

Ensuring Safe Journeys: The Importance of Safe Routes to School

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In neighborhoods across Maryland, the journey to school marks the beginning of a child's day—a time filled with potential, learning, and growth. However, for many children, this journey is also full of dangers lurking in the form of busy streets, reckless drivers, and inadequate infrastructure. These hazards threaten the lives of these students making their way to their schools.

Take for example local reports. At the end of 2023, a 10-year-old Towson student was struck by a car, less than a mile from Stoneleigh Elementary School. According to a neighbor, this was the third time a student had been struck on that block. Baltimore County Police cautioned drivers against speeding while the principal sent a letter to parents asking them to go over pedestrian rules with their children. Similarly, the same week the U.S. celebrated Thanksgiving 2023, two Riverdale Elementary School students, ages 10 and 5, were hit by a vehicle and killed while walking to school in Prince George's County. Unfortunately, they were only *steps away* from school when they were struck by a passenger van.

This reality underscores the critical need for Safe Routes to School, where children can walk or bike to school without fear of getting injured or killed.

For the past decade, pedestrian fatalities and injuries due to speed-related vehicle accidents have been on the rise. An

alarming number of those injuries have occurred in school zones. According to the Transportation Research Board, 25,000 children are injured annually and more than 100 killed on average while walking to or from school. Think of all the empty chairs at the dinner tables.

Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that pedestrian injuries are among the leading causes of death for children aged 5 to 19 years old. Similarly, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that over 6,000 pedestrians and cyclists under the age of 15 are injured in motor vehicle crashes annually.

The Safe Routes to School Concept

In recognition of these hazards—and in an effort to increase safety for kids on their way to school—the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program has emerged.

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is an approach that promotes and encourages walking and bicycling to school through infrastructure improvements, enforcement, tools, safety education initiatives, and community engagement.

Nationally, 10%–14% of car trips during morning rush hour are for school travel. SRTS initiatives improve safety and levels of physical activity for students. SRTS programs can be implemented by a department of transportation, metropolitan planning organization, local

government, school district, or even by an individual school.

By enhancing sidewalks, installing crosswalks, and implementing traffic calming measures, SRTS projects aim to mitigate risks and foster a culture of safety.

These statistics cited above underscore the urgency of prioritizing safe routes to school, as they directly impact the well-being and future of the youth. Beyond the physical injuries inflicted by accidents, the fear of navigating hazardous routes can deter children from engaging in active transportation altogether, contributing to sedentary lifestyles and associated health issues such as obesity and cardiovascular disease.

Furthermore, Safe Routes to School initiatives yield a myriad of additional benefits that extend beyond the realm of safety. By promoting walking and biking, SRTS projects contribute to reductions in traffic congestion, air pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, they foster a sense of community cohesion, as families and neighbors come together to advocate for safer streets and healthier lifestyles.

In essence, the implementation of Safe Routes to School represents an investment in the future—a commitment to ensuring that every child has equitable access to education and opportunities for growth. By prioritizing safety, the community not only protects the most vulnerable members of society but also lays the foundation for thriving, resilient communities.

Program Elements

While it's clear that a Safe Routes to School program has many benefits, school districts or the schools themselves may need further ideas on how to make this work. A typical program would include at least the following items:

1. Sidewalks and Crosswalks:

First, ensure there are sidewalks along the roads leading to the school. These sidewalks should be wide enough for kids to walk together safely. Install clearly marked crosswalks at intersections, so drivers know where to expect pedestrians.

2. Speed Bumps, Humps, and Signs:

Add speed bumps on the roads near the school to slow cars. Install signs reminding drivers to watch for kids and to drive slowly.

3. Safe Intersections:

Where streets meet, create safer intersections by installing stop signs or traffic lights to control the flow of traffic and give students/pedestrians enough time to cross safely.

4. Bike Lanes and Racks:

For children who ride bikes, designate bike lanes separated from car traffic. Install bike racks at the school where kids can securely lock up their bikes during the day.

5. Adult Supervision:

Have adults stationed along the route, especially at busy crossings, to help kids cross safely and keep an eye out for any dangers.

6. Education Programs:

Teach kids about road safety and the rules of the route. Hold regular training workshops or assemblies to reinforce these lessons.

7. Community Involvement:

Involve parents, teachers, and local authorities in planning and maintaining the safe route. Encourage them to report any hazards or concerns along the way.



8. Speed Feedback Signs:

Dynamic speed feedback signs are one type of traffic control device that state departments of transportation use to reduce vehicle speeds, and therefore crashes, by giving drivers who are traveling over the posted or advisory speed a targeted message such as "Your Speed XX" or "Slow Down."

9. Rapid Rectangular Flashing Beacons (RRFB):

Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons are traffic control devices designed for stopping traffic at intersections or mid-block locations so to allow pedestrians and cyclists to safely cross the road while minimizing the interruption to the flow of vehicle traffic.

By implementing these measures, authorities can create a safe route to school where kids can walk or bike confidently, knowing that they're protected from traffic and other dangers.

In Conclusion

Safe Routes to School is not merely a transportation program; it is a critical method that will allow the community to protect and save the children that live there. As the industry strives to create safer communities, initiatives that prioritize the safety and empowerment of youth should be championed. After all, isn't it our collective responsibility to protect the younger generation—and if we won't do it, who will?

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