

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL AT MAYBURY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN DETROIT

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Congress passed legislation establishing the Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS). Since then, nearly all states and the District of Columbia have announced local or statewide SRTS activities, and thousands of schools have participated in the program.¹ SRTS enables and encourages children to walk and bike to school by helping communities reduce traffic congestion and improve neighborhood safety and air quality. SRTS is also helping to address the epidemic of childhood overweight and obesity by increasing children's daily physical activity levels. The program is an especially important intervention for low-income communities and communities of color, which are more likely to suffer from disproportionately high rates of childhood overweight and obesity, and to have experienced a history of disinvestment in the built environment. This case study examines the implementation process and results of a Safe Routes to School program at Maybury Elementary, a public school serving a low-income, largely Latino community in Detroit.

THE CLIMATE

One-hundred-year-old Maybury Elementary is located in southwest Detroit and serves approximately 600 students in pre-kindergarten through the fifth grade. Close to 90 percent of students are Latino and nearly all students participate in the free or reduced lunch program. Immigrant families, especially from Mexico, are strongly represented. Parents are typically employed in seasonal occupations and construction-related work, and poverty and lack of health benefits are common problems. Principal Ellen Snedeker describes Maybury Elementary families as “very loving, protective, and caring.”

Principal Snedeker says that childhood overweight, obesity, and diabetes are big concerns at Maybury Elementary. “Kids tend to be a lot more sedentary with TV, video games, little play space and parents' concerns about danger,” she says. A high proportion of students also suffer from asthma. While many parents would like to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into their families' diets, they often cannot afford to buy them.

Maybury Elementary's Safe Routes to School program emerged in the context of a larger effort to address health and wellness already underway. The school participates in the Alliance for a Healthier



Generation's Healthy Schools Program, which enabled staff to work with a designated “relationship manager” who helps them develop initiatives to address student health, particularly around obesity and diabetes. Maybury also formed a wellness council that brought together staff, parents, and other community stakeholders on a regular basis to discuss issues such as the quality of school lunches, students' diets outside of school, and other health-related concerns. These activities helped focus the school on health priorities by fostering a climate of education and awareness.

By leveraging support from the alliance, Maybury was able to build partnerships that have helped the school expand its wellness programs. For instance, a two-year grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan allowed Maybury to hire additional P.E. instructors, and to purchase a rock climbing wall, physical education equipment, and food supplies for health and nutrition classes. Michigan State University, through a three-year partnership, provides staff to teach health education classes in lower grades. Other steps to address health include regular assessments of students' BMI (body mass index), and cooking classes for parents and students taught by a dietitian on staff. Cooking and canning classes are also available through a partnership with a local food bank and the Michigan Farm Bureau. In these contexts, parents learn how to shop and prepare food more healthfully within their budgets. Plans are also in the works for a school garden. After-school programs offer swimming, skating, soccer, and hockey. Maybury also contracts with Playworks, a nonprofit organization that provides schools with trained staff who work to increase organized opportunities for physical activity during the school day.

POLITICAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC WILL

Elisabeth Mack, Maybury's “Communities in Schools Coordinator,” first proposed the possibility of participating in SRTS. Communities in Schools is a nonprofit that works with public schools to increase their resources through partnerships with business, social service agencies, healthcare providers, and other institutions. Mack has worked with Maybury Elementary for eight years, and describes her job as doing “whatever it takes” to improve children's and parents' lives. Her proposal to include SRTS as part of the school's larger wellness effort was based on a needs assessment she conducts at the start of each school year, which takes into account a broad range of considerations. Her first step in a yearlong process was to gain the support of school staff for SRTS. Principal Snedeker saw SRTS as a way to both address children's health and help them develop independence and social skills. Mack also communicated with parents to help them understand the program's value. “Parents understood that their children needed to have enough physical activity and eat well,” she says, “and that [SRTS] would support a healthy generation in our school.”

Mack was introduced to SRTS through the Michigan State Governor's Fitness Council, which invited schools to submit proposals for funding. A portion of the dollars schools could receive was for

improving infrastructure in communities where poor conditions discouraged walking or biking; the rest was intended for program development and support. As part of the application process, Mack was charged with forming a committee that included school staff, community members, the Department of Public Works, city officials, and representatives from the Governor's Fitness Council. The committee's role was to reach out to parents to identify the reasons students weren't walking or biking to school, and create a proposal to address obstacles. For instance, Maybury is near a bridge that feeds heavy traffic, including trucks, across the Canadian border and right by the school. So even though many students live as little as a block away, their parents drive them, creating major traffic jams around the school. Decaying sidewalks, dangerous dogs, a high crime rate, and poor lighting in a nearby park were also identified as barriers.

Maybury's proposal was accepted and the school was awarded over \$300,000, most of which was designated for infrastructure improvements. Resources also went to fulfill a Governor's Council requirement that the school partner with a local, child-focused nonprofit to develop a "walking school bus." Out of this partnership with Neighborhood Centers Incorporated, which Mack says was a great success, came many planning meetings with parents, as well as a "walking audit" during which participants recorded everything they saw as an impediment to walking to school. Bilingual presentations, and the use of video to educate parents about the program, helped build parents' trust and support, says Mack. Maybury also worked with Wayne State University's urban planning department to produce GIS maps, which facilitated the planning process by supplying a big picture view of neighborhood demographics. Maps showing blocks where a high number of Maybury students lived, for example, or which areas had the most crime, assisted school staff and partners in developing appropriate walking school bus routes.

By the end of this effort, enough parents had volunteered to be walking school bus "leaders," and in 2008, Maybury Elementary's SRTS program was launched. Both Principal Snedeker and Elisabeth Mack estimate that about a quarter of students participate, though rates vary with the seasons. To date, Detroit's Department of Public Works has completed all the infrastructure improvements called for in the SRTS plan, and, Mack says, parents are commenting on how much easier it is to walk. Among the ongoing challenges is parent participation. Demands on parents such as low-paying jobs, long working hours, limited time, lack of transportation and proximity to school, and the everyday stressors of simply making ends meet make it more difficult for them to volunteer for the program. But parents who can *do* get involved, and among students, the program has been a success. "Kids like it. They get into a mode, a pattern. They get to see their friends," says Snedeker, who is optimistic. "I think anytime you bring change it's always a process, sometimes you take a step forward and then a step back. We plan on keeping it going."

IMPLICATIONS

This case study suggests, first, that *schools serving low-income communities can plan and implement successful Safe Routes to School programs*. It also suggests that *these schools face unique challenges in doing so*. Finally, it suggests that in order to overcome these challenges and maintain SRTS over the long term, *schools serving low-income communities need greater resources and support*. This final point is especially critical given that SRTS funding is not specifically targeted to communities with the greatest need, although entities like the Safe Routes to School National Partnership are working to address disparities. “There are a lot of things to look at when you talk about poverty and how it affects the total health of the child,” says Elisabeth Mack. “People expect children to succeed in school, but identifying and addressing the impediments that cause them not to, is not a discussion people want to have. You are talking about creating some equity across the board.”

In the meantime, Maybury staff are working to find ways to make it easier for parents to participate. For example, Elisabeth Mack is hoping for a new grant that will allow her to provide parents with a small stipend. For parents struggling with poverty, unpaid volunteer activities are economically infeasible. Extra money or coupons to purchase daily necessities such as food or drugstore items they otherwise might not be able to afford, for example, can make participation possible. Mack is also considering a plan to rotate walking school bus leaders so that routes can continue even when competing demands force parent volunteers to resign; and another to coordinate school hours with a nearby high school so that older kids can drop their siblings off when parents are not able to. Mack says more funding would also allow the school to provide much-needed education and leadership training for parents. This would help them better understand the benefits of SRTS, as well as develop the skills and confidence to take on leadership roles to which they might not be accustomed. Finally, more funding would allow Maybury to simply expand the program itself by, for example, incorporating biking. “The kids wish they could ride,” says Mack. “Safe Routes talks about biking, but our kids don’t do it because our school doesn’t have the facility to secure their bikes.”

CONCLUSION

Safe Routes to School is a viable strategy for increasing physical activity and improving neighborhood conditions in low-income communities, especially in the context of broader efforts in schools to improve children's health. Many advocates support strengthening and expanding the SRTS program by increasing resources available to all schools. As part of this worthwhile objective, policymakers should consider targeting funds to communities with fewer resources and greater needs, which are also more likely to experience higher rates of childhood overweight and obesity. Reversing the

childhood obesity epidemic for *all* children demands purposeful attention to ensuring those with the greatest need derive the most benefit from these initiatives.

¹ National Center for Safe Routes to School, *2008-2009 Summary Annual Report*, http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/about/annual_report_08-09/index.cfm, (accessed October 6, 2010).