POLICY RESEARCH & IMPLICATIONS

Promoting Walking & Cycling To School

Summary

Researchers studied nine elementary school walking and cycling programs, also known as active transport (ATS) initiatives, across the United States. After analyzing data from interviews with key people involved in each initiative, two different aspects of policy influence were found:

♦ **Policy Actions** were specific policies that influenced ATS:

- School speed zone policies
- Drop-off policies
- No transport zone policies
- School siting policies
- School start/dismissal time policies
- School choice policies

♦ **Policy Influences** were factors that had the potential to impact policies related to ATS:

- Sidewalks
- Cross walks/crossing guards
- Funding
- Personal safety concerns

- Advocacy group involvement
- Walk to School Days
- Parking lot and drop-off area size and design
- Natural environmental factors

Whether the goals of ATS are related to health, traffic control, or clean air, many stakeholders need to work together to stimulate action and ensure successful initiatives. Schools and communities contemplating an ATS initiative should explore the policy and influences reported here and proactively address them.

Why should schools promote an active commute?

There are many reasons that schools promote active commuting to and from school:

- An increase in sedentary leisure-time activities, such as TV watching, plus cuts in recess and physical education programs can result in lack of physical activity in today's youth.

- Walking or cycling to school is an opportunity for children to get exercise.

- Environmental benefits such as less traffic and air pollution surrounding the school. (A large proportion of morning traffic is due to parents taking their children to school).

- Both children and adults can enjoy a social benefit of an active commute to school. Walking together can provide quality time between parents and children. Children who walk with friends can socialize and catch up on the day's events.

Policy Actions: What policies in schools or communities affect ATS?

School Zone Speed Limit and Enforcement Policies. The presence of school zones alone may not be enough to make active commuting safer. Policies to enforce speed limits are an important aspect of overall pedestrian safety and ATS initiatives.

Drop-off Policies. Private vehicle drop-off procedures can cause congestion on already crowded streets. Drop-off policies that allow cars or buses to block sidewalks or entrances to schools also can be a danger for children walking into the school.

No Transport Zone Policies. "No transport zones" are areas where bus service is not provided because children live too close to the school. Theoretically, if students live close and lack bus service, active transport would be a viable option.

School Siting Policies. School location within the community influences whether or not children will be able to safely walk or cycle to school. School officials have to consider factors such as traffic speed, traffic congestion, terrain around the school, and school distance from residential neighborhood when deciding on where new schools should be located.

School Start /Dismissal Time Policies. If elementary schools start class later than when most parents leave for work, getting children to walk to school might be challenging. Dismissal times can also influence ATS initiatives. Walkers can be dismissed earlier as both an incentive and a safety measure by giving them a head start from heavy traffic.

School Choice Policies. In some areas, attendance is based on choice rather than proximity to school. If students choose a school that is farther than their home school, they may be likely to live too far away for ATS.

Policy Influences: What factors can influence ATS policies?

Sidewalks. Having sidewalks around the school and community is not enough to support ATS. The sidewalks need to be continuous, well-maintained and cleared of debris or snow/ice.

Crossing Guards/Crosswalks. These are comparatively low-cost solutions to some safety concerns with ATS. Crossing guards and crosswalks can maintain traffic control, reassure parents of their child's safety, and make children feel safer when walking.

Personal Safety Concerns. Personal safety concerns can be a barrier to ATS initiatives. Many parents feel that their communities are safe, but there is still a chance that their child would be abducted or harmed by strangers. Promoting adult led walking groups can ease some concern.

"Some parents aren't letting them walk because of the safety issue. For some students, they're walking through some areas that aren't the safest in the city." — School Principal

Participation in Walk to School Days. Walk to school events can be the start of ATS initiatives with support of schools, local pedestrian advocacy groups, and legislators. National and state programs can also provide information and support.

" I think what gets a little more visibility is the Walk to School Day, and what we have done is used that as the vehicle to springboard other things." —Community Organizer

Funding. Funding for a formal program coordinator, parent leaders or teachers is especially important to ATS success. A program with adequate financial support also can help pay for infrastructure improvements such as sidewalks near the school.

Advocacy Group Involvement. Many ATS initiatives involve advocacy groups. Although reasons for participation may vary, these groups often have the same goal: to increase the number of children walking or cycling to school. Advocates help to facilitate environmental and policy changes.

Parking Lot/Drop Off Area Size and Design. Private vehicle drop off can be inconvenient and can cause traffic congestion on roads around the school. Also, idling automobiles and school buses make schools one of the places with the poorest air quality during and immediately after drop-off and pick-up times.

Natural Environment. Topography, terrain, and weather can all influence a school's decision to promote ATS. Since many of these factors cannot be changed, ways to address them should be proactively built into ATS plans

For more information on starting a Safe Routes to School program in your area, see the following websites:

The National Center for Safe Routes to School: www.saferoutesinfo.org

National Safe Routes To School Clearing House: safety.fhwa.dot.gov/saferoutes

Lessons Learned:

1. Establishing policies is a **collaborative effort.** School personnel need to have effective relationships with public safety officials, city officials, parents, and school district representatives in order for policies to be enacted and enforced.

2. Policies that address **personal safety and traffic safety** (e.g., speed zones, drop off policies, and safe routes promotion) are paramount.

3. ATS initiatives must **take into account relevant state and local policies** (e.g., bus policies, school start times, school choice) that might affect success.

4. Factors such as infrastructure, crossing guard/cross walk status, geography of the surrounding area or weather can be important catalysts or inhibitors for policy development. **Addressing these proactively can benefit the initiative.**