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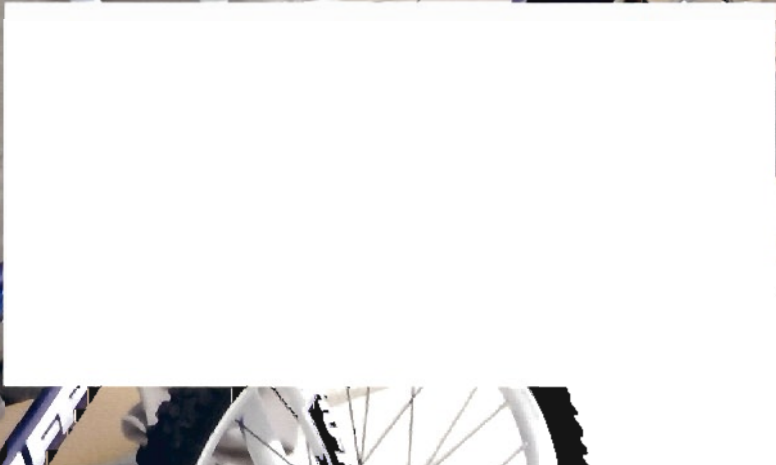
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Bicycle Safety

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(Note: The text on the poster is partially obscured and difficult to read, but the title and bicycle illustration are clear.)





WALK THIS WAY!

From Coast To Coast, SROs Utilize Program To Improve Safety of Students Who Walk or Bike To School

By **Doug Nicholas**, Communications Coordinator, National Center for Safe Routes to School



he schools in Milford, Delaware, were having a problem—bicycle theft. “We were having an issue with bicycles being stolen, so I wanted to provide locks to kids who couldn’t afford them,” said Patrolman First Class and School Resource Officer Joey Melvin of the Milford Police Department. “I submitted a grant request for locks to Delaware’s Safe Routes to School program. Next thing I know, a box is waiting for me, full of locks. I put a lock on every bike in the bike rack that didn’t have one.”

“I was blown away by working with Safe Routes to School.”

A 10-year law enforcement veteran, Officer Melvin is one of many SROs around the country who have connected with the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program. SRTS is a national program designed to improve the health and well-being of children by enabling and encouraging them to safely walk and bicycle to school.

SROs play a vital role in this program by working with educators, parents, engineers, planners, public health professionals and others to improve student safety and encourage more physical activity.

“School Resources officers add so much to Safe Routes to School programs. They are part of the school, they see the issues students who walk or bike to school face and they are in a great position to improve safety in so many ways,” said Lauren Marchetti, director of the National Center for Safe Routes to School, the information clearinghouse for the federal Safe Routes to School program which assists states and communities in enabling and encouraging children to safely walk and bicycle to school.

There are dozens of ways that SROs interact with the SRTS program.

Back in Milford, Del., Joey Melvin is a model for how an SRO can make use of the Safe Routes program to positively impact the school community.

“I’m the kind of guy—I want to do as much as I can in the position. I want to be proactive, not reactive,” Officer Melvin said. “Someone mentioned Safe Routes to School in passing. I thought it sounded interesting, and a little while later I reached out to Sarah Coakley, the State Safe Routes to School Coordinator for Delaware, looking for materials, items I could give to the kids at assemblies and events. I was amazed at the resources available.”

That first contact netted him some materials to give away: pedestrian and

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bicycle safety bookmarks, reflective bracelets, flying disks, and bike safety tip cards. Then he got the locks. Then he noticed some kids riding bikes without helmets. He made a request to SRTS for helmets—a box of helmets arrived. He gave them to the kids who didn’t have them.

But Safe Routes to School is about more than giveaway items and locks and helmets.

SRTS is a federal transportation funding program administered by the Federal Highway Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Transportation. It was established by Congress in 2005 as a part of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for

Users (SAFETEA-LU). Funding is channeled through state departments of transportation to projects directed to schools serving students in grades K–8. Under the most recent transportation legislation, MAP-21 (Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century), SRTS activities are eligible as part of the Transportation Alternatives Program.

Two types of projects are eligible for funding. Infrastructure projects are engineering improvements within two miles of an elementary or middle school that make it safer for kids to walk or bike to school. Sidewalks, for example, or speed humps. Non-infrastructure activities include enforcement, education, encouragement and program evaluation; SRO contributions typically fall into this category.

When Officer Melvin learned that money was available for infrastructure projects, he began looking for problems on the streets around his schools. He noticed an intersection near Lulu M. Ross Elementary School, a spot where lots of school children crossed, that seemed dangerous.

“Kids are crossing the street from a sidewalk to no sidewalk,” Officer Melvin described, “they end up walking in the street.”

He pulled together a committee of parents, school administrators and town engineers, and they submitted a grant to Delaware’s SRTS program for infrastructure improvements. The grant for \$125,000 was approved at the end of the 2011-12 school year.

“So far the grant has paid for engineering studies of the area,” Officer Melvin said. “The committee has decided on the improvements to make—sidewalks, crosswalks and signage—and now the construction work can begin.”

Officer Melvin’s experience shows the end points of the range of ways SROs can





make use of the Safe Routes to School program. Between the easy end of collecting give-away items and the challenging end of pulling together an infrastructure project are many other opportunities.

La Mesa, Calif., a suburb east of San Diego, has a thriving Safe Routes to School program for its seven elementary and two middle schools, according to Enrique Nunez, a Community Service Officer who coordinates the Safe Routes program for the La Mesa Police Department.

Every elementary school has designated walking and bicycling routes, Nunez said. City engineers addressed safety concerns for each route, adding sidewalks, high visibility crosswalks, signage and other improvements as necessary. To further enhance the safety of the routes, the local Safe Routes to School program recruits senior citizen and parent volunteers to provide adult supervision along the routes.

“The senior and parent volunteers have gone through pedestrian safety training and background checks,” Nunez said. “They make the students and their parents feel safer.”

In addition, each school recruits student for a Safety Patrol—a group of 5th grade volunteers who serve as crossing guards near the school at the beginning and end of each school day.

Officer Claudia McDaniel is a 15-year police veteran in her third year as an SRO in La Mesa. One of her roles is to support and monitor the Safety Patrols. Officer McDaniel noticed that the Safety Patrol equipment at one school needed to be replaced.

“Their equipment was old, bent and broken,” Officer McDaniel explained. “The kids in the Safety Patrol at this school are working on a busy street, a hard street to work on. I thought they deserved to have good equipment, but the school couldn’t afford it.”

So Officer McDaniel took photos of the broken equipment and showed them to Misty Thompson, La Mesa’s Safe Routes to School Coordinator, who reached out to the local Lions Club.

“The Lions Club presented new equipment to the Safety Patrol,” Officer McDaniel said, adding, “and the Safety Patrol students were so honored and excited.”

Another of Officer McDaniel’s roles is to “keep an eye out around the schools for any pedestrian safety issues.” She monitors the crossing times allowed by traffic signals making sure they provide enough time for kids to cross. She notes where “red curbs”—no parking zones—are needed to prevent drivers from creating hazards.

“My job is to keep kids safe,” Officer McDaniel said. “That intersects with Safe Routes to School in a lot of ways.”

In York, Maine, Officer Scott Cogger is a 27-year York Police Department veteran, including 20 years in the schools. He began as a DARE officer, now he’s an SRO.

Officer Cogger has worked closely with the physical education teachers at the town’s two elementary schools to hold Walk to School Day each year for the last 10 years.

Walk to School Day is a global event that involves communities from more than 40 countries walking and biking to school

on the same day. It began in 1997 as a one-day event. Over time, the event has become part of a movement for year-round safe routes to school and a celebration with thousands of schools across the U.S. participating every October.

In York, participating students meet at a remote location about a half-mile from the school and walk from there. Officer Cogger brings a police van to the event, allowing the students to ditch their backpacks for the walk. He also assists with traffic control. Another police officer at the event leads the walk in a police cruiser. Officer Cogger also assisted when York schools participated in the first Bike to School Day—an active transportation event similar to Walk to School Day—this past May.

“Every time we do a walk or bike to school day, I see a lot of smiles on the kids’ faces,” he reflected. “The little ones think it’s so cool.”

“SRO’s have a unique relationship with the students in their schools,” said Marchetti of the National Center for Safe Routes to School. “They also have expertise that can be incorporated into educational programs about pedestrian and bicycling safety and special events like Walk to School Day or Bike to School Day.”

This October, Officer Cogger led a well-attended Bike Rodeo—an event to teach students about bicycle safety through an on-bike experience—at York Middle School.

“I had a big smile on my face on October first when so many kids showed up for the Bike Rodeo,” Officer Cogger recalled.

In small towns, suburban communities and large cities, School Resource Officers are connecting with and keeping students safe through Safe Routes to School activities.

In Reno, Nev., MJ Cloud is an 18-year law enforcement veteran—14 years as a deputy with the Washoe County Sheriff’s Office and another four years as an SRO with the Washoe County School District Police Department, including the last two years as the Safe Routes to School Coordinator.

The Washoe district includes 64 elementary and middle schools serving 44,000 elementary and middle schoolers. Of those schools, 20 have well-established Safe Routes programs. The SRTS duties of Officer Cloud and other SROs include:

- supporting student Safety Patrols;
- recommending minor infrastructure and traffic pattern changes to make roads safer for students;
- participating in Walk to School Day;

- providing traffic control at drop-off and pick-up times; this includes educating drivers on the rules for driving in school areas (“We give out lots of warnings,” said Officer Cloud);
- providing pedestrian and bicycle safety messages for school announcements;
- organizing Bike Rodeos in partnership with local groups such as the Kiwanis Club and the Reno Bike Project; and
- informing parents about safety skills to teach their children through stories in school newsletters, the schools’ automated phone messages, and in person at PTA meetings.

In Winchester, Mass., a suburb of Boston, Sgt. Tom Groux (pronounced “Grew”) is a 25 year vet of the Winchester Police Department and has been the department’s Safety Officer since 2009. The town did not have an SRTS program when he became Safety Officer, but he saw the need.

“We were having problems with congestion at the schools during the drop-off and pick-up times,” Sgt. Groux remembered. “Everybody was running late and in a hurry. I thought there had to be a better way.”

He learned about SRTS from a traffic engineering consultant and then made contact with the Massachusetts Safe Routes to School Coordinator at the time. After learning about the program and the resources available through it, Sgt. Groux said, “I bought into the ideology.”

Part of that ideology is that active transportation to school—walking, biking, or other methods—is good for kids. It can provide part of each child’s recommended 60 minutes of daily exercise. It also wakes them up and gets them ready to learn. Academic studies have suggested that kids who exercise regularly tend to get better grades.

Sgt. Groux is incorporating SRTS programs into the Winchester schools: remote drop-off sites where parents can drop-off their children to walk the remaining half-mile to schools, relieving school congestion and getting the children exercise; a Walking School Bus program, in which a group of children walk to school with one or more adults.; and making bicycle and pedestrian safety presentations in classrooms.

Much of the emphasis of local SRTS programs is on promoting walking and

4 WAYS FOR SROs TO GET INVOLVED IN SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

- 1 Ask the school principal and PTA if any action is already under way to improve safety and encourage students to walk and bicycle to school—ask to get involved.
- 2 Consider coordinating a Walk to School Day event in October or a Bike to School Day event in May. Visit www.walkbiketoschool.org to get started.
- 3 Identify safety problems on commonly used walking and bicycling routes.
- 4 Learn more about Safe Routes to School and State SRTS programs by visiting www.saferoutesinfo.org.

biking. First and foremost, however, SRTS is about improving pedestrian and bicycling safety where students have no other transportation options.

In Anchorage, Alaska, Officer Kristi Mercer, an SRO with the Anchorage Police Department since 2009, learned about Safe Routes to School through a chance meeting with Alaska’s SRTS Coordinator, Steve Soenksen. One of the schools she works in, Clark Middle School, serves 1,100 students from a mostly lower income community. About 800 of those students don’t have a choice but to walk or bike to school, she said. Officer Mercer saw the need to provide safety information and training to the students.

She also saw the need to help the students, many of whom have had “negative interactions with police,” according to Officer Mercer, see SROs and police officers in a positive way.

Officer Mercer took the lead in applying for a grant from the Alaska Safe Routes program for bicycle safety training materials. An initial grant was used to provide League Cycling Instructor (LCI) certification training to a group of Anchorage SROs who are now qualified to lead Bike Rodeos. A pending grant application would provide 20-30 bikes and a trailer to haul them for Bike Rodeos that could begin in May 2013.

“We have to provide bikes for the rodeos,” Officer Mercer said, “because a lot of kids don’t have bikes. If we didn’t provide bikes, they might take one to participate. You have to be realistic and think about the consequences of the program.”

From Anchorage, Alaska, to York, Maine, Safe Routes programs have made great strides in improving the safety of students who walk and bike to and from school. School Resource Officers are a key partner in these efforts because of their specialized skills, authority and relationships with the students at their school.

