

**bridging the gap**

Research Informing Policies & Practices  
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief  
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# Elementary School Participation in Safe Routes to School Programming is Associated with Higher Rates of Student Active Travel to School

## Introduction

Active travel, defined as walking or bicycling to and from school, is associated with increased levels of physical activity for children and adolescents. Active travel may also be an effective strategy for reducing the prevalence of childhood obesity. However, fewer children actively commute to school now than in prior decades. Strategies such as Safe Routes to School (SRTS) initiatives aim to increase rates of active travel among students by providing technical assistance and support to schools in developing and sustaining programs that help children safely walk and bicycle to and from school.

This research brief examines elementary school administrators' reports of school participation in SRTS initiatives, and associations with estimated rates of active travel by students. As part of the Bridging the Gap research program, surveys were gathered annually

from administrators at nationally-representative samples of U.S. public elementary schools between the 2006-07 and 2012-13 school years. School administrators were asked to indicate whether their school participated in SRTS or similar initiatives. In addition, administrators were asked to estimate how many students walked or bicycled to school on an average school day. Data were weighted to allow for inference to elementary schools nationwide, and analyses controlled for school demographic characteristics (i.e., school size, region, locale, student demographics).

## Key Findings

*The prevalence of elementary school participation in SRTS programs grew steadily over the past seven years, increasing by 54 percent between 2006-07 and 2012-13 (from 14.2% of schools to 21.8% of schools). Rates of student active travel to school, as estimated by school administrators, were 60 percent higher at schools that participated in SRTS programs (where 32.4% of students walked or biked) than at schools that did not participate (where 20.2% of students walked or biked).*

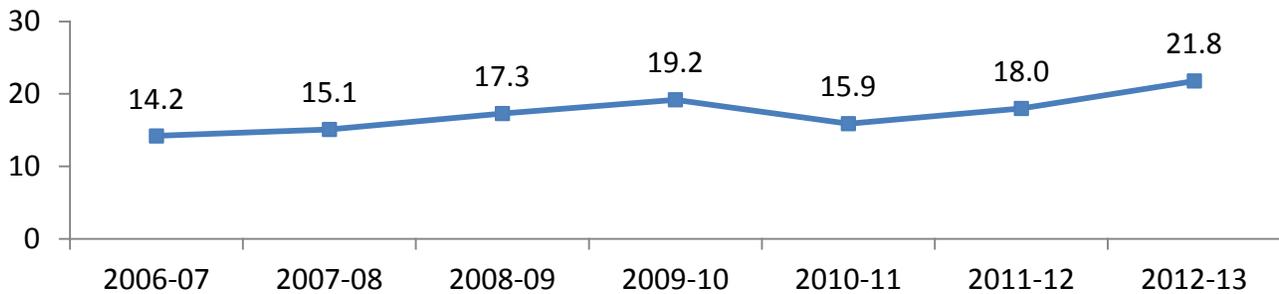
### Findings for the 2012-13 school year:

- SRTS programming was more common at schools in the West (33% of schools) than at schools in the Northeast (20%), Midwest (24%) or South (13%).
- SRTS programming was least common at rural schools (14%) as compared to urban schools (25%), suburban schools (24%), or schools located in small towns (18%).
- SRTS programming did not differ by the school's socioeconomic characteristics (based on the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals).

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

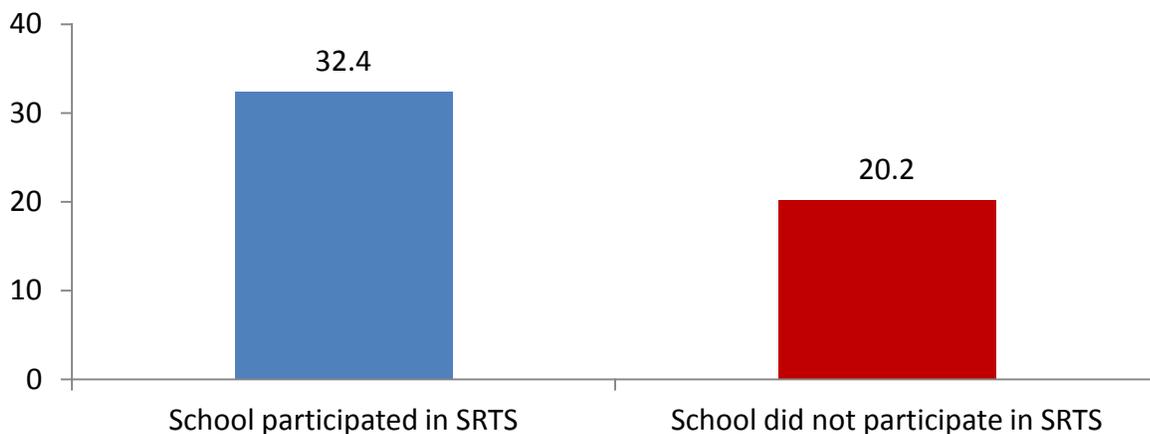
Active travel is a promising strategy for keeping children physically active and for reducing the adverse health consequences of inactivity, such as childhood obesity. SRTS programs are associated with higher reported rates of children walking or biking to school. Financial support for staffing (i.e., crossing guards), school infrastructure such as bike racks, and street-scale improvements such as crosswalk beacons and sidewalks may help to increase students' active travel. Increased support for other SRTS technical assistance programs and SRTS strategies may also help to increase rates of active travel. Even at schools already participating in SRTS programs, opportunities still exist for substantial growth in rates of active travel with sufficient financial investment and supportive policies.

### Percentages of U.S. Public Elementary Schools Participating in Safe Routes to School Programming



*Note:* Data weighted to school level, and percentages are adjusted for covariates (school size, locale, region, racial/ethnic composition of the student body, and percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals).

### Estimated Percentages of Students Who Walked or Bicycled to School, by School Safe Routes to School Programming Status, 2006-07 - 2012-13



*Note:* Percentages are based on estimates provided by school administrators. Significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between schools participating in SRTS vs. not participating.

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