

Getting More Students to Walk and Bicycle: Four Elements of Successful Programs



An examination of the SRTS programs included in the study revealed that at schools where walking and bicycling increased, programs shared at least three of the four following elements:

- **They identified an in-school leader.** Having an in-school leader—someone who championed SRTS—boosted a program's ability to encourage more walking and bicycling between home and school. Leaders who worked within the school, or who had participated in school functions on a regular basis, were more likely to inspire members of the school community to do activities often and with lots of student participation. Though many schools have outside organizations that run their SRTS programs effectively, having a leader within the school appears to be a key component of achieving walking and bicycling-related success.
- **They conducted activities that reinforced walking and bicycling.** Conducting activities specifically targeted to increase walking and bicycling to school helped change students' behaviors. In this study, frequent walker/biker programs, walk/bicycle-to-school-day events, and park-and-walk/bicycle activities gave students and their families opportunities to experience repeatedly the benefits of active transportation to school.
- **They generated parent support for SRTS.** Involving parents in planning and carrying out activities was a good way to get their support for SRTS. Parents led walking school buses and bike trains, helped students cross streets and collected student travel data. Parents' commitment to SRTS increased when they participated and enjoyed the programs' benefits.
- **They established policies that supported SRTS.** Something as simple as allowing walkers and bicyclists to leave school a few minutes early seemed to serve as a powerful incentive for students to walk and bicycle to/from school.

Though some Safe Routes to School programs have to address safety problems first, most programs ultimately aim to increase walking and bicycling among students. Some programs yield a greater response than imagined; others start out by showing great promise, but end up not reaching their goals.

The National Center for Safe Routes to School (National Center), in an effort to better understand what factors might contribute to increases in walking and bicycling, examined programs for elements linked to measured walking and bicycling outcomes. Two prerequisites for increasing walking and bicycling percentages are: (1) having safe places to walk or bicycle, and (2) having students who live close enough to school to walk or bicycle, but for reasons unrelated to traffic safety, do not. The programs examined by the National Center met these basic prerequisites.



The Research Behind the Results

To uncover program elements that are associated with increased walking and bicycling, the National Center examined program activity at six schools: three where walking and bicycling increased significantly—called “high performing” schools—and three where they did not—called “reference” schools. To be included in this study, schools had to have done three things: (1) collected student travel data over a three-year period; (2) avoided collecting data during the week that includes Walk to School Day; and (3) collected data during comparable time periods (for example, October 2007 and October 2009).¹

This selection process ensured that the schools’ travel data could not be explained by one-time events like Walk to School Day or seasonal differences in travel patterns. The three high performing schools were matched with three reference schools based on characteristics including population density, students’ socio-economic status, walkability of the schools’ communities and the size of the schools’ attendance boundaries. The National Center interviewed contacts at six SRTS programs in the summer

of 2010 to gather information about how programs were organized and what types of events and activities they had conducted. These interviews revealed that high performing schools were more likely than reference schools to (1) have strong program leadership within the school, (2) conduct frequent activities that reinforced students to walk and bicycle, (3) have strong support from parent groups and (4) have policies that supported walking and bicycling to/from school. The table below displays program elements found across schools featured in the National Center’s study.

To see whether the four elements associated with increased walking and bicycling might be found in other high performing schools, the National Center applied the elements to two schools that both received the James L. Oberstar SRTS Award and reported an increase in walking and bicycling. The Award is given each year by the National Center for Safe Routes to School to recognize an exemplary SRTS program in the United States.² As seen from the table, the two Award-winning schools possessed all four of the key study-identified elements.

School	In-School Leadership	Frequent Walking and Bicycling Activities	Parental Support	Supportive School Policies	Walking and Bicycling Percentages
High Performing Schools					
Elementary School B	*		*	*	+ 13% (14 – 27%)
Elementary School D	*	*	*	*	+ 12% (5 – 17%)
Middle School F	*	*	*		+ 5% (11 – 16%)
Reference Schools					
Elementary School A	*				0% (2 – 2%)
Elementary School C					- 1% (11 – 10%)
Middle School E		*			+ 1% (24 – 25%)
Oberstar SRTS Award-winning Schools					
SRTS Award-winning School 1	*	*	*	*	+ 45% (25 – 70%)
SRTS Award-winning School 2	*	*	*	*	+ 15% (35 – 50%)

¹ To read the complete study, go to www.saferoutesinfo.org/program-tools/comparative_analysis_program_outcomes.

² For more information on SRTS Award recipients, go to www.saferoutesinfo.org/data-central/success-stories/safe-routes-to-school-award.

