

37: Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School programs increase bicycling and walking to school through a comprehensive approach that includes engineering, education, encouragement, and enforcement components. Programs engage schools, parents, children and community groups.

SITUATION

- Effective community-based program
- Federal, Oregon, and local efforts exist

Safe Routes to School (SR2S) programs are community-based programs led by parents, schools, community members, and governments to improve the lives of children by enabling and encouraging walking and bicycling to school. SR2S programs examine conditions around schools and facilitate the planning, development, and implementation of projects and activities that improve safety and reduce traffic in the vicinity of schools. As a result bicycling and walking to school is safer and a more appealing transportation option for families.

Safe Routes programs began in Europe over 20 years ago; in 2005 the US government passed a \$617 million Safe Routes program. Oregon's Transportation Safety Division will administer this program and allocate about \$5 million statewide by the end of 2009.

A number of cities in Oregon have existing programs. The City of Portland has the largest program, working to serve 20 schools by June 2007. The City of Eugene, Bend, and Medford also have excellent program models; other communities starting programs include Lake Oswego, Beaverton, Independence, and Albany.

PROBLEMS

- Sharp decline in student biking and walking
- Youth inactivity leads to spikes in obesity and diabetes
- Parents de-emphasize youth health and independence
- Schools are located further away from homes

In 1970 approximately 60% of children walked and biked to school, today less than 10% do. This decrease is part of an overall trend that includes a sharp drop in youth physical activity, increased obesity and diabetes rates.



Bicycling to schools has become more difficult. Many of the new school buildings are located on the outskirts of town. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that the state of Oregon pays 70 – 90 percent of local school busing costs, leaving no incentive for districts to cut costs.

Parents are also de-emphasizing the walk and bike to school as more households have both parents working. On average, 50% of the children are driven to school by their parents, these trips also make up roughly 20% of the morning commute trips. This increased driving has created congestion in front of schools, creating safety hazards and harming air quality and the health of all students.

SOLUTIONS

- Expand program to new schools
- Publicity efforts
- School involvement
- Traffic calming

The expansion of the Safe Routes to Schools program will continue to push the issues of child safety, health, physical activity, and the importance of bicycling and walking. The program must be expanded in Oregon, Portland, and elsewhere to continue to build successes.

Safe Routes programs generally start with promotional efforts that increase participation by students that are interested but not currently bicycling and walking. Successful programs build coalitions with parents, community members, and get buy in from the schools to run ongoing efforts.



Child-friendly street design is another key to increasing bicycling and walking among youth. Preliminary research has shown that children prefer low-traffic routes. Safety crash data also shows that these streets are safer. We recommend that urban planners and engineers expand the network of bicycle boulevards near schools and create a new set of pedestrian-bike cut through routes between neighborhoods and schools.

WHO TO CONTACT

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