

Executive Summary

A White Paper

Beginning the Discussion on

Effectively Planning and Implementing Safe Routes to School for Students with Disabilities

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a foundation for Safe Routes to School (SRTS) practitioners upon which to build concerted efforts to bring SRTS benefits to students with disabilities. In enacting the program in 2005, Congress was clear. The purpose of SRTS is to enable and encourage children, **including those with disabilities**, to walk and bicycle to school. It is reasonable to expect that people involved in SRTS initiatives take this purpose seriously. However, in comparison to many other aspects of SRTS planning, there is a lack of specific information, published guidance, and documentation of experiences, to assist practitioners and advocates in bringing SRTS benefits to students with disabilities.

One of the biggest issues facing students with disabilities is the challenge of living in an often inaccessible society. Students with disabilities can and will participate in SRTS when provided an accessible means to do so. SRTS locally, statewide, and nationally can better serve students with disabilities by:

- Identifying and promoting the benefits of SRTS for students with disabilities with special education teachers and other related professionals.
- Providing tools, techniques, and support so SRTS will be considered a viable option when working toward educational goals found in transition plans and Individualized Education Plans (IEP).
- Ensuring that promotional materials, evaluation procedures, event planning, and action plans recognize students with disabilities in ways that enable their participation without singling them out.
- Recognizing the characteristics of the three types of special education school settings and conducting SRTS in a manner appropriate for the students placed in each setting.
- Developing tools and resources to assist schools in conducting meaningful SRTS initiatives for students with disabilities.
- Sensitively engaging the families of students with disabilities in the SRTS planning process.
- Encouraging, facilitating, and creating a public archive of reports from the field (including pilot projects) regarding SRTS efforts to serve students with disabilities in the three special education school settings.
- Encouraging an investment in special education for SRTS now, so that in the long run it may minimize the cost of public programs each student with disabilities will receive over his/her lifetime.
- Initiating a dialogue at the state and national levels to promote SRTS opportunities and benefits with special education professionals to engage them collaboratively in local SRTS efforts.
- Educating state legislatures and Congress regarding the benefits of public investment in SRTS, advocating for increases in SRTS funding to better serve

students with disabilities, and broadening the SRTS purpose to allow for teaching and development of self-powered travel skills.

When reading this paper, it is important to keep in mind that SRTS in Michigan has two levels. The first, and most important level, features a planning process that results in an action plan including all SRTS activities that could benefit a community. The second level involves federal funding to implement parts of the action plan. Some of the recommendations in this paper may not be appropriate for the SRTS federal funding. For example, at the time of this writing, SRTS federal funds are not available for general health and fitness activities taking place on or near school campuses; all activities must be specifically related to walking, biking, or rolling to and from school. The authors feel it is beneficial to offer a wide scope of ideas and alternatives for students with disabilities and understand that some will need to be implemented outside of SRTS federal funds.

PART I. A Primer on the Special Needs Student, Special Education, and Life in a Special Needs Family

Students with disabilities represent 15 percent of the student population in Michigan. Their attributes are widely varied in type and severity, but most can be understood by understanding the process of functional development every child experiences growing from infancy to adulthood. Disabilities arise out of delays or barriers at various stages of this process. The barriers in turn stem from underlying biological difficulties. As is true of all people, each individual with disabilities presents a unique profile of attributes. Acknowledging and identifying this profile is key to creating effective interventions and accommodations, both in education and in SRTS, to enable each student to realize his/her full potential.

Special Education is the institution created by Congress to ensure students with disabilities have opportunities equal to that of general education students in order to develop their full educational potential. Special education programs involve an array of specialized services providing instruction, other therapies, and accommodations necessary to make instruction effective. In order to more effectively support students with disabilities, their education and related services are developed and documented in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). SRTS initiatives for students with disabilities may support special education professionals and the IEPs they implement. It is responsibility the of SRTS to arm special education professionals and SRTS planning teams with the necessary tools, resources, and support to engage students with disabilities.

Because of the wide range in type and severity of special needs, three types of school settings for delivering special education have evolved: neighborhood schools, regional/district-wide schools, and center-based-program schools. Schools involved with SRTS initiatives need to recognize which of these settings characterizes their school and develop their programs accordingly.

Both in the family and society, students with disabilities may face challenges. Families carry a greater parenting load which overlays the regular demands of parenting.

Engagement in society even for mundane needs like shopping is often difficult because of the reactions of strangers to the child with disabilities and his/her family. These sensitivities must be respected by SRTS planners attempting to engage parents that have a student with disabilities.

PART II. Involving Students with Disabilities in Safe Routes to School

Benefits of SRTS for students with disabilities go beyond physical fitness and development of healthy lifestyle habits. SRTS is an opportunity to support individual growth and goals. Many students with disabilities struggle to learn social skills, understand social rules, and develop a personal sense of responsibility, self-sufficiency, and independence. Travel to and from school under their own power, to the extent they are able, provides a real-world situation within which to learn, practice, and hone these skills and behaviors.

SRTS Planning in Three Special Education School Settings

Planning for SRTS activities and projects is required in Michigan prior to submission of a funding application. Planning must include:

- Establishing a multidisciplinary team.
- Identifying barriers to walking and rolling to school.
- Using attitude and belief surveys.
- Conducting an environmental audit.
- Completing an action plan of priority interventions (e.g., activities and projects) to increase walking and rolling to school and address the barriers.

Schools currently engaged with SRTS activities or planning processes should consider the three special education settings. Neighborhood schools serve special education students who live in the neighborhood and are placed in the general education classroom. Regional/District-wide schools are neighborhood schools with one or more classrooms set aside for special education students. Center-based-program schools are schools that exclusively serve students with disabilities. In each setting, an important planning step is to promote SRTS benefits to parents of children with disabilities and to the special education professionals serving them so these individuals become members of the planning team. The approach to SRTS planning and implementation varies among the three settings by degree. For example, techniques used at a neighborhood school must be complemented with additional strategies at the satellite school. The center-based-program school requires a rethinking of typical planning and implementation because with few exceptions, students reside at great distance from the school. In addition, SRTS efforts at neighborhood and regional/district-wide schools typically begin outside of the special education setting. In a center-based-program school, SRTS would need to be initiated and implemented with a special education focus.

Five categories are used by SRTS to describe the range of challenges and solutions associated with walking and biking to school. These categories, known as the Five Es,

are education, encouragement, enforcement, engineering, and evaluation. All five Es are considered during Michigan's SRTS planning process.

The Neighborhood School Walk to School Day and any other special events associated with SRTS can be planned with sensitivity to the accommodations like wheelchairs or crutches by ensuring that graphics routinely include these mobility aids along with the feet and pedals. Routes can be offered that provide a viable choice (e.g., shorter or accessible) for students with various physical disabilities; and these choices can be offered to all participants, enabling students with disabilities participation without singling them out. It is essential that special education professionals from the school and parents of students with disabilities are represented on the SRTS planning team. Using the school's professional and social networks can yield candidates willing to participate.

Parent and student surveys can be revised to include mobility choices beyond walking and biking, since for some students with disabilities these may not be perceived as an option. Reports showing survey results should incorporate the response choices for students with disabilities without distinguishing them as such. In organizing route safety audits, participating parents of students with disabilities can be assigned routes that represent potential options for their student.

In terms of the 5 Es, for **education** activities (e.g., walking safety lessons) to be effective, the aids and accommodations already being used in the school must be available to support the SRTS education activities. The attributes of each student will dictate the need for additional materials and techniques which may be necessary for education to be effective for individual students. Teachers, parents, advocates, and the other professionals serving the student at the school are great resources to determine the assistance necessary for an SRTS education intervention to be effective for a given student—another reason engaging this staff is so important. The ideal marriage between SRTS and special education is the inclusion of SRTS among the learning objectives and techniques to support the student's IEP.

Encouragement efforts should be sensitive to the additional stress faced by families having children with disabilities. Efforts to engage them may be most successful if they are approached through other families with students with disabilities and the people who provide their children instruction and related services. Efforts to engage families will be better received if the general promotional materials are inclusive of students with disabilities. In addition, if special education professionals at schools with SRTS programs have a clear understanding of SRTS benefits and how they could benefit their students, they may be more inclined to include SRTS in existing educational goals.

Enforcement personnel (whether uniformed officers or crossing guards) can benefit from training to provide an understanding of the types of students with disabilities attending the school, and the behaviors and causes that characterize each type.

Engineering interventions are governed by the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements for providing access. Care must be taken, though, not to assume that

engineering alone can address all the needs of individuals with disabilities. The **evaluation** (survey) alterations were described above.

The Regional/District-wide School Students with disabilities placed in special education classrooms at regional/district-wide schools often arrive from residences outside of the neighborhood. As with rural schools, remote drop-off locations are a means of providing an opportunity for students to travel some of the distance to school under their own power. Efforts to recruit parents of students with disabilities as members of the SRTS planning team should be sensitive to the fact that these parents are outsiders in the neighborhood on top of some parents feeling they are outsiders because they have a student with disabilities. This sensitivity extends to the planning of SRTS events to engage nonresident families. In this setting it is even more important to promote the benefits of SRTS for students with disabilities with the special education classroom teachers, aides, and staff.

The Center-based-program School Students in this setting are the most severely challenged. They will come from great distances and the opportunity for self-powered travel is from the bus or car to the classroom. Direct supervision will be involved in this trip for the majority of students. Nevertheless, for these students, making the most of that trip represents significant benefit, and the trip can become an educational tool for achieving learning objectives and life skills. Walk to School Day can be organized as a special event and as an extended trip from bus to room using a circuitous route on school grounds. Creativity is required in recruiting a planning team and facilitating its efforts since all parents are remote. As center-based-program schools are solely special education settings, SRTS planning will focus solely on students with disabilities.

Route safety assessment can be reinterpreted as creating routes to each classroom that provide learning opportunities tailored to the particular challenges characterizing students in each classroom. Attitude and behavior surveys can be revamped to reflect the objectives and benefits of the trip to school in this setting. Likewise, the action plans can be tailored to the unique educational and quality-of-life opportunities possible through creation of routes with unique purposes on school grounds.

Resource Scarcity: Special Education and SRTS

SRTS planning teams develop action plans that ensure all students experience the benefits of SRTS. However, successfully implementing an SRTS action plan requires resources—both human and financial—and both types of resources are scarce within federal and state SRTS programs. In Michigan, 51 of the 400+ schools engaged in SRTS planning have applied for and been awarded federal funds. The schools receiving awards were, for the most part, funded for only the highest priority elements of their action plans and the funding is very competitive.

A case can be made for investing more resources in SRTS for children with disabilities. Such investments can help students with disabilities develop to the highest level of

functioning potentially available to them. Achieving their potential level of independent functioning enables them to reduce the extent to which they are dependent on society.

Conclusion

Safe Routes to School can be successful for students with disabilities. Throughout the paper, various ways have been identified to better serve these students. Some things can be done at the local level without any funding, and some require support, financial resources, and action of state and national leaders.

Safe Routes to School has broad societal benefits beyond the direct objective of increasing the number of students who travel to and from school under their own power. Among these benefits is the opportunity to increase understanding and acceptance in our society of children with disabilities and the adults they become. Young children readily understand that differences are simply differences. They do not attach judgment or stigma to differences until they learn to do so. Through SRTS efforts, more children can be given the opportunity to experience the joy of independent travel under their own power. By engaging students with disabilities in SRTS, we provide each child the opportunity to appreciate the diverse means by which such travel can be accomplished, and that the joy is in the journey regardless of the means.