Background on Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is a national and international movement to create safe, convenient, and fun opportunities for children to bicycle and walk to and from schools. The program has been designed to reverse the decline in children walking and bicycling to schools. Safe Routes to School can also play a critical role in reversing the alarming nationwide trend toward childhood obesity and inactivity.

There is a federally funded program that was established in 2005 and several states have established a state-funded SRTS program, including Texas and California.

Benefits of Safe Routes to School

**Safety:**

- In 2009, more than 23,000 children (ages 5 to 15) were injured and 250 killed by cars when they were struck while walking or bicycling. This represents 25% of all children’s traffic fatalities and 15% of all children’s traffic injuries. Safe Routes to School is the only program focused on addressing this tragic reality.
- For children who live less than a mile from school, 43% are driven to school—an easy distance for walking and bicycling if conditions are safe.
- These short trips can be shifted to walking and bicycling with Safe Routes to School, easing the morning commute and increasing physical activity.

**Promotes academic achievement:**

- Evidence suggests that physical activity has a positive impact on cognitive ability, avoiding tobacco use, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.
- Other studies have shown that normal weight children have higher scholastic achievement, less absenteeism, and higher physical fitness than their obese counterparts.
- Recent studies have found a strong correlation between physical activity and physical education in schools and students’ academic performance.

**Promotes physical activity:**

- It is recommended that children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. Walking one mile to and from school each day equals two-thirds of the recommended level of physical activity per day, and children who walk to school are more physically active throughout the day.
- Studies show that children who walk and bicycle to school are more physically active, have lower body mass index scores, lower obesity levels and are more likely to meet physical activity guidelines than students who are driven or bused to school.
- Studies of Safe Routes to School programs have shown they can increase walking and bicycling anywhere from 20 to 200%. Another study found that just a 5% increase in neighborhood walkability was associated with 32.1% more minutes devoted to physically active travel.
• It’s unfair to expect and encourage children to be more physically active without providing them with an opportunity and safe environment to allow them to incorporate exercise into their daily routines. Infrastructure installed with Safe Routes to School funding is proven to reduce pedestrian and bicycle deaths and injuries. For example, adding a sidewalk cuts in half the risk that a pedestrian will be struck by a car.

**Benefits the community economically:**

• Studies have found that building bike/pedestrian trails reduces health care costs associated with physical inactivity. For every dollar invested in building these trails, nearly $3 in medical cost savings may be achieved

• In addition, adding a sidewalk can reduce long-term school busing costs, and ease financial burdens on schools struggling to absorb the rising price of gasoline. Conservatively assuming that 5% of today’s school busing costs are for hazard busing, making it safe for those children to walk or bicycle instead could save approximately $1 billion per year in busing costs

• Construction of pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure creates jobs. In fact, for each $1 million in bicycling or pedestrian infrastructure 10-11.4 jobs are created; compared to 7.8 jobs for road-only construction projects.

**State and Local Communities Drive SRTS Efforts**

A key to Safe Routes to School is the requirement for a comprehensive planning approach whereby cities, schools and parents work together to set priorities for projects to address the most pressing safety concerns. This approach helps target funding where it is most needed.

Since 2006, $9.5 million in SRTS grants have been awarded in Iowa to 98 grantees. The program has been extremely effective in our state, to see a brochure about Safe Routes to School Program in Iowa you can go to the Iowa Department of Transportation Web site: http://www.iowadot.gov/saferoutes/

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