



STRENGTHENING AND GROWING SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Transportation Bill Reauthorization Recommendations

Background

The federal Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program was first created in August 2005 through Section 1404 of SAFETEA-LU, and authorized at \$612 million in funding over five years, through September 2009. Already more than 4000 elementary and middle schools around the country are benefiting from millions of dollars made available through SRTS, which are awarded through each state's Department of Transportation.

The purpose of this funding is to allow and encourage more children to safely walk and bicycle to school. The bulk of these grants allow schools and communities to retrofit and build roads, sidewalks, bike lanes and pathways to allow children to more safely walk and bicycle to school. A smaller percentage of funding (10 to 30%) supports non-infrastructure activities, including walking and bicycling safety education, driver awareness campaigns, more robust enforcement of speed limits and traffic safety rules, promotional events to encourage more children to walk and bicycle, and more. *By improving the safety and prevalence of walking and bicycling to and from school, children and their communities benefit from reduced traffic congestion, better air quality, and healthier lifestyles.*

Safe Routes to School: Addressing National Problems

Safe Routes to School programs work to enable more children to safely walk and bicycle to school. Just 15% of children currently walk or bicycle to school today, down from nearly 50% in 1969. Successful Safe Routes to School programs result in a number of wide-ranging benefits for communities, all of which tie into federal priorities:

The Problem	Safe Routes to School Has an Answer
Obesity and Physical Inactivity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nearly one-third of all children are overweight or obese or at risk and childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed nearly five-fold in forty years. • Less than 20% of adolescents get the Surgeon General's recommended sixty minutes of physical activity a day, and 23% of children get no physical activity a day. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ For each hour of driving per day, obesity increases 6 percent, but walking for transportation reduces the risk of obesity. ✓ Walking one mile to and from school each day generates two-thirds of the recommended sixty minutes of physical activity a day. Plus, children who walk to school have higher levels of physical activity throughout the day.
Traffic Safety and Congestion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 23,000 children age 14 and under were injured and 429 were killed while walking or bicycling in the United States in 2006. • Half of children struck by cars near schools are hit by parents driving other children to school. • As much as 20 to 30% of morning traffic is generated by parents driving their children to schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Private vehicles account for half of school trips between 1/4 and 1/2 mile—a distance that is easily covered by walking or bicycling. ✓ A California study showed that schools that received SRTS infrastructure improvements yielded walking and bicycling increases that were often in the range of 20 to 200%, and it generated up to a 49% decrease in child bicycle and pedestrian collision rates.

Poor Air Quality and Harmful Car Emissions

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers have found that one in three schools are located in air pollution danger zones. Air pollution can exacerbate chronic respiratory conditions, such as asthma. • Asthma is on the rise in the United States, with one in ten children now suffering from this disease. 14 million school days are missed each year due to asthma. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Returning to 1969 levels of walking and bicycling to school would save 3.2 billion vehicle miles, 1.5 million tons of carbon dioxide and 89,000 tons of other pollutants—equal to approximately twenty percent of the carbon dioxide savings generated by the entire American public transit system in 2005 or keeping more than 250,000 cars off the road for a year. ✓ Schools that are designed so children can walk and bicycle have measurably better air quality. |
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Reauthorization Recommendations

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership (SRTSNP) is extremely pleased with the impact that the SRTS program is having around the country. Within months of the passage of SAFETEA-LU, the Federal Highway Administration issued guidance to the states to help them establish their SRTS program guidelines and processes. Three years after the law was originally passed, all states now have coordinators in place and all have issued at least one round of application guidelines. Hundreds of grants have already been awarded, totaling over \$350 million and benefiting more than 4,000 local schools across the nation.

Safe Routes to School is essential for helping schoolchildren be safe, healthy, and active on their way to and from school. It also helps communities find solutions to traffic congestion, poor air quality, and high rates of childhood obesity and related diseases. **That is why we strongly urge Congress to continue and increase its support for Safe Routes to School in the reauthorization of SAFETEA-LU, and make some small policy improvements to the operation of the SRTS program.**

Specifically, the Safe Routes to School National Partnership urges Congress to:

- **Increase Funding:** At its current funding level of \$612 million over five years, demand is far exceeding available funding.
 - With the high cost of fuel, school districts all across the country are cutting bus routes. Critical safety improvements are needed at most schools to make walking and bicycling safe for the increased numbers of children who may now have to get to school on their own.
 - Nationally, state DOTs are receiving approximately three times as many applications as they can fund—in some states, this ratio is as high as ten times as many applicants as awardees.
 - Nationally, the ratio of funding requested to funding awarded is even higher—applicants are requesting approximately five times as much funding as what can be awarded.
 - At the current funding level, just 6% of schools around the country can benefit from SRTS funding. And, even in these 6% of schools, they are receiving funding for only a small portion of the needed upgrades and activities to make them safe for student pedestrians and cyclists.
 - Across the country, the average grant size is approximately \$180,000. It would take over \$17 billion to award the average grant to each elementary and middle school to ensure that the most basic safety upgrades and educational and encouragement curriculums are provided.

Based on the demonstrated need and interest for this program, we recommend Congress provide increased funding for SRTS, with the bulk of the funding to be awarded to the states by formula, while reserving 15% for those states that provide matching funds, thereby increasing the reach of federal dollars. States would also be required to ensure funds are distributed in a fair and equitable manner, including low-income communities and urban, rural, and suburban areas.

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

- **Expand Eligibility:** Add high schools to eligible applicants ensure that children can continue their habits of walking and bicycling to school as they grow. We also recommend allowing up to 10% of infrastructure funding to be used to create safe routes to bus stops, as long as the bus stops serve a significant number of children and are outside the two-mile radius of the school.
- **Reduce Overhead and Delays:** Ensure effective use of federal dollars and avoid unnecessary delays in local project implementation by requiring the Federal Highway Administration and States to ease administrative burdens posed by title 23 and the Common Rule guidelines, while retaining protections for labor and the environment. Currently, even small projects are subject to the same rules and regulations as multi-million dollar highway projects, posing challenges and delays for cities, schools, and nonprofits that implement these projects.
- **Support Evaluation and Research:** Add a strong emphasis on research and evaluation. We recommend Congress require FHWA to create a comprehensive evaluation plan, including regular and reliable data collection, that will allow for the evaluation of the impact of SRTS at the local, state, and national level on all of the legislative goals of the program. Currently, the Federal Highway Administration strongly encourages states to evaluate their projects, but does not require it. We also recommend giving FHWA the authority to conduct research that will advance knowledge about SRTS, either through the research title or by utilizing a 2.5% set-aside of overall funding. We also recommend the appointment of a new task force to provide guidance on strategies and progress for the overall implementation and evaluation of the SRTS program.
- **Build it Right:** Ensure that new roads and schools are built right the first time, with attention to the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists. We recommend that Congress create an intergovernmental working group with representatives from relevant federal and state agencies and other stakeholders to issue recommendations on siting schools in the neighborhoods they serve. We also recommend that Congress require state Departments of Transportation, MPOs and local municipalities to adopt “complete streets” policies to consider the needs of all users—whether walking, bicycling, taking public transportation, or driving—in all transportation projects. This will reduce the number of schools that need SRTS funding in future years to retrofit existing roads and paths.

For more information on these recommendations, please contact Margo Pedroso, Policy Manager, with Safe Routes to School National Partnership, at margo@saferoutespartnership.org or 301-292-1043.

About the Safe Routes to School National Partnership

Launched in August 2005, the Safe Routes to School National Partnership is a fast-growing network of hundreds of organizations, government agencies and professional groups working to set goals, share best practices, secure funding, and provide educational materials to agencies that implement Safe Routes to School programs. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership’s mission is to serve a diverse national community of organizations that advocates for and promotes the practice of safe bicycling and walking to and from schools throughout the United States. www.saferoutespartnership.org