

Safe Routes to School National Partnership Summary and Reaction to the GAO Report On Safe Routes to School

August 5, 2008

Background: The U.S. GAO report on Safe Routes to School was released on July 31, 2008 and is titled: *Safe Routes to School: Progress in Implementing the Program but a Comprehensive Plan to Evaluate Program Outcomes is Needed*. The report was developed at the request of Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), the Ranking Member on the Committee on the Environment and Public Works. Several people associated with the Safe Routes to School National Partnership (SRTSNP) were interviewed in the fall of 2007 and the winter of 2008 as part of the GAO investigation including Deb Hubsmith, Director of the Safe Routes to School National Partnership; Brooke Driesse, Network Organizer of the California SRTS State Network; and Glen Harrison, Network Organizer of the Washington D.C. State Network.

To read the full GAO report, click [here](#).

GAO Findings Recommendations:

- 1) **Progress Implementing the Program:** The reports states that “FHWA has made considerable progress in implementing the SRTS program. It has established a National Center for SRTS and a National SRTS Task Force and successfully applied some criteria for addressing 21st Century Challenges.” The report acknowledges that as of March 31, 2008 states have obligated almost \$75 million in SRTS funding, or approximately 18 percent of the total amount apportioned by FHWA. Currently 2,700 schools throughout the U.S. are being served.
- 2) **Evaluation Component Needed:** While the GAO report did acknowledge that the National Center for SRTS has developed standard parent survey and student tally forms, the report notes that, “FHWA lacks a comprehensive plan for measuring the results of the program. Until a comprehensive plan is in place, it will be difficult to measure both national and local program outcomes and hold grantees accountable for their use of program funds.” The GAO recommends that the Secretary of Transportation direct the Administrator of FHWA to develop a comprehensive plan to monitor and evaluate the SRTS program with a requirement that states collect data, and that there be a formalized collaboration with the clearinghouse, the CDC and the EPA to explore the feasibility of developing “health and environmental outcome measures.”
- 3) **Matching Funds:** The GAO notes that the “SRTS program is unusual in that SAFETEA-LU sets the federal share of the cost of a SRTS program at 100 percent, while most federal funds for federal-aid highway projects must be

matched by funds from other state or local sources.” The GAO recommends that Congress consider requiring a state or local match to encourage additional investment.

SRTS National Partnership Reaction to the GAO Report

The SRTSNP agrees with several aspects of the GAO report including:

- **Progress:** There has been much progress with the roll out of the federal SRTS program since it was enacted three years ago in August 2005. Some highlights include:
 - In January 2006, FHWA issued comprehensive and flexible guidance to states for implementation of the federal SRTS program
 - All states have SRTS Coordinators associated with the State DOTs who serve as contacts for the program at the state level
 - All states have released at least one call for applications for program funding
 - More than \$222 million in funding has been awarded, and nearly \$75 million in funding has been obligated
 - In May 2006 the FHWA awarded a \$6 million contract to the University of North Carolina’s Highway Research Center to run the SRTS Clearinghouse and establish the National Center for SRTS, www.saferoutesinfo.org.
 - In January 2007 FHWA appointed a diverse group of stakeholders to serve on the National SRTS Task Force to develop a report for Congress on strategies for advancing SRTS. The Task Force report was published on July 28, 2008.

- **Evaluation:** We need a national evaluation framework for SRTS that is required for all grant recipients. As Congress and State move more toward “performance based outcomes” SRTS will not compete well unless evaluations are required and standardized. This recommendation is a component of the SRTSNP’s platform for the reauthorization of SAFETEA-LU. However, because local programs often need to collect specific local data, we recommend that national evaluation forms include some questions that are required, with room for locals to customize the surveys as desired to glean important local data, attitudes and considerations. SRTSNP wrote several letters to the U.S. DOT during the summer of 2007 regarding the need for improved national systems of data collection for SRTS and bicycle and pedestrian programs at the state and local level. The SRTSNP has also been working with the U.S. DOT through the National Household Travel Survey to ensure that additional data is collected through that analysis for SRTS.

- **Collaboration with CDC and EPA:** The SRTSNP also agrees that the FHWA should collaborate with CDC and the EPA in developing health and environmental outcome measures for SRTS. In addition to these evaluation efforts, SRTSNP believes that it will be critical for these agencies to collaborate

on school siting issues, as currently only 33% of students live within two miles of their schools, and there has been a growing trend to close neighborhood schools and build large mega-schools far away from communities such that it is not possible for children to walk and bicycle. A national strategy is needed to encourage state and local entities to build more neighborhood schools.

The SRTSNP disagrees with one main aspect of the GAO Report.

- **Matching Funds:** The Partnership feels that the federal SRTS program should remain as a 100% funding program, and that there should not be a requirement for a local match. Many of the communities that need SRTS programs the most are low-income communities that do not have the resources to provide matching funds for the program. In addition, the nature of SRTS programs is that community partners join together and volunteer their time to run programs and implement activities that will make it safer and easier for children to walk and bicycle to school; as such, an in-kind match is inherent in SRTS program. While we do not recommend a required local match, the SRTSNP's platform for the reauthorization of SAFETEA-LU includes a recommendation to encourage states to provide additional state funding for implementation of SRTS programs. Under our recommendation, \$600 million/year would be provided for SRTS programs with \$100 million of that funding available as a "match" for states that provide additional state funding for SRTS programs. This would increase the overall amount of SRTS funding available for local projects, and commitment from the states, while keeping the 100% funding for local programs.

Overall, the SRTSNP is pleased that the GAO report has recognized that the Safe Routes to School program, while only three years old, is being implemented by the states, and that it is a unique transportation program in that it can generate positive health and environmental outcomes, in addition to its transportation benefits. We encourage the FHWA Administrator to implement the evaluation recommendations provided in the GAO report. The SRTSNP would like to work with FHWA, the CDC, the EPA and the National Center for SRTS to develop a performance based evaluation plan for SRTS that recognizes the program's transportation, health and environmental benefits.