Involving Students with Disabilities in SRTS

SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School

Prepared by the National Center for Safe Routes to School

May 2010

Involving Students with Disabilities in SRTS

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are improving children's lives throughout the United States—making it safer to walk and bicycle to school, and encouraging a generation of young people to consider healthy, environmentally friendly transportation options. Walk to School Day participation has steadily increased since it began in 1997, now with over 3,000 schools in the U.S. participating each October. It is important that SRTS involve *all students*, including children with disabilities.

Hiawatha, Kansas

All children face challenges as they grow and develop. For children with disabilities, the scope of these challenges includes a physical, sensory, emotional or cognitive impairment that can complicate and magnify the usual demands of childhood. Safe Routes to School programs offer opportunities for children with disabilities to develop social skills and interact with their peers—and vice-versa. These programs can also provide opportunities to teach pedestrian and bicycle safety skills, and positive experiences to encourage independent travel later in life.

Consider this:

1. Children with disabilities are a part of all public schools in the U.S. On average, one out of every seven students has a disability.[1]
2. Children with disabilities are at a higher risk for sedentary behavior than their non-disabled peers.[2]
3. Children with disabilities are more likely to rely on walking and bicycling in order to live independently later in life.

Congress emphasized these issues in the legislation that created the federal SRTS program, which states that the purpose of the program is "to enable and encourage children, including those with disabilities, to walk and bicycle to school."[3]

This resource is intended to help SRTS organizers include and accommodate children with disabilities in SRTS. It discusses practical strategies for involving students with disabilities in SRTS, and provides examples of schools that have done so effectively.

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2008 (NCES 2009-020), Chapter 2. Available online at: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009020_2a.pdf.
2. Jalpa A. Doshi, PhD, Daniel Polsky, PhD, and Virginia Chang, MD, PhD. "Prevalence and Trends in Obesity among Aged and Disabled U.S. Medicare Beneficiaries, 1997-2002." *Health Affairs*, Vol. 26, no. 4 (2007), pp. 1111-1117.
3. *Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users*, Section 1404. Available online at: http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/saferoutes/overview/legislation.cfm.

A Primer on Special Education in the U.S.

Safe Routes to School organizers can learn a lot from what schools around the country are already doing to serve children with disabilities. A series of education laws since 1975 has required that children with disabilities receive a "free appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment." This means children with disabilities have the right to a free public education that addresses each child's individual needs. It also means that, to the maximum extent possible, children with disabilities must be educated alongside their peers.[1]

Special education professionals work with parents and general education teachers to identify and accommodate the needs of children with disabilities through the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for each child with a disability. Individualized Education Plans address not only classroom instruction but also a child's needs as they relate to travel to school and extracurricular activities. In addition to providing specialized training for children with disabilities, special education professionals often teach alongside general education teachers in general education classrooms, adapting and supplementing the lesson, so that students with special needs can achieve the intended objectives.

Since public schools have a variety of methods for ensuring children with disabilities are able to access standard education curricula and school activities, SRTS should be integrated within existing special education programs and activities to ensure these children are included.

1. Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Available online at: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=108_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ446.108.

Oceanview, Delaware

Hiawatha, Kansas

Bozeman, Montana

Strategies for Creating Inclusive SRTS Programs

There are a number of strategies that can be used to ensure that children with disabilities are an integral part of a SRTS program:

1. **Involve special education professionals and parents of children with disabilities on the SRTS team.** Achieving the benefits of SRTS for children with disabilities begins with awareness of their needs and how the school system is structured to address them. The people in the best position to know these things are special education professionals and the parents of children with disabilities. Invite them to participate as members of the school's SRTS team. Without this perspective, SRTS organizers may miss important opportunities to benefit children with disabilities.
2. **Consult special education professionals and parents of children with disabilities when planning SRTS education activities during the school day.** Communicate with special education professionals to ensure that inclusive SRTS activities are scheduled to maximize participation by special needs students. This involves knowledge of both class schedules and times when the special needs professionals are available to assist. For example, if a pedestrian/bicycle safety education class is held during physical education, additional staff or volunteers may be needed to ensure students with disabilities are able to fully participate.
3. **Seek input and involvement when planning SRTS encouragement activities.** Safe Routes to School activities, such as Walk to School Day and Walking and Wheeling Wednesdays, can also benefit from the input of those who know children with disabilities best. Parents and special education professionals can work with SRTS organizers to determine appropriate strategies to include their children, as well as provide a source of volunteers to assist with the event.
4. **Involve children with disabilities in walking and bicycling audits.** Safe Routes to School programs can help to make schools more accessible for children with disabilities by identifying physical barriers along the route to school, such as missing curb ramps, steep driveways, sidewalk gaps and pedestrian signals that are not accessible. Students with physical disabilities, and their parents, know these barriers all too well. They should be invited to participate in walking and bicycling audits and other "field activities" throughout the SRTS process.
5. **Let the Principal know that including students with disabilities is a priority for you.** Principals have a unique authority in every school. If you are having trouble reaching out to special education teachers and parents, they can often help by putting you in touch with the right people.
6. **Ensure SRTS messages and images are inclusive.** One common mistake that SRTS programs make is using photographs and images that do not include students with disabilities, therefore implying that the program is not intended for them. Images chosen to represent the program should always include a balance of students of all ages, genders, ethnicities and abilities.
7. **Establish special programs when necessary.** In most cases, children with disabilities can be included alongside their peers. All that is required is proper consultation with parents and special educators, a little creativity, and perhaps a change of approach. However, SRTS organizers should recognize that there are circumstances under which this arrangement, on its own, does not achieve optimal results for a student with disabilities. In these cases, it is best to work with a special education professional to develop a custom-tailored program.

Enabling and encouraging children with disabilities to walk and bicycle to school is a central purpose of the federal SRTS program. Including special needs children not only benefits them but other members of the school community as well.

Putting it Into Practice

Photo resource:
The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability

The following descriptions are real life examples of how communities and schools have included children in SRTS and other walking and bicycling activities.

Walk/Bike to School Day

Heritage School and Woodland Meadows Elementary School (Saline, Mich.)

Saline, Mich., has long been a pioneer in developing inclusive education strategies. When Heritage School and Woodland Meadows Elementary decided to establish a SRTS program, this inclusiveness ethic transferred naturally. The schools established an SRTS team that included an advocate for children with disabilities. When the team conducted a walk audit, they paid close attention to accessibility issues.

Walk/Bike to School Day, the program's signature event, was also planned to include children with disabilities. Two remote drop-off locations were identified, one for children arriving in buses and another for children arriving by car. Children with special needs were met by special education teachers and assistants who supervised and assisted them during the walk to school. Walk/Bike to School Day also included a bike train that catered to children of all abilities. Children who could not ride on their own rode tandems piloted by trained volunteers.

Developing SRTS for a Special Education School

Hillside Learning and Behavior Center (Allegan, Mich.)

Hillside Learning and Behavior Center is located in the small town Allegan, Mich., where it serves students with disabilities from the entire county. Most students live outside of the Allegan City limits and all are provided with bus service. However, walking is an integral part of life at Hillside. Students regularly walk from school to downtown Allegan as part of life skills training. Consequently, while federal funding cannot be used for this purpose, the Hillside SRTS program focused on improving the route between school and downtown rather than the route between home and school.

The school's SRTS Action Plan Team conducted a walk audit that included special education professionals and approximately 50 Hillside students. As a result of the walk audit and other SRTS action team efforts, enforcement was increased at one intersection, and students now take a new, modified route to avoid another intersection. Students are now more visible because they wear reflective vests, and Hillside teachers incorporate pedestrian safety lessons into their classes.

Swansfield Walk to School Day

Swansfield Elementary School (Columbia, Md.)

Swansfield Elementary School in Columbia, Md., held its first Walk to School Day in 2005. The event was so popular that the school launched a SRTS program soon afterwards. From the outset, Swansfield's program involved students with disabilities. During Walk to School days, the school designated an alternative bus drop-off location a short distance from the school (along a school walking route) so that children who could not walk to school would be able to participate—including students with disabilities who arrive at school on a separate bus.

Teachers and parent volunteers were posted at the alternative location to assist special education students so that they were fully involved in the event and were able to walk to school with their peers. In addition to ensuring that SRTS encouragement programs included students with disabilities, Swansfield used SRTS grant money (including federal and local funds) to improve accessibility to the campus, including eliminating key sidewalk gaps and installing ADA-compliant curb ramps.

Photo resource:
The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability

Everyone Can Participate in Sports Day

Solomon Elementary School (Chicago, Ill.)

Winter weather conditions can be challenging in Chicago. To shake off the winter blues and supplement the schools' participation in International Walk to School Day and Walking and Wheeling Wednesdays, Solomon Elementary School and the National Center on Physical Activity and Disability (NCPAD) developed a Sports Day.

Through the SRTS program, several organizations came together to educate, enable, and encourage students, parents and school staff on the inclusion of students with disabilities in order to foster a healthy lifestyle for all children. Partners included NCPAD, Project Mobility, Chicago Park District, Active Transportation Alliance and Safe Routes Ambassadors.

The goal of Solomon School SRTS Sports Day was to provide an inclusive event for all students to be more physically active and learn about safe pedestrian travel. Sports Day involved 390 students of all abilities rotating through activity stations such as adaptive cycling, wheelchair sports, parachute games, nature activities, pedometer tracking instruction, and pedestrian safety.

A video clip of Sports Day of Solomon Elementary School can be viewed on NCPAD's website at: http://www.ncpad.org/fitt/fact_sheet.php?sheet=707

This case study is provided courtesy of the National Center on Physical Activity and Disability.

A Bike Club for Children with Special Needs

Amory Middle School (Amory, Miss.)

David Tutor teaches special education for the Amory School District and the Monroe County District. His class consists of eight students—four are in wheelchairs, two are autistic, one has Down syndrome, and one is cognitively disabled. Students range in age from 13 to 16 years old and will stay in Tutor's class through the end of their high school years.

"I felt they needed more physical activity," Tutor says. "I felt it would enhance their academic activity. I wanted to make it a priority to get active."

During the 2008-2009 school year, funds from the special education program were used to purchase four 20–inch bicycles, helmets and protective elbow and knee pads for a total of about $400. One child knew how to ride a bike, and Tutor taught the other three who are mobile. They ride the bicycles on the school's large football field. He also takes them to the school's fitness room where they use hydraulic exercise equipment for 30 to 45 minutes a day, and sometimes more if they are unable to bike due to the weather. Tutor says that the benefits of the daily exercise extended into the classroom. "When we come in from any type of exercise, they're ready to get started and they stay focused much longer."

Spartanburg, South Carolina

For more resources and information on including children of all abilities in Safe Routes to School programs, please visit the National Center for Safe Routes to School's website at www.saferoutesinfo.org.