the program, they can also contribute to its success. Facilitate a positive process where all concerns are heard. Criticism and dissenting opinions often lead to a better program.

Outline the variety of problems that *SRTS programs* address and request input and feedback in all those areas. Recommendations will fall into the following categories:

Engineering

Engineering includes a variety of design techniques that can reduce traffic volumes, decrease speed, and improve safety.

Enforcement

Enforcement enlists the help of local police departments to focus enforcement efforts in problem areas and increase community awareness of school safety issues.

Education

Education programs teach motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists about their responsibilities and about traffic rules, while promoting activities that encourage bicycling and walking.

Encouragement

Encouragement activities are a way to get students to apply what they've learned from the Education component in their daily habits.

The committee should use the feedback from the community to develop a list of options. Ensure that your plan includes a specific list of infrastructure improvements that are needed to increase biking and walking and improve safety. Also include the list of educational, encouragement and enforcement components that are needed in your community.

After you have created your list, decide which projects and activities should be pursued first. Keep in mind that some projects will take longer to put in place than others. Think about the ease of implementing the recommendation, the cost and the ability of the solution to make a difference.

Some things may be easily fixed, such as changing or adding signage or adding bicycle racks. Making these easier changes will allow the community to see some immediate results and help build support for more complex projects.

PROJECTS SUCH AS CONSTRUCTING A NEW sidewalk or installing speed tables will require more time to gather support and funding. These projects also take longer because they require planning, design and construction as well as cooperation among different levels of government. It will often take time for your project to be constructed. However, it is important to start building support for the project so that it is included in your community's plan.

In the Village of Weston representatives of DC Everest Junior High School, the Everest Metropolitan Police Department, the Marathon County Health Department, the Wausau Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Village of Weston, Laidlaw Bus Service and a parent used this toolkit as well as resources from the National Center for SRTS to develop a SRTS plan for their school. They were able to identify a number of safety and environmental issues that prohibited safe walking and biking to school. The planning process helped them to develop a list of recommendations that will allow them to improve conditions.

Safe Routes to School plan elements

1. Introduction

- » List of members of SRTS Task Force
- » Basic community and school information

2. Community vision and goals for local SRTS

3. Report of existing condition

- » Map of school enrollment boundaries
- » Walking and bicycling audit
- » Assessment of school facilities
- » School walking and bicycling policies
- » City pedestrian and bicycle ordinances
- » Surveys of students, parents, teachers, etc
- » Crash data, traffic counts, and speed checks

4. Issue identification

- » Information from audits, assessments and surveys

5. Recommendations for improvements

- » Engineering
- » Enforcement
- » Education
- » Encouragement

6. Next steps/Conclusion

- » Steps needed and a timeline to implement both the short-term and long-term recommendations

Next Steps

Putting it all together

Slower traffic and a comprehensive non-motorized network create a more livable community where more people can choose to walk and bike with ease. When you create a SRTS Plan, make sure that the entire community has an opportunity to participate and comment on the plan. The more people involved in creating the plan, the better the chances that it will be accepted by the community.

Once you have completed your plan start immediately with events and activities in the school. Consider having a kick off event and invite the media, politicians, parents, school staff, the SRTS Task Force and, of course, children. You may want to hold the kick off in conjunction with an event such as *International Walk to School Day*, *Bike to Work Week* or *Earth Day*.

However, this is not the end of the work for your SRTS Task Force. Look at all the funding options that exist for the various programs and projects you want to undertake. Have committee members begin pursuing the necessary funding and keep your momentum going.

REMEMBER ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS TAKE TIME BUT smaller projects and special events can generate immediate results. When people start seeing more children on the streets, the program will take on a life of its own. Most SRTS Programs experience strong support from their communities. When streets are safer for children, they are safer for everyone.