



Safe Routes
to School
National
Partnership

Overcoming Obstacles in Underserved Communities



Serving vulnerable communities through the federal Safe Routes to School program is a priority for the Safe Routes to School National Partnership. We hope that this resource will help state advocates and state Departments of Transportation work together to develop proactive policies to assist the most underserved communities in planning for, applying for and implementing Safe Routes to School grants.

Underserved communities can face many challenges associated with applying for and implementing Safe Routes to School grants. For example, applying for a federally-funded Safe Routes to School award through a state Department of Transportation (DOT) can be a time-consuming endeavor requiring expertise and assistance from local planners and engineers, as well as coordination with the school district and city. Once a project is awarded funding, local award recipients must comply with federal highway regulations, which can require additional expertise and staffing to complete paperwork and submit for approvals. Additionally, the program is operated on a reimbursement basis, meaning that schools and localities must expend the funds and then wait for reimbursement.

Examples

Given the varying circumstances within states, state Departments of Transportation have different approaches for engaging underserved communities in Safe Routes to School. Some states may utilize just one of the best practices identified below, while others may offer a package of initiatives. Examples from twelve state Safe Routes to School programs, including contact information, can be found in the Safe Routes to School National Partnership website's **State Resources section**.

These aspects can create challenges for underserved communities in a number of ways. Schools in underserved areas are often understaffed, meaning that their availability to spearhead a Safe Routes to School award may be limited. These schools also face significant challenges in absorbing the costs of carrying out a Safe Routes to School project while waiting for reimbursement. Finally, these communities may lack access to city or county engineering staff with the expertise necessary to implement the project and comply with federal and state regulatory processes.

Yet, underserved schools and communities are often the very institutions where significant numbers of children are already walking to school in areas with dangerous traffic conditions, high crime rates and other threats to personal safety. These schools may also lack the resources to bus children, and the parents may be unable to drive, walk or bicycle their children to school. Underserved schools also tend to have the highest levels of childhood obesity and low community involvement. More needs to be done to ensure that Safe Routes to School funding reaches communities that have the greatest needs. Targeted awareness campaigns, direct financial support, staffing, training and technical assistance can all increase the ability of an underserved school to compete for state funds and successfully launch a Safe Routes to School program.



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Good Policies

Several states have paid attention to the concerns of underserved schools and communities, and are utilizing different approaches to address these special needs and challenges in the application process, through planning, and through implementation. Many state DOTs have chosen different mechanisms or initiatives to help underserved communities. Several types of approaches are identified here:

1. Develop an assessment of the state's underserved schools, and how the current Safe Routes to School program is serving those schools. By completing this analysis, states can better understand the obstacles and set targets for providing funding to the most vulnerable communities.
2. Develop a comprehensive initiative specifically for underserved communities. Some states have chosen to develop and fund a special Safe Routes to School program to ensure that infrastructure improvements and programs are implemented in underserved communities. Another approach is to require a minimum amount guarantee or percentage for the most vulnerable communities in future application cycles.
3. Carry out a special outreach or awareness campaign. Given the staffing shortages in many underserved schools, it can require extra effort to ensure that these communities are aware of Safe Routes to School awards and consider applying. Some states have carried out special outreach efforts to reach underserved communities.
4. Provide funding for planning awards. Another approach that some states use is to provide small planning awards with much-simplified applications. These awards provide funding to help smaller and underserved communities do the initial assessments and develop plans that are necessary for applying for a larger-scale award.
5. Award extra points on applications. Some states have chosen to ensure adequate representation of underserved communities by providing extra points or consideration during the application review process if a community or school meets a certain income level criteria or has a minimum percentage of children receiving free or reduced school lunches.
6. Offer engineering assistance. Underserved communities can be deterred



from applying or fall behind in completing a project due to a shortage of engineers or planners. Several states have contracted with statewide planning or engineering firms that provide expertise to underserved communities at the state's expense, or with costs built in to the award amount, to help them develop plans and carry out Safe Routes to School projects.

7. Assist with matching requirements. Some states have found ways to provide the 20% match required when using the new MAP-21 funds. This effort can help to alleviate the stress that this new requirement has created for underserved communities and will ensure that these communities are still able to apply for the funds.

Resources

- Safe Routes to School National Partnership developed a [Low-Income Resource Guide](#) for volunteers and professionals implementing Safe Routes to School in low-income schools and communities.
- Arizona Safe Routes to School Planning Assistance Program: <http://www.azdot.gov/MPD/srts/PlanAsstPrgm.asp>
- Iowa Traffic Engineering Assistance program: <http://www.iowadot.gov/traffic/teap.html>
- Active Living Research Safe Routes to School web page features reports on low-income communities and equity issues: <http://www.activelivingresearch.org/taxonomy/term/208>
- Active Living Resource Center, Safe Routes to School Pilot Program focused on low-income schools: <http://www.activelivingresources.org/saferoutestoschool8.php>
- Safe Routes to School National Partnership's Local School Project Evaluation Report, which analyzes programs in ten low-income schools around the country: http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/media/file/Health_Evaluation_Feb_2010.pdf
- Pilot evaluation of a walking school bus program in a low-income, urban community. This study was conducted in three diverse, socioeconomically disadvantaged, public elementary schools in Seattle, Washington: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/9/122>