



Establishing a Safe Routes to School State Network: A 10-Step Guide



Changing the habits of
an entire generation.

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Safe Routes to School: A Vital Need

Walking or bicycling to school is now rare. But this wasn't always the case. In 1969, according to the National Household Travel Survey, approximately 50 percent of children in the United States got to school by walking or bicycling.¹ By 2001, about 15 percent of students traveled to school by walking or bicycling.²

The increasing trend of driving kids to school has serious implications for health and safety. Today, kids are less active and 23 percent of children get no free time physical activity.³ Over the past 40 years, rates of obesity have soared among children of all ages in the United States, and approximately 25 million children and adolescents—more than 33 percent—are now either overweight or obese.⁴ In addition, 20 percent to 30 percent of morning traffic can be generated by parents driving their children to schools,⁵ and 50 percent of children hit by cars near schools are hit by parents of other students.⁶

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is a national movement that is making it safer and more convenient for children to walk and bicycle to school. Concerned by the long-term health and traffic consequences of the aforementioned trends, the U.S. Congress approved \$612 million in August 2005 for state implementation of SRTS programs over five years. Each state is receiving a minimum of \$1 million per fiscal year through 2009 for SRTS, and is charged with creating a full-time SRTS coordinator that is associated with the state Department of Transportation. Each state must spend 10 percent to 30 percent of their funds on non-infrastructure activities including encouragement, public awareness, enforcement and educational programs. In addition, 70 percent to 90 percent of funds are spent on infrastructure—sidewalks, bike lanes, pathways and traffic-calming activities.

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About the SRTS National Partnership and the State Network Project

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership is a network of more than 300 nonprofit organizations, government agencies, schools and professionals working to set goals, share best practices, secure funding and provide educational materials to agencies that implement SRTS programs.

Because the SRTS National Partnership recognizes that the potential for SRTS is much broader than the \$612 million in funds available now through state Departments of Transportation, it is implementing the State Network Project in nine key states and the District of Columbia. The project links nonprofit leaders with regional and state-level departments to help the SRTS federal program succeed and to help identify viable projects for funding. The State Network Project is also working to leverage additional resources for SRTS and to remove policy barriers to walking and bicycling to schools. The State Network Project currently includes: California, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

The nine states and the District of Columbia were selected based on both need and their capacity to support the program. The SRTS National Partnership considered the number and percentage of overweight and obese children within the states, as well as the number and percentage of minority children in low-income families. Other criteria included the states' ability to leverage strategic partnerships and to make a national impact.

The principal goals of the State Network Project are to:

- 1 increase physical activity among school-aged children grades K-8 by increasing the number of children walking and bicycling to schools;**
- 2 facilitate the implementation of the federal SRTS program; and**
- 3 institutionalize state-level SRTS programs so they are not dependant on and do not end after one short burst of funding.**

The SRTS State Network Project has received primary support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is also funded by Bikes Belong Coalition, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Harvest Foundation, and Kaiser Permanente.

For additional information and links to the Safe Routes to School National Partnership's State Network Project and individual state pages, please visit our Web site: www.saferoutespartnership.org/state.





Establishing a SRTS State Network

Although the SRTS National Partnership is currently only working in nine states and the District of Columbia, every state could benefit from a SRTS State Network. Networks can unite stakeholders to help make the state SRTS program successful, provide for an educational forum, and contribute to a national learning network. The Network can also play a leading role in removing barriers to walking and bicycling to schools by improving SRTS-related state and regional policies and practices.

Almost anyone can convene a SRTS State Network, although leadership is best suited to organizations, agencies and individuals with experience and credibility in SRTS-related policies and programs in the state. Funding for a State Network could come from a variety of sources, including agencies, but most likely will come from foundations and companies in the state with an interest in the success of SRTS programs.

What follows is a 10-step process that can be used to create a SRTS State Network in your state.

1 Find a SRTS State Network Organizer.

It is important to have ongoing leadership for the SRTS State Network. Seek funding for a part-time or full-time position that can be hosted through a credible stakeholder organization in your state. At a minimum, 10 hours per week should be dedicated to the Network organizer position.

Ongoing duties for this position may include:

- scheduling and leading monthly teleconference calls;
- developing agendas and meeting minutes;
- maintaining a database of Network contacts;
- organizing press events and facilitating special action teams;
- recruiting partners for the Network through letter-writing and phone campaigns;
- maintaining an e-mail list and/or listserv;
- keeping Network partners updated and connected; and
- coordinating ongoing communications with Network contacts.

Ideally, the Network organizer will work with a voluntary Network chair to develop meeting agendas. The Network chair should be an influential, well-connected and respected person in your state, and he or she should help guide the strategy for the Network.

2 Develop a relationship with the state SRTS Coordinator at the Department of Transportation.

The success of the federally-funded SRTS program is critical to growing the overall SRTS movement. A State Network can provide a great deal of assistance to your state SRTS coordinator and the Department of Transportation (DOT). It also can

help ensure the success of the state program by drawing upon Network stakeholder expertise and resources. For example, a State Network can work with the DOT to conduct outreach regarding grant application deadlines. Invite your state SRTS DOT coordinator to be an active member of the Network and offer the Network as an advisory committee for the DOT program if one does not already exist.

3 Recruit network partners.

An effective SRTS State Network is made up of leaders from many diverse agencies and organizations. At a minimum, the State Departments of Transportation, Education and Health should be recruited to participate. In addition, bicycle, pedestrian, health and school advocacy groups should serve on the Network through the participation of high level staffers or board members. There may be other potential stakeholders in your state such as environmental and smart growth groups, elected officials, regional and local agencies, and individuals that you should seek to include in the Network.

Your Network will most likely be comprised of a core group of 12 to 25 people that attend telephone meetings. More should be on your email list, and some may only participate in single-issue workgroups. Make sure to maintain an updated contact list so all can receive the latest updates, meeting agendas and minutes, SRTS program resources and press releases from your Network and other sources.

An effective SRTS State Network will include partners who have technical expertise in comprehensive SRTS programs, knowledge of and internal connections to the three primary state agencies, the capacity and willingness to reach out to their members, elected officials and the general public, and expertise in SRTS-related policies that would be incorporated in a SRTS State Network Action Plan.

4 Research the state SRTS program and other policies.

Once you have assembled a SRTS State Network, the next step is to research existing policies in your state that affect children and adults' ability to walk and bicycle to school safely. Your Network should create a list of policies, laws and practices of interest. Network partners can be tasked with completing brief written research on particular policies. The Network organizer collects all of these status reports and circulates them to the group for discussion.

Examples of policies that SRTS State Networks have previously considered include:

- State SRTS Programs—the federally-funded program managed by each state DOT is established through a variety of policy decisions made by the DOT, usually in conjunction with other stakeholders;
- School Wellness Policies—federally-mandated school policies that could include a SRTS component as part of the physical activity plan;
- Complete Streets Policies—planning and community design which includes the needs of all users (pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users) in street design;
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Curriculum and Large-scale Instruction—training sessions for children and youth which increase knowledge and skills about traffic safety;
- Hazard Busing—school bus routes that replace walking and bicycling on high-risk streets and crossings near schools;
- School Siting—the size and location of new or remodeled schools;
- Fine-based Funding Mechanisms—channeling funds generated from increased fines for traffic violations, especially in school zones, to SRTS programs;

- Strategic Highway Safety Program—state program established through federal funding to reduce traffic injuries and fatalities;
- Existing SRTS-related State Legislation—policies that can affect eligibility for projects and other aspects of the program design; and
- Evaluation Procedures—tools and techniques for collecting SRTS program data.

Questions that should be considered during policy research include:

- What issue motivated the policy?
- What are the key elements of the policy?
- What were the policy-makers' original goals and objectives?
- Who are the primary policy beneficiaries?
- What groups are responsible for implementing the policy and what are their specific roles?
- What type of campaign or process was used to get this policy approved?
- Who were the main supporters?
- Where there any opponents?
- How long did it take to develop and/or implement the policy, and what were key milestones in the process?

5 Prioritize policies.

Once the research is completed, present the information on each of the policies to SRTS State Network partners. The Network can then begin to prioritize which issues should be primary and which should be secondary for group action. This rating process would include considerations for timelines, opportunities and importance. We recommend that Network partners rate policies for both the importance to their organization and the importance to the Network.

Since the federal SRTS program is paramount, it should be prioritized at or near the top of the list, even if the Network determines that the program is currently well managed. We must ensure that these federal funds are spent on good projects and programs, and that there are measurable results showing an increase in physical activity and improvements in safety.

6 Create action teams and identify leaders.

Determine which SRTS State Network partners would be the appropriate leaders for implementing each prioritized policy and which partners will assist. Separate action teams can be convened to focus on specific policies and report back to the larger group to seek approval on a particular strategy, or to seek assistance with tasks such as outreach or developing referenced position papers on policies.

If there are not enough Network partners to form action teams on some or all of the issues, then the Network as a whole should engage in priority policy work. You may also be able to identify Network partners and outside experts who are willing to be part of an action team on a particular issue, even though they may not regularly participate in the overall Network.

Keep in mind that your Network may not have the capacity to address all of the policy areas referenced in step four. The rating process will help your Network identify and prioritize the most important policies.

7 Develop a list of objectives and tasks.

Develop a list of objectives and tasks for each policy and create an estimated timeline for completing the tasks and achieving the objectives. This list will change periodically as tasks are completed and as new issues, opportunities and resources are identified. While some policies may take years to implement, start by outlining

objectives and tasks to be achieved during the next six to twelve months, so that your Network will be able to track and monitor progress and achieve early successes.

8 Write an SRTS State Network Action Plan.

The SRTS State Network Action Plan will become your road map for the SRTS State Network's work and meeting agendas. The Action Plan should include the Network partner list, the prioritized list of policies with their action team participants, and the associated objectives and tasks for each of the policies. The Action Plan details which policies the Network will address in the next six to twelve months, and also details which policies are important even if the Network does not currently have the capacity to address them. By recording these policies, the Network will be able to monitor them and plan action steps down the road.

The Action Plan should be updated and reviewed at least every six months. New policy issues, opportunities and resources may be identified or removed over time, so the Action Plan should be considered a living document that will periodically change as needed. It can also serve as a framework for seeking additional funding to fulfill SRTS State Network goals.

9 Create model policies.

For priority policies that the State Network will address, a policy-specific workgroup or action team should create language for the development of a model policy. This can be done by either modifying existing language or creating a new model policy brief. For example, a Network might propose new language to the State Department of Education regarding school siting policies, or a Network might propose new language to the State Department of Transportation regarding the need for complete streets, or the DOT's use of Highway Safety Improvement program funds. Outside experts and Network partners who may be on your contact list

but are not part of the core group may be recruited to provide policy language, technical expertise or help with advocacy efforts.

10 Keep network partners engaged and share your success.

Schedule regular SRTS State Network and action team meetings, and keep partners, elected officials and relevant news media informed of Network activities and accomplishments. Because people in your Network are likely to be busy leaders who typically attend a lot of meetings, be sure that important tasks are accomplished between meetings, and that Network meetings are efficient and productive. Providing meeting notes within one week of each meeting will also help inform partners who may not be able to attend each meeting.

If materials such as press releases or official letters are produced by Network partners or an action team, be sure that the entire Network has an opportunity to review and comment on the draft materials before final distribution.

Evaluate the progress and challenges of the Network, and make modifications to the SRTS State Network Action Plan or Network structure as needed. Undoubtedly, there will be periodic turnover of Network partners, so recruitment will be an ongoing task of the Network organizer and partners. Compelling success stories will help motivate and provide ideas to networks and SRTS stakeholders in other states, so remember to keep national groups such as the SRTS National Partnership and contacts in other states informed of your progress. The accomplishments of your SRTS State Network will contribute to the overall success of the SRTS movement in your state, and could have an impact on the replication of policies nationwide.

Endnotes

- 1 Transportation Characteristics of School Children, Report No. 4. Washington, DC: Nationwide Personal Transportation Study, Federal Highway Administration, July 1972.
- 2 "Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 231-R-03-004: 2, 2003. Available at www.epa.gov/livability/school_travel.htm.
- 3 "A Nation at Risk—Childhood Obesity Sourcebook—(Physical activity levels among children aged 9–13 years—United States, 2002." Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 2003;52[33]:785–8, and "National Health Interview Survey." National Center for Health Statistics, 1999–2001.
- 4 "Obesity Still a Major Problem." National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 14 April 2006. Available at www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/06facts/obesity03_04.htm.
- 5 Dubay A. "See Dick and Jane Sit in Traffic," The Press Democrat, September 7, 2003 cited in Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency EPA 231-R-03-004. October 2003. Available at www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/school_travel.pdf. Accessed January 20, 2006.

See also: Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, London, Greater Vancouver Regional District. 1999. Morning Peak Trip by Purpose at www.transact.org/ca/saferoute/saferoute.htm.
- 6 Washington State Department of Transportation; cited in Safe Routes to School, NHTSA, 2002.

