

# Safe Routes to School Issue Brief



ACTIVE  
TRANSPORTATION  
ALLIANCE



## Quick Facts

- Illinois ranks 9th among the nation in obese adolescents ages 10 to 17.
- Nearly five children are hit by cars every day in Illinois while walking or biking within one block of a school.
- Since 2005, the Illinois Safe Routes to School program has awarded almost \$49.5 million to fund 518 projects.
- For every million dollars spent on bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure development projects there are 9.6 to 11.4 new jobs produced.

## Overview

Every kid deserves the chance to be happy and healthy, but many communities are unable to provide safe spaces for kids to be active and get exercise. As a result, thousands of Illinois children continue to be injured in preventable crashes each year. We also face a growing public health threat from a childhood obesity epidemic caused in part by sedentary lifestyles.

With public resources scarce, we need to invest in proven strategies that address these costly long-term problems, while creating new opportunities for communities to become more vibrant and livable.

The Safe Routes to School program encourages our children to walk or bike to school and enables communities to build safer streets and sidewalks. A combination of reduced federal funding and administrative challenges have meant Illinois' Safe Routes to School program is falling behind other states and not reaching communities that need it most.

By increasing funding to the program and adopting national best practices, we can create a happier and healthier future for our children. This issue brief will review the barriers children face to walking and biking, describe the proven benefits of Safe Routes to School, evaluate the program's progress in Illinois, and provide recommendations for continued improvement.



## Barriers to healthy transportation

To understand the role Safe Routes to School can play in promoting walking and biking, it is important to understand the barriers that exist to healthy transportation. Half of school children walked or biked to school in 1969, but only 13% reported doing so in 2009.<sup>i</sup> This shift reflects the increasing number of obstacles preventing children from enjoying the benefits of walking and biking.

Some of the most common barriers to walking and biking include:

- Incomplete or non-existent sidewalks and crosswalks
- Lack of adequate on-street facilities for bicycles, such as bike lanes
- Dangerous conditions presented by high-speed traffic and wide roads
- Siting of schools on the outskirts of towns, creating long distances and other physical barriers
- Concerns about personal safety and crime

## Children are harmed by the lack of safe spaces for physical activity

Barriers to healthy transportation present more than an inconvenience. They create an environment where children are not only exposed to direct bodily harm in the form of crashes, but also indirectly through the impact sedentary lifestyles can have on public health issues, like childhood obesity. Unfortunately, these direct and indirect impacts have a disproportionate impact on low income communities and communities of color.

- From 2006-2012, over 18,400 children were involved in a crash while biking or walking within 1.5 miles of school in Illinois. 54% of all crashes involving youth victims occurred within one block of a school.<sup>ii</sup>
- Over the last thirty years, childhood obesity has tripled in the U.S.<sup>iii</sup> 14.7 percent of children aged 2-4 years old in Illinois

are obese. That rate jumps to 19.3 percent for 10-17 year olds.<sup>iv</sup> Obesity increases the risk of serious health problems including heart disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer.<sup>v</sup>

- Among African American children, 20.2% are obese, while 22.4 % of Latino children and 14.1% of White children fall into the same category.<sup>vi</sup>
- Nationally, young people living in poor communities and communities of color are 50% less likely to have opportunities for recreation near home.<sup>vii</sup>

## Safe Routes to School: A Proven Solution with Tangible Benefits

Encouraging more children to walk and bike to school as a strategy to curb childhood obesity and other public health issues may seem challenging, but proven models of success can be seen in the U.S. and across the globe.

Safe Routes to School is an internationally-recognized program focused on making walking and biking routes to school safer through educational programming and infrastructure improvements. Since the program was brought to the United States in 2005, mounting evidence has demonstrated the many health, academic, and economic benefits biking and walking can make available to children and communities at large.

### Safe Routes to School is effective at increasing walking and biking to school, which promotes good health.

- Schools participating in Safe Routes to School report rates of walking and biking to school that are 37% higher than schools that did not participate in the program.<sup>viii</sup>
- A study of 800 schools from four states showed that a Safe Routes to School infrastructure improvement resulted in an 18% increase in walking and bicycling, and then each year of Safe Routes to School programming added an additional 5%.<sup>ix</sup>
- A study in NYC showed a 44% decrease in child pedestrian injuries in areas with Safe Routes to School improvements.<sup>x</sup>
- Walking and biking to school helps kids get more physical activity, which in turn reduces their risk of obesity and promotes good overall health.<sup>xi</sup>





Photo: M.V. Jantzen

**Increased biking and walking is linked to improved academic achievement.**

- Studies show a positive association between physical activity and child concentration, academic performance, and behavior in school. <sup>xii</sup>
- Physical activity and fitness boost learning and memory in children; fitness-associated performance benefits are largest for those situations in which initial learning is the most challenging. <sup>xiii</sup>
- Lower performing students appear to derive particular benefit from physical activity. <sup>xiv</sup> In addition, short bicycling exercise periods resulted in enhanced neuronal activity and increased cognitive performance for teenagers with intellectual and developmental disabilities. <sup>xv</sup>

**Investments in biking and walking infrastructure yield widespread economic benefits**

- Bike and pedestrian improvements in general are also increasingly linked to economic benefits for communities. <sup>xvi</sup>
- Safe Routes to School is a cost-effective program. A study demonstrated that for a \$10 million investment, New York City’s Safe Routes to School program helped avert \$230 million in future costs to society. <sup>xvii</sup>
- An additional economic benefit is that for every million dollars spent on roadway projects there are 7.8 jobs produced, but for every million dollars spent on bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure development projects there are 9.6 to 11.4 new jobs produced. <sup>xviii</sup>

**Safe Routes to School in the U.S. and Illinois**

In 2005, the federal government enacted a new transportation bill called the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which established a federally-funded Safe Routes to School program in the U.S. Under SAFETEA-LU, each state received dedicated money for a Safe Routes to School program and was required to employ a full-time program coordinator.

The dedicated funding was intended to support a mix of infrastructure projects, such as sidewalk improvements, and educational programming, such as bicycle safety education in schools.

The Safe Routes to School coordinator’s responsibilities included program management and educational outreach to help ensure competitive applications were submitted by groups from throughout the state. Based on anecdotal reports from program participants, this outreach was successful in that it provided applicants with the baseline information to submit a competitive project proposal.

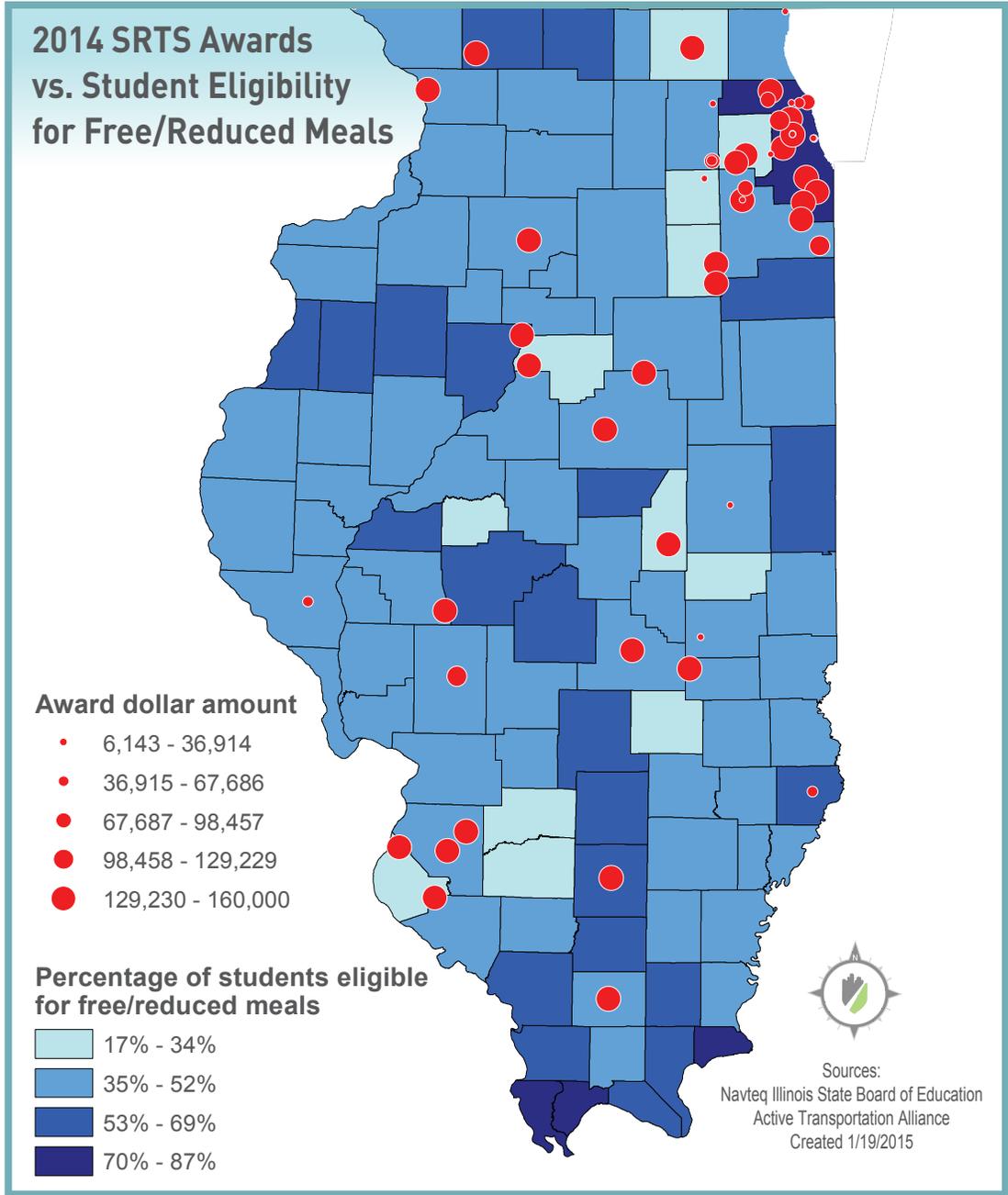
A new transportation bill called Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP21) was enacted in 2012, which eliminated the dedicated federal funding for Safe Routes to School and made it each state’s choice as to whether they wanted to continue implementing the program with flexible funds that required a 20% local match from a larger pot of bicycling and walking transportation funding. Along with the elimination of a dedicated funding source, a state could choose how much funding they wanted to allocate to Safe Routes to School and administratively they were given the choice as to whether or not they would employ a full-time coordinator.

# Evaluating Safe Routes to School in Illinois

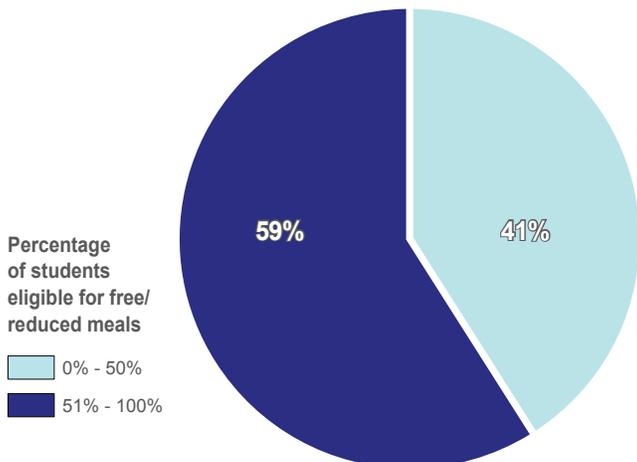
Since 2005, the Illinois Safe Routes to School program has awarded almost \$49.5 million to fund 518 projects across the state over the course of four funding cycles. While the program has provided millions of dollars to projects that support walking and biking across the state, recently there has been a decline in impact.

## The Safe Routes to School program has the following inadequacies:

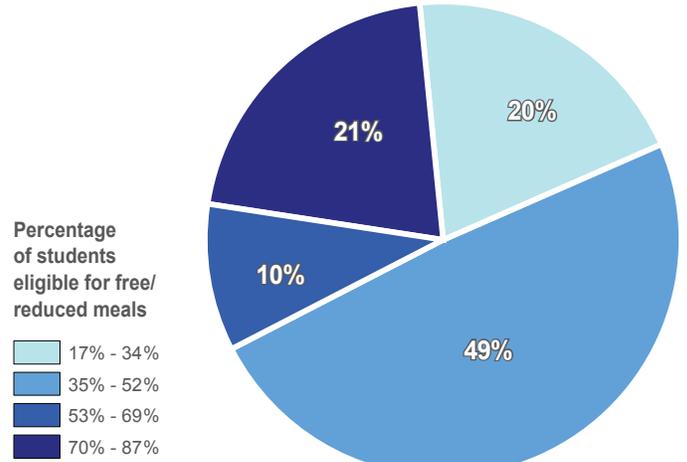
- **It isn't directing funding to communities that need it most.** High-need communities that have higher percentages of students who are eligible for free and reduced meals aren't getting an equitable portion of the Safe Routes to School funding pot. In some other states, funding is strategically focused on communities that have the highest need.



Of all schools in Illinois, 59% have student bodies with at least 50% eligibility for free/reduced meals



Only 31% of funding is reaching communities with the highest need



- **It isn't offering the technical assistance necessary for some high-need communities to submit competitive applications and implement successful projects.** High-need communities that need pre-application resources like planning and other technical assistance to support applications aren't receiving it.
- **It doesn't offer educational trainings and outreach that are crucial for potential applicants to gain baseline information about the benefits of the program.** In past years the Safe Routes to School program facilitated educational outreach to communities in order to educate on the benefits of the program as well as provide guidance, but this type of outreach has been eliminated.
- **It doesn't require enough collaboration of IDOT district offices and applicants.** This collaboration would encourage a positive relationship with district offices and applicants, as well as provide insight into local planning and engineering projects that could impact proposed Safe Routes to School projects.



See addendum that shows the 2014 Safe Routes to School awards broken out by legislative districts.

## Action Steps: Policy Recommendations for Improving Safe Routes to School in Illinois

# 1

### Increase state contribution to Safe Routes to School program

**OUTCOME:** An increase in the state's contribution to the program will ensure that enough dollars are available to the communities that apply, and while remaining a competitive application process, will ensure a greater percentage of projects funded.

# 2

### Eliminate barriers to participation for low and moderate income communities

**OUTCOME:** This will make the initial application for funding more financially feasible to more communities around the state, and also ensure that disadvantaged communities aren't discriminated against due to inability to provide local funding for approved projects.

# 3

### Improve program administration to mirror national best practices

**OUTCOME:** Program administration improvement could increase community application for funding due to less cumbersome application requirements, improved project review process, and ultimately increase ease and efficiency of program.

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