The Driving Force in Children’s Health:
The Convergence of Transportation Planning and Public Health in Developing
Safe Routes to School in Amherst, NY
Gabrielle Cohen, B.A1, Danielle Vazquez, B.A2, So Ra Baek, Ph.D3, Bumjoon Kang, Ph.D4

Abstract

Physical activity rates among children have declined over the decades. In 1969, 48% of children from the ages of 5-14 in the United States walked or bicycled to school (The National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2011). In 2009 it was reported that only 13% of 5-14 year olds walked or bicycled to school (National Center, 2011). There are a number of contributing factors to this severe decline including school location and suburban sprawl. These factors explore the core of why children aren’t walking or biking to school: safety. When children cannot get to school without an automobile they are losing out on an opportunity for physical activity. Safe Routes to School is a federally funded program that works with communities and policymakers to promote children walking to school through creating safe routes. Our research explores data from a study that was done in the Sweet Home school district in Buffalo, NY and connects the role of how proper planning practices can catalyze a healthy lifestyle.

Background

What is Safe Routes to School?
Established in 2005 Safe Routes to School is a federally funded program that aims to increase the health and wellness of children all over America. The program does this by developing routes for children to walk or bike to school. Safe Routes to School has satellite programs in states that all report to the National Center so that every year they can publish an annual report. In 2008 the town of Amherst received a SRTS grant, since then there have been multiple studies on different school districts.

Why the Sweet Home School District?
Since the 1950’s Buffalo has experienced a diaspora of it’s residents moving to what planners call the secondary area in a city, otherwise known as the suburbs. Suburbs pose a series of threats to communities including diminished social interaction, negative environmental impacts, and the reliance on the automobile. In the past, transportation planners have neglected to respond to these threats and instead focused on revitalizing the urban areas. The issue is that in doing so, cities have become unaffordable and have banished people to “secondary areas” of cities without the proper “weapons” to fight the threats of suburbs. Weapons in this case meaning automobiles. The city of Buffalo has seen this first hand in it’s neighboring suburbs. The Sweet Home school district however has not faced these issues. Almost all families have cars. Most students live far away from their schools and get to school via buses or are driven by a family member. The school district can then serve as our control group where all students do not walk to school.

Health Background

Children should have 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity everyday (Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2008). When children achieve this they can live healthy lives as well as build healthy routines and habits as they get older. Children need 3 types of physical activity that are divided as such:

- **Cardio**
- **Bone Strengthening**
- **Muscle Strengthening**

These three types of physical activity comprise the ideals behind Safe Routes to School. The idea of walking to school and biking to school not only provides social activity but physical activity as well. SRTS is promoting achieving 60 minutes of physical activity per day by starting children’s days off with one form of it.

Methods

1. Assembling the Team
   1. Finding people passionate about transportation planning and active living
2. Gathering data
   1. GIS Data
   2. Census Data
   3. National SRTS Data
   4. Local SRTS Data
   5. Federal SRTS Data
3. Engaging the community
   1. Engaging school districts
   2. Engaging parents
   3. Engaging students
4. Publishing of papers
5. Planning and policy recommendations

References

The 2014 United States Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth (2014.). Pennington Biomedical Research Center. 4-35

Acknowledgements

The food systems and healthy communities lab would like to thank and acknowledge the National/Safe Routes to School initiative for supporting and funding the STRS Amherst project. We would also like to thank the Sweet Home School District administrators, teachers, parents/guardians, and students for helping aid us in this research. This presentation would not be possible without the help of community members and stakeholders in promoting the findings of our research. Without the help of these partners it would not be possible to create and foster a better future for the city of Buffalo.