

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction to “Safe Routes to School”

Welcome to “Safe Routes to School,” an ever-growing effort to promote safe walking and bicycling to and from school! Across Georgia, and across the United States, and, in fact, across the world, communities are setting up programs to support walking and



At Glennwood School in Decatur, Georgia, walking and rolling to school has become a “cool” thing to do!

bicycling as viable and healthful options for children and families on their school journeys. This Guidebook is designed to help you establish a successful and sustainable Safe Routes to School program that will enhance the safety and health of your community.

Why “Safe Routes to School?”

Have you ever watched a long line of cars clog the road in front of a school, engines idling as they inch their way forward, impatient children squirming in the back seat? Have you seen children on their way to school, walking in the road, scurrying across a major street, or dodging cars in the school driveway? While “going to school” is often a very basic part of family life, the simple act of getting to and from school has become increasingly difficult.

Thirty years ago, more than 66 percent of children in the US walked or biked to school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Today, with increased traffic, many parents are concerned that walking and bicycling are not safe, and the number of American school children who walk or bike to school has dropped to just 13 percent (CDC). With this change, we have seen corresponding increases in traffic congestion and air pollution around schools; we have also seen a dramatic rise in rates of childhood obesity in recent years. Many health professionals and educators agree that walking and biking to school provide important opportunities for children to explore their neighborhoods, develop social skills, experience a sense of responsibility and independence, and exercise their bodies.

Safe Routes to School programs use a comprehensive community-based approach to address these issues. They seek to improve the safety of children who walk and bicycle while increasing the numbers of school community members who travel to and from school using non-motorized transportation.



Students and parents at Clairemont Elementary in Decatur, Georgia, enjoy the exercise and the fun on “Walk and Roll to School Day.”

The Need for Safe Routes to School

Safety

- In a survey of parents conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30% indicated traffic danger as a major barrier to allowing their children to walk or bike to school.
- Motor vehicle crashes (in which children are passengers) are the leading cause of death for school-age children (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration).

Congestion

- 20 to 25% of morning rush hour traffic is attributable to parents driving their children to school (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration).
- 50% of children hit by cars near schools are hit by parents of other students (Washington State Department of Transportation).

Health and Physical Activity

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends at least 60 minutes daily of physical activity for children. Yet, of children ages 9 to 13 years, 62 percent do not participate in any organized physical activity and 23 percent do not engage in any free-time physical activity outside of school hours (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- The percentage of overweight children and adolescents in the U.S. has tripled in the last 30 years. (National Center for Health Statistics). In 2003, one in three Georgia middle school students were either overweight or at risk for being overweight (Georgia Student Health Survey).
- Public health and medical professionals

have begun to speculate that the current generation of children may be the first that will not live as long as their parents (Summit on Obesity).

- An estimated 31% of all elementary students in Georgia live within 1 mile of their local elementary school and could walk to school; only 13% bike or walk nationally. (Data provided by GA Tech, from a GA Division of Public Health funded study, published in American Journal of Preventative Medicine, Oct. 2007).

The Environment

- An average car emits close to .9 pounds of pollutants each mile it travels (Environmental Protection Agency).
- A 4-mile round-trip bike ride can prevent 15 pounds of air pollution (factoring in pollution generated by starting and stopping) (Federal Highway Administration).

Economics

- The metro Atlanta region loses more than \$1.75 billion each year, approximately \$1,127 per peak traveler, due to congestion-related costs (Clean Air Campaign).
- In a 2006 study, Atlanta was named the most expensive place in the US for driving a car, with an annual cost of \$5,772 (Sperling's Best Places).
- Nationally, per-pupil busing costs grew from \$394 in 1990-91 to \$521 in 1999-2000. (National Center for Education Statistics).
- Medical expenses related to overweight and obesity cost Georgians over two billion dollars in 1998 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

What does a Safe Routes to School program look like?

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs come in many shapes and sizes; the beauty of SRTS is that it is tailor-made to address an individual school community's needs. Simply put, community members come together to consider problems and implement solutions. This is done by conducting a needs assessment, setting goals, developing a plan, and then implementing that plan to achieve those goals. Successful programs have used a comprehensive "5 E" approach to addressing changes:

- Engineering, focusing on infrastructure improvements around the school that support walking and bicycling;
- Enforcement, focusing on legal enforcement of traffic laws as well as school policies that support walking and bicycling;
- Education, focusing on bicycle and pedes-



Four of the "E's" come together at Mason Elementary in Duluth, Georgia.

- 1) Encouragement - a "bike train" to school;
- 2) Education - instruction about dismounting at a crosswalk;
- 3) Engineering - the crosswalk and curb ramp; and
- 4) Enforcement - a crossing guard stops traffic.

Essential Components of a Safe Routes to School Program

- Community Interest and Involvement
- Data Collection
- Safe Routes to School Plan
- Engineering, Enforcement, Education, and Encouragement Activities
- Evaluation

trian safety training of children and adults in the school community;

- Encouragement, focusing on fun, educational, and motivational activities and events that promote safe walking and bicycling;
- Evaluation, incorporating on-going information-gathering, review and analysis each step of the way.

Georgia's SRTS Program

In 2005, Congress passed federal legislation that established a national Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program. The program dedicates a total of \$612 million toward SRTS nationwide from 2005 to 2009. These funds are being distributed to states in proportion to the number of primary and secondary school students in the state. Georgia received an estimated \$16 million over five years.

The Georgia Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program was created in 2006 by the Georgia Department of Transportation in coordination with the Georgia SRTS Advisory Committee. The Program provides funds to communities throughout Georgia to improve the ability of primary and middle school students to walk



Students and parents at Dresden Elementary in Chamblee, Georgia, gather in an apartment complex parking lot for an early morning "Walking School Bus". The bright colored vests, provided by the Georgia Department of Transportation, make the children highly visible to motorists as they cross busy streets.

and bicycle to school safely. (See Chapter 5, Funding Your Program.)

The Georgia Program seeks to:

- enable and encourage children, including those with disabilities, to walk and bicycle to school safely;
- make bicycling and walking to school a safer and more appealing transportation alternative, thereby encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age; and
- facilitate the planning, development, and implementation of projects and activities that will improve safety and reduce traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution in the vicinity (approximately 2 miles) of primary and middle schools (Grades K-8).

Benefits to Communities

The benefits of Safe Routes to School programs are far-reaching.

- Glennwood School in the Georgia city of

Decatur saw a 229% increase in daily walking and biking to school over a two year period. (Metro Atlanta Safe Routes to School Project)

- Over the course of one school year, Mason Elementary in Duluth, Georgia saw a 26% reduction of morning car traffic congestion at the school. (Metro Atlanta Safe Routes to School Project)
- During school year 2004-2005, research in Marin County, California indicated a 2.6 million mile reduction in vehicle miles traveled. Fewer vehicle miles relates directly to the reduction of air pollutants that endanger public health.
- In Odense, Denmark, where the Safe Routes to School concept originated, traffic-related injuries among school-children were reduced by 30%.



A rainy Walk to School Day brought members of the Dresden Elementary community together. Pictured are two parents, a student, a teacher, and a member of the local neighborhood association.

Safe Routes to School programs also bring about "quality of life" changes in communities. In many places, the local school system and the local government typically interact very little; Safe Routes to School brings them together in active dialogue and partnership.

In some communities, many citizens are not deeply involved in transportation issues; Safe Routes to School provides an additional vehicle for families - including students — to be involved directly and actively. In many areas, active transportation options, such as walking and bicycling, have become a thing of the past; Safe Routes to School shines a spotlight on those options for children and adults even beyond the journey to school. In addition, with more families out walking and bicycling, neighborhoods can develop a greater sense of community.

The Guidebook

The Georgia Safe Routes to School Guidebook was developed by the Metro Atlanta Safe Routes to School Project and sponsored by the Georgia Department of Transportation. The information contained in this Guidebook is based on a three-year demonstration project in five urban and suburban metro Atlanta schools, as well as state-of-the-art information from sources



Before the Safe Routes to School project began at Mason Elementary in Duluth, only one student biked to school and just a handful walked. A year after the pilot project ended, families avoid the traffic by walking and biking on a daily basis.

across the US.

We hope to see Safe Routes to School programs multiply and flourish throughout Georgia, and we want to make it as simple and joyful as possible for you to get started. The

Community Benefits to Safe Routes to School

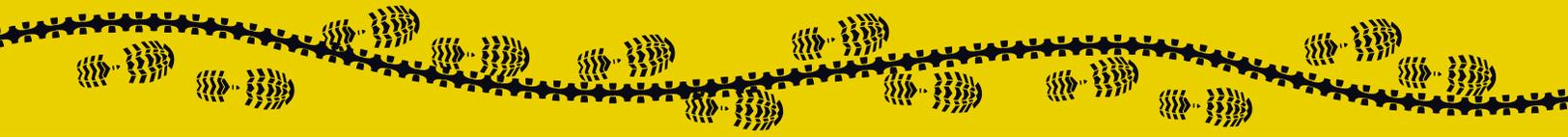
"The program increased awareness about safe alternatives to get to school. We had a lot of fun getting to know kids and parents who walked and rode to school together. It built community." - Parent, Duluth, Georgia

"The program help set the norm for walking to school. The new norm is really important to our neighborhood." - Parent, Decatur, Georgia

"The program got parents, students, and teachers involved. It gave me the opportunity to walk and interact with the students. The mothers had a chance to meet other mothers in the community." - Teacher, Chamblee, Georgia

"People get out of their houses and walk/bike about. Since the program started, I have seen families walking and bicycling to the grocery store and other places. We were once cocooned suburbanites. Now we're neighbors." - School neighbor, Gwinnett County, Georgia.

"I have learned a lot about the benefits of walking and biking and how to impact a community to be knowledgeable about these important issues." - Principal, Duluth, Georgia.



Guidebook will take you step-by-step through the processes for setting up a program, conducting assessments, developing a plan, implementing activities in each of the "5 E" areas. The Appendix contains a "Toolkit" with a variety of materials that can be reproduced and/or adapted for use by communities in Georgia. Be sure, too, to check the Resources section at the end of Chapters 7 through 11 for additional sources of help and information.

Notes

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