

# SRTS CASE STUDY: Washington, DC

## Murch Elementary School builds consensus

**SafeRoutes**  
National Center for Safe Routes to School



CASE STUDY

## Introduction

Murch Elementary School built community consensus for Safe Routes to School (SRTS) efforts that enabled it to overcome barriers to walking and bicycling to school, to educate and encourage students to walk and ride to school, and to build sidewalks to make that trip safer. The school's efforts earned it the 2009 James L. Oberstar Award for Safe Routes to School.

Murch Elementary is located between two major commuter streets in Washington, D.C., and many commuters use the school's side routes as a shortcut, racing on small streets to get to work on time, according to SRTS Co-Team Leader Robin Schepper.

The school's SRTS team administered a survey in which parents identified traffic speed and the lack of sidewalks and crossing guards as barriers to students walking to school. In fact, due to liability concerns, the school had a policy that required every student to provide written permission from his or her caregiver to be able to walk or bicycle to and from school. As a result, even though the entire school attendance boundary stretched no more than two miles from the school site, few of Murch's 500 students walked and bicycled to school. Signing the permission slip caused parents to feel that walking and bicycling to school was risky, even if the students were walking in adult-supervised groups.



The second challenge for the program was constructing sidewalks in locations where residents oppose them. In the neighborhoods surrounding Murch Elementary School, homeowner opposition caused the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) to leave sidewalks out of recent roadway reconstruction projects resulting in gaps in sidewalks along routes to school. Traffic congestion during the drop-off period in the morning has also been a challenge for Murch Elementary, as well as enforcing parking regulations and an orderly drop-off protocol with parent drivers.

Murch Elementary School is located in the District of Columbia Public Schools District, one of the lowest performing school districts in the United States. To remedy the poor performance, the school district is in the midst of major reforms to academic programs, and the changes have resulted in high teacher turnover.

The goals of the Murch SRTS program were to boost the number of students who walk and bicycle to school and to improve the safety of the walking and bicycling environment. In addition, the team hoped to teach students safe walking and bicycling skills and to teach older students to be role models for younger walkers and bicyclists.

## Activities

In August 2008, Murch Elementary School was awarded \$150,000 in federal funding through the DDOT SRTS program. A consultant assisted the Murch Safe SRTS team in the development of a SRTS Action Plan

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covering the Five E's: Engineering, Education, Enforcement, Encouragement, and Evaluation. During the school year, the school began teaching pedestrian and bicycle safety education in physical education classes; the Metropolitan Police Department worked to enforce traffic laws near the school; the school participated in its first International Walk to School Day Event; and it began a Walking Wednesdays program. A key to the program's success was construction of seven blocks of sidewalks; and ongoing evaluation was completed.

“The funding was essential,” Principal Dawn Ellis says. “If we had not received federal funding, we could not have eliminated the barriers to walking to school that faced our parents and students. If you don't have a sidewalk, parents are not going to let their young children walk to school, even if the parents are walking with their children and holding their hands.”

Federal funding was also critical for the safety education provided to students by the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA).

The overall success of Murch Elementary School's program is a direct result of the partnerships that the SRTS team formed within the school and the surrounding community. The school's location adjacent to a retirement community and near the non-profit Iona Senior Services provided an opportunity for parents and school officials to partner with senior citizens on pedestrian safety issues.

Early in the fall of 2008, the SRTS team, spearheaded by the Home and School Association, requested that the administration change the policy requiring permission to walk and bicycle to school. The SRTS team explained that if more students walked and bicycled, the drop-off period in the morning would be less congested. The principal eliminated the policy and agreed to endorse International Walk to School Day. The assistant principal posted notices of the Walking Wednesdays program in the weekly newsletter and became an active member of the school's SRTS team.



The SRTS team utilized a student safety patrol to enforce rules and regulations. Student leaders “ticketed” parents violating the drop-off procedures. The partnership gave the SRTS team the opportunity to discuss morning congestion with the local police, who devoted more time in their routine morning patrols to the school area.

A pedestrian safety working group has formed that includes representatives from the Murch SRTS team, local Advisory Neighborhood Commissions, the City Council, two citizens associations, and the Coalition for Smarter Growth. The group has raised the profile of the SRTS not only within the school zone, but within the surrounding community.

## Milestones

The placement of a street light at a major intersection, more sidewalks, more crossing guards, and installation of a bicycle rack on school grounds have encouraged more children to walk and bicycle to school, Schepper says.

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“Every time I see our bicycle racks filled with kids’ and adults’ bicycles, I smile,” Schepper continues.

The results are impressive, says Washington D.C.’s SRTS Coordinator Jennifer Hefferan.

“In just one school year they were able to end a long-held school policy requiring permission slips for bicyclists, they teamed with a local senior citizens group to jump start a neighborhood pedestrian safety coalition, and they were able to gain community support for controversial new sidewalk construction.” Hefferan says. “The Murch SRTS team repeatedly brought their ideas before neighborhood groups, local elected officials and the broader community to gain support for the team’s goals.”

Though Murch’s SRTS grant has ended, the school continues efforts to make the neighborhood safer for pedestrians. The school is part of a broader Connecticut Avenue Pedestrian Coalition that requested more sidewalks as part of the President’s stimulus money to Washington D.C.. The group will ask the District of Columbia City Council to appropriate funds to develop a pedestrian plan for Connecticut Avenue from Calvert Street to Western, which includes two more elementary schools that received SRTS grants last year.

“Since the federal grant we have become more active in our broader community and realized that we can affect change,” Schepper says. She encourages other communities to work their local departments of transportation, to involve other constituencies and to gain the support of the city council.

“Partnering with other entities in the community was helpful not only in furthering the SRTS goals at Murch, but it has really broadened the impact of the program in the community overall,” says SRTS Co-Team Leader Jane Solomon. “This is a great time to be working on pedestrian safety because it’s become a major focus for local governments, police departments and lots of organizations and citizen groups. They’re addressing it for all kinds of reasons—from promoting the use of mass transit to keeping the elderly more active and independent, to deterring crime by having more people on the streets. Whatever the particular motivation, the goals are the same and by working together you create a very powerful voice.”

## Contacts:

Murch Elementary School SRTS Co-Team Leader Robin Schepper: [robin@wayfinderinc.com](mailto:robin@wayfinderinc.com)

Washington, D.C. SRTS Coordinator Jennifer Hefferan: [jennifer.hefferan@dc.gov](mailto:jennifer.hefferan@dc.gov)



For more resources and information on Safe Routes to School, please visit the National Center for Safe Routes to School Web site at [www.saferoutesinfo.org](http://www.saferoutesinfo.org).