

SRTS CASE STUDY: Vernon, Connecticut

A Grass “Routes” Effort

SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School



CASE STUDY

Background

Skinner Road School is in Vernon, Conn. As a kindergarten to fifth grade school, it supports 330 racially and economically diverse students. In 2003, Skinner Road had the lowest testing scores in the district. At this time, the school also had poor fitness test scores, with only 9 percent of fourth graders passing all four parts of the fitness test. In 2006, school staff and parent volunteers initiated Skinner Road’s first Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program with the belief that healthier students will learn better.

Details

To begin the SRTS program, the school had to gain support from a variety of potential partners in the community. These partners included the superintendent, the bus coordinator, the Vernon Police Department, the Department of Public Works, teachers and parents. All of these entities worked together to develop and implement a SRTS program that benefits the students and the community and promotes physical health and improved academic performance.

In 2006 and 2007, the school participated in International Walk to School Day. Prior to the event, posters and signs promoting the event and encouraging participation were placed throughout the school grounds. On the day before the event, the students received wristbands to remind them of the upcoming Walk to School Day.



Children participating in Walk to School Day.

On International Walk to School Day, all of the students were encouraged to meet at a designated location and walk to school together. The meeting points were sidewalk areas at intersections less than one mile north and south of the school. If the children lived too far from school to walk, they rode the bus to the designated drop-off area and then walked to school. Students who usually arrived to school in private vehicles also were encouraged to be dropped off at the meeting point. And those students who typically walked to school were encouraged to walk to the meeting place first, if possible. Once all of the participants arrived, they walked to school with the adult volunteers.

The school staff and the community members worked together to create an inviting walking environment. On the way to meet the students, staff picked up trash along the route. The staff also reminded the students to stay on the sidewalks and out of people’s yards. To support the efforts of the school, community members living along the school route trimmed trees and hedges and kept a watchful eye on the children as they walked.

On the day of the event, 10 to 20 school staff members volunteered to oversee the drop-off points and to help lead the children to school. Parent volunteers also aided with these activities. Once all the children arrived at the drop-off points, the volunteers led them to school, where the cafeteria employees served breakfast that the students could take to class with them.

During their work on the SRTS program, the SRTS planners identified effective strategies for recruiting participants and holding successful events. The first effective recruitment strategy was sending a newsletter and reminder notes to

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the students’ homes. These reminders informed parents of the upcoming SRTS events. Another recruitment strategy was establishing contact with parents, such as through a phone call or meeting them when they came to school to pick up their children. To ensure that the Walk to School Day event was attended by elected officials and other decision makers, invitations were sent to the mayor, the school superintendent, the state SRTS coordinator and to state representatives. These invitations raised the awareness of the event at the policy level. Invitations also were sent to the police and public works departments to guarantee their involvement with the event.

In addition to the International Walk to School Day events, Skinner Road has several ongoing SRTS-related activities throughout the school year, such as bi-monthly Walking Wednesday events. These events are similar to Walk to School Day in that school staff, parents, children, pedestrians, bus riders and those who use private transportation, meet at the off-campus location and walk to school together. Throughout the school year, messages on the importance of physical activity and how to walk to school safely are incorporated into the classroom curriculum. Also, activities encouraging wellness and exercise are incorporated into recess times and extracurricular activities.

Results

A goal of Skinner Road’s Walk to School Day was for one school bus, typically filled with children, to be empty. On the day of the event, Oct. 3, 2007, the school officials exceeded their goal by having two empty school buses and more than 300 students, which is 94 percent of the student body walking to school the day of the event.

With the incorporation of healthy messages and activities into all aspects of the school, from recess to the classroom and to the journey to and from school, Skinner Road has seen a marked improvement in the health of its students. In 2004, Skinner Road had 2.4 percent of its students passing all four parts of the fourth grade fitness test. This number increased to 36 percent in 2006 and then to 42 percent in 2007.

The SRTS program began with the belief that healthier children learn better, and this belief turned into reality with the students’ improved academic performance. Once among the poorest performing schools in the district, now Skinner Road is among the best schools. From 2006 to 2007, the school demonstrated significant improvements in mathematics, reading and writing among students in the third, fourth and fifth grade. While walking and bicycling to school is not the only factor contributing to the improved fitness and academic scores, the school administration at Skinner Road believes the SRTS program is partly to thank.

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