

## Safe Routes to School Networking Call: Engaging Parents/Guardians in SRTS Programming Wednesday, November 10, 2021, 1 p.m.

*The Massachusetts Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program's second Networking Call consisted of three randomized breakout rooms for a guided discussion on how to better engage parents/guardians in SRTS programming. Below you will find a summary of each discussion along with helpful resources related to engaging parents/guardians in SRTS programming.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Breakout Room 1 (participants from New Bedford, Newton, Wakefield, Melrose, Agawam, and North Attleborough)**

- In some communities, there is a lack of structured school communication around arrival and dismissal
- One way to help with SRTS sustainability is to connect with town-wide PTO President groups
- One PTO created a brief biking video aimed at the educational points needed locally
- Parents as volunteers come & go, with different priorities and levels of activism
  - SRTS needs parent champions to help move the program forward
- COVID made family engagement tougher
- It was suggested that involving middle school/high school youth for peer-on-peer ped/bike education would help keep a Safe Routes program sustainable
- If there is a new school site, that could be a new opportunity for active transportation (Walking School Bus) and behavior change
- It is important to include winter in the active transportation conversation and arrival/dismissal planning

### **Breakout Room 2 (participants from Belmont, Sturbridge, Lexington, and Cape Ann)**

- COVID caused a decrease in parent/guardian engagement because families were trying to manage virtual events/classrooms (not the same)
  - Turnover has also made it difficult to maintain engagement (especially if it's just one parent/guardian champion at each school)
  - Some schools have great SRTS representation, but it's not uniform across a district
- In one community, there used to be representatives from all schools at a monthly town meeting but now the schools basically fend for themselves
  - Parents/guardians are supportive of the program but don't want to help enforce safety rules during arrival and dismissal because they are sometimes the ones breaking the rules
  - Need municipal support to help with no idling efforts
  - There have been issues filling crossing guard positions in many communities
  - There have been efforts to try and get seniors and/or retired folks to lead Walking School Buses or volunteer at crossing guard posts

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<sup>1</sup> The views, opinions, and statements presented in this summary document were made independently by the attendees of this networking call. They may not necessarily represent the opinions or guidance of the Massachusetts Safe Routes to School Program, its agents, or employees.

- Most parent/guardian engagement takes place during the flagship events/walk to school days
  - They can help with communication
  - PTO chairs try to fill the volunteer spots
- In another community, one of the parents is a transportation professional and a member of the local bike/ped committee
  - The municipal buy-in helps with infrastructure change
  - SRTS Task Forces are a great way for school and municipal folks to come together and move Safe Routes programming along in a community
- Successful communication techniques include inviting folks to join a site walk, direct emails, in-person conversations (during arrival and dismissal), and having different organizations/groups share on multiple platforms so it really sinks in

### **Breakout Room 3 (participants from Seekonk, Burlington, Townsend, Westborough, Sturbridge, and Arlington)**

- There was a wide range of parent/guardian engagement with these communities
  - Some schools don't have any engagement and other schools have supportive families for walk to school days
  - PTOs/PTAs are sometimes helpful, but they are struggling to get parents involved (can't get volunteers)
  - In one community, parents/guardians must be the primary target because community members don't want to volunteer (they want SRTS to happen, but don't want to be involved)
  - One town has a coordinator who is very involved, but the issue is getting volunteers to assist
  - There have been efforts to try and establish a pilot program (created by SRTS) to try and make arrival/dismissal safer (waiting for Select Board)
- Not only has it been difficult engaging families, but it has also been difficult engaging schools due to capacity limits this year
  - There is some caution over the amount of messaging (don't want to have communication fatigue)
  - It's harder to get buy-in when the schools are on busy streets
- There is a wide range of communication strategies that work in each community
  - Some individual schools have their own Facebook page that get a lot of engagement
  - Some teachers have individual Twitter accounts where families can get direct information from them
  - Some PTOs have Facebook and Twitter pages where they can push information out
  - Some schools have a "virtual backpack" where families can access the regular newsletter and information on walk to school days
  - In other communities, there is no one managing the social media accounts and the folks who are most engaged on social media don't have children in the schools (mostly curious about the grant opportunities)
  - Some communities are able to translate their messages into multiple languages to reach all families (Safe Routes to School also has many backpack flyers offered in multiple languages)
- Some schools have been successful with SRTS programming by offering incentives like parking and community service hours for high school students

## Helpful Links:

- [Student Safety During Arrival and Dismissal Backpack Flyer](#)
- [SRTS Sustainability Document](#)
- [Pop-up Projects for Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Park, Walk, & Roll Tip Sheet](#)
- [Why Walk, Bike, & Roll? Tip Sheet](#)
- [SRTS Evaluation Tools](#)
- [Walking School Bus and Bike Train Guide](#)
- [Driver Education Resources](#)
- [SRTS Pedestrian Safety Mentor Model](#)
- [SRTS Taskforce Resources](#)