

SAFE WAYS TO SCHOOL THE ROLE IN MULTIMODAL PLANNING

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The growth of Florida's cities in the 21st century has dramatically changed the home to school trip for school-aged children. Traffic congestion on once quiet neighborhood streets has led to safety concerns and reduced the ability of children to walk or bicycle to school. Consequently, there is a corresponding increase in automobile congestion (close to 40% of peak hour traffic in some metropolitan areas). This decline in walking and cycling represents a missed opportunity for the daily physical activity that has become so important in childhood obesity prevention, and it represents approximately \$750 million a year in school bussing expenses.

Historically, land use planning, multimodal planning, and school planning have not always been coordinated in Florida, thus creating a climate conducive to auto dependency and a myriad of school transportation problems. To address this concern, the Florida Legislature passed a bill in 2002 entitled "Safe Paths to Schools," thereby establishing in the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) a "Safe Paths" program for consideration in planning, construction, and funding. The bill further suggests in §335.066(3) that FDOT may adopt appropriate rules pursuant to §120.536 (1) and §120.54 for the administration of the "Safe Paths to Schools" Program.¹

Related to the Safe Paths legislation, the Florida Statutes were amended in 1999 to allow local governments to establish multimodal transportation districts (MMTDs) to promote development that favors pedestrian, bicycle, and transit modes over automobile transportation; to develop professionally accepted techniques for measuring Level of Service (LOS) for automobiles, bicycles, pedestrians, transit, and trucks; and to assist local governments in implementing multimodal LOS analysis.

A recent report on multimodal tradeoffs in traffic impact studies identified a need to define the special needs of schools within MMTDs because of their significance as significant trip generators. Additional legislation, passed in 2002, requires local governments to establish interlocal agreements with school districts to jointly define the specific ways to coordinate the plans and processes of each governing body; these agreements overlap with the need to provide safe paths to schools. Most recently, Florida passed Senate Bill 360 (2005), which supports multimodal transportation. Also passed in 2005, the New Federal Transportation Act, SAFETEA-LU, commits between \$4 and \$9 million annually to Florida for the Safe Routes to School Program (SR2S) through 2009.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to examine the relationship between multimodal transportation planning, school siting, and Florida's Safe Ways to School Program (SW2S) in order to identify how to best meet the requirements of the Safe Paths to School legislation, and other associated legislation. Counties and school districts need guidance on how to safely locate new schools to serve developing and redeveloping areas and how to safely get children to those schools. This research examines various aspects of school transportation as they relate to the safe movement of children to school and the

establishment of multimodal transportation districts, and provides guidance for legislative and policy development in Florida, based upon the best practices within Florida and throughout the country.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Parents' decisions about how to safely get their children to school are complex and dependent upon the travel options available. For those who live a long distance from school, the choice may be limited to taking the school bus or being driven by their parents. For others, the physical environment surrounding the school may be a determining factor in the choice of transportation mode. The Florida Departments of Transportation, Community Affairs, Education, and Health (FDOT, FDCA, FDOE, and FDOH, respectively), local governments and school boards, and other private and public organizations all have a role in improving the coordination of transportation, land use, and school planning, and the overlapping areas of coordination: multimodal planning, coordinated school planning, and SW2S. Multimodal planning and coordinated school planning can create a safe and predictable built environment in which the 4 E's of SR2S (education, encouragement, enforcement and engineering) can be implemented to increase the opportunities for children to engage in routine physical activity while walking to school.

The most critical aspect of SR2S is the need for ongoing coordination between these diverse programs. The goal of this coordination should be to develop communities that balance the need for safe, continuous, and predictable environments for pedestrians and bicyclists, especially near schools, with the need for mobility within the community. Without creating multimodal environments that encourage alternatives to automobile travel throughout the community, the traffic near school zones is likely to remain an issue and schoolchildren are likely to continue to experience the negative consequences of insufficient exercise. Conversely, with improved attention to multimodal transportation planning, coordinated school planning and SR2S programs, the trend of declining numbers of children walking and bicycling to school can be reversed.

BENEFITS

By participating in this research, representatives from the DOT, DOE, DCA, and DOH have already recognized the connections between their various objectives. The findings of this study can be used to improve policy development and at the state and local agency levels, raise awareness of the need for active home to school travel, and improve coordination among government agencies with similar and complementary objectives. This research provides guidance that can ultimately improve the safety and efficiency of home to school transportation and the health of Florida's children.

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¹For the purposes of this study, Safe Ways to School, Safe Paths to School, and Safe Routes to School are all used to refer to programs that have the shared goal of increasing the number of children who walk or bicycle to school. There are only a few minor distinctions. The Florida Traffic and Bicycle Education Program established the Safe Ways to School Program in Florida in 1997. Other states developed programs shortly thereafter using different names, most commonly Safe Routes to School. Safe Paths to School refers to Florida's 2002 legislation that assigned responsibility for the establishment of such a program within the Florida Department of Transportation. The SAFETEA-LU legislation established a national Safe Routes to School Program in 2005.