Examining Practices that Promote Access to Safe Routes to School Programs in Vulnerable Communities
Background
State Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Programs aim to create safe, convenient, and fun opportunities for children to bicycle and walk to and from school.

Initiated in 2005 with federal funding to state departments of transportation.

Some states also have state-specific programs.
SRTS Six “E’s”

- Evaluation
- Engineering
- Education
- Encouragement
- Enforcement
- Equity
Higher Need in Low-Income Communities

- Injury and crash rates\textsuperscript{1-4}

- Less favorable physical and social environments surrounding schools\textsuperscript{5,6}

- Children from low-income families are more likely to walk or bicycle to school, increasing risk for exposure to safety hazards\textsuperscript{7,8}

Challenges for Low-Income Communities

- Great need but scarce resources
  - Human resources – staffing at schools and in local city agencies
  - Expertise – in engineering and design
  - Fiscal resources – for planning and implementing changes

- Yet, some states have developed some strategies, policies and practices to focus on equity in their program implementation
Purpose
Assessing Key “Practices”

- Low-income schools are well-represented in SRTS awards at the national level
- Distribution of SRTS funds by school income level within states may differ
- Data also lacking for the impact of equity-focused best practices on awards to low-income schools

**Purpose of Study**
To determine which practices, processes, and procedures best facilitate applications and awards in vulnerable communities.
 Approaches for Equitable Funding

- SRTS programs in multiple states have adopted several approaches that can reduce barriers faced by schools in low-income communities.
- Span the pre-period planning process to application and project implementation:

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<tr>
<th>Pre-Period</th>
<th>Need Identification</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Selection</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<td>Set-Aside Funds</td>
<td>Awareness and Education</td>
<td>Grant Planning Assistance: Funding &amp; Writing</td>
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<td>Project Administration Services</td>
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<td>Project Implementation Costs</td>
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Study Methods

- **Award Data Collection**
  - Award data, which are reported quarterly by state SRTS contacts, were obtained from the National Center for Safe Routes to School State Project List, for years 2005-2015

- **Surveys**
  - Surveys on identified practices for equitable funding were sent to individual state-level respondents

- **Interviews**
  - Follow-up interviews were also conducted with a sample of state coordinators to gather additional information on the processes and practices collected in the survey

- **Other Reports and State Websites**
  - Reviewed state program websites and legislative websites, reviewed reports produced by states or other advocacy partners
Results
Data obtained from websites/other sources (all)
State responded to web survey
Key-informant interview conducted with state
“Noteworthy” States

- Awarded projects to low-income schools at a rate higher than expected in more than one funding cycle
  - Low-income schools were defined as having >75% of students eligible for free or reduced price meals

- Reported a number of practices for equitable funding
Some Caveats

- Not all states responded to the survey or participated in an interview if they were invited to do so.

- States that had a particular focus on low-income communities may have also reported practices that were general and support all communities.
  - These general practices are included in our tables.

- States define vulnerable schools and communities in different ways and these may or may not coincide with the definition used in the analysis of awards data.
  - Crashes and safety.
Noteworthy States

Data obtained from websites/other sources (all)
State responded to web survey
Key-informant interview conducted with state

Noteworthy state
States define vulnerable communities using different standards and methods

- In some states, these “high-need” communities are defined by local jurisdictions, not on a statewide basis
- In many states, free or reduced price lunch statistics in schools are incorporated into the definition
- Some states use criteria identified by other state agencies and offices

Information on characteristics of schools and communities reached by a project is often collected during the SRTS project application process
Vulnerable Communities in CA

- 80% of the statewide median household income
- CalEnviroScreen—a tool used to designate communities as disadvantaged using a combination of pollution and socioeconomic indicators
- Free or reduced price school meal eligibility
- This information is asked on the application
Vulnerable Communities in FL

- High number of students receiving free or reduced price school meals (asked on application)

- The state also defines REDI (Rural Economic Development Initiative) Communities:
  - Low per-capita income or high taxable values
  - High unemployment or underemployment, or lack of year-round stable employment opportunities
  - Low weekly earned wages compared to the state average
  - High percentage of the population receiving public assistance
  - High poverty levels compared to the state average

- REDI communities are identified through the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
The Office of the Governor identified eight “particularly distressed” communities – those that experienced devastating effects related to population decline, poverty, infrastructure challenges, and blight.
Vulnerable Communities in PA

- Environmental Justice/Entitlement Communities, defined in part by PA Act 47 based on municipality financial status
Vulnerable Communities in DE

- Above the state median for percent of students eligible for free or reduced price meals
  - State median is 35%
Practices for Equitable Funding

Pre-Period
- Set-Aside Funds
- Awareness and Education

Need Identification
- Grant Planning Assistance: Funding & Writing
- Engineering Assistance

Application

Selection
- Provision of Funding Match
- Point Priority

Implementation
- Project Administration Services
- Engineering Services
- Project Implementation Costs
## Practices for Equitable Funding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase in Project Timeline</th>
<th>Practice that may promote SRTS funding in low-income communities</th>
<th># States using practice (N=51)</th>
<th># Noteworthy states using practice (N=16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Period</td>
<td><strong>Set-aside funds</strong> for low-income communities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need Identification</td>
<td>Practice <strong>awareness and education</strong> strategies aimed at encouraging applications from low-income communities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Provide <strong>grant planning assistance: funding</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Provide <strong>grant planning assistance: writing</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Provide <strong>engineering assistance</strong> to communities before they apply</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td><strong>Provision of funding match</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assign extra points or provide special consideration for applications from low-income communities (&quot;<strong>point priority</strong>&quot;)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Provide <strong>project administration services</strong> to communities during project implementation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide <strong>engineering services</strong> to communities during project implementation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assist with <strong>project implementation costs</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Set-Aside Funds

- A portion of SRTS funding is set aside specifically for communities that may have higher proportions of people that are identified as high-need or low-income.

- **CA** was the only state found to set aside funds
  - CA sets aside 25% of funds for disadvantaged communities in its Active Transportation Program, which includes SRTS as well as other bicycle and pedestrian projects.
Special outreach efforts and educational workshops are carried out to reach and encourage low-income communities to apply for funding.

Several states reported general methods for outreach and communication.

Three states reported targeted methods for reaching low-income communities.
Strategies reported to reach all schools included:

- Maintaining a website that provides guidance and resources on applying for and implementing SRTS projects
- Providing informational sessions or workshops/trainings/webinars on the application process
- Having regional or local coordinators available for outreach and technical assistance, including working with MPOs
- Sending out emails/newsletters
- Working with state and local health and education departments, non-profits, and local government
Mississippi

- Worked with partners at the Mississippi Department of Education’s Office of Healthy Schools, which had a program focused on low-income communities and schools

- Also worked with the Department of Health with its county-level health programs to spread information about SRTS
**Targeted Awareness and Education**

**Michigan**

- Contracts with the Michigan Fitness Foundation (MFF) to administer SRTS

- MFF staff:
  - Provide regional trainings to inform potential SRTS applicants, and ensure at least half of the trainings are based in low-income areas.
  - Tailor trainings to provide a higher level of technical assistance to low-income communities, including leading them through the planning and application process
  - Worked for 5 years to build a network of partners in Detroit
    - Worked with the local MPO to tailor crash data heat maps to show crashes during school travel hours to demonstrate issue to the school system
Targeted Awareness and Education

Washington

- Identifies areas with high rates of pedestrian and bicycle collisions and targets those communities for outreach
  - Many are low-income communities
Grant Planning Assistance: Funding

- Grant planning assistance is provided through grant planning awards or funding.
  - Some states offer planning awards that all communities can apply for to develop SRTS plans and prepare to submit a larger application
  - Schools/communities can hire a consultant to help develop the plan
  - Start-up awards with simple applications to initiate a program
  - Plan development awards to support the creation of comprehensive travel plans
Virginia

- Offers a “walkabout mini-grant”, where communities are provided an assessment of the walking/biking conditions in the area and a report that helps communities apply for larger grants.
Mississippi

- Planning funds were given to larger urban areas to develop circulation studies
  - Helped those communities prioritize schools for a phased approach
  - Look at routes students are traveling to/from school and assess what the priority infrastructure improvements would be
Grant Planning Assistance: Writing

- Grant writing assistance may also be provided.

- Strategies reported to reach all schools included:
  - Providing grant workshops and toolkits
  - Local coordinators assist with applications if requested by a community
Mississippi
- Planning funds given to some low-income communities to hire a grant writer, as well as for other assistance in planning and writing a comprehensive application and for hosting encouragement activities such as “walk to school” events

New Jersey
- Transportation Management Association SRTS Coordinators may assist disadvantaged communities with grant applications as part of the NJ SRTS Non-Infrastructure Program

Michigan
- Assistance through subcontracts with local health departments, the MI Department of Community Health, and other non-profits to provide assistance to low-income or low capacity communities
Engineering Assistance Pre-Application

- Statewide planning or engineering firms are contracted to provide expertise to help low-income communities develop plans for SRTS projects.
  - Firms are contracted at state’s expense or costs are built into award amount
  - Planning assistance that includes consideration of different design options
Provision of Funding Match

- Low-income communities are provided the local funding match, mandated by federal policy*
  - *After SAFETEA-LU, communities are required to provide up to a 20% local match when they receive federal dollars for SRTS or other projects—a considerable impediment for low-income communities.

- Many states provide match through bridge and toll credits
- Many states provide the match for all projects, regardless of community’s SES
Targeted Provision of Funding Match

Texas

- Under the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), allows economically disadvantaged counties to request an adjustment to the local funding match amount
  - The Texas Transportation Commission, TxDOT’s governing body, annually certifies a list of Economically Disadvantaged Counties and the local match adjustments that may be considered for each
    - Economically Disadvantaged Counties have below average per capita taxable property value, below average per capita income, and above average unemployment
Point Priority

- Extra points are awarded or special considerations are provided for applications from low-income or disadvantaged communities during scoring of potential funding applications
  - *Example*: a state DOT may offer bonus points for applications from disadvantaged communities, or factor in community resources and size when reviewing applications to ensure that communities with fewer resources and staff are considered

- Many states provide special consideration or use a point priority.
Point Priority

California

- The 2011 SRTS application rating system (by law) provided for consideration of projects that would provide benefit to a low-income school
- Current Active Transportation Program application rating system includes priority for projects reaching disadvantaged communities (defined by law)

Florida

- Priority for applications from schools with a high number of students receiving free or reduced price school meals or from a REDI (Rural Economic Development Initiative) Community defined by the state
- Special consideration for applications from areas with high crash rates – run an annual report looking at crash data within a 2-mile radius of all schools
**Point Priority**

**New Jersey**
- Consider whether the school is part of a Schools Development Authority District or located in an Urban Aid Community defined by the state

**Pennsylvania**
- Points are awarded if the project is anticipated to positively impact an environmental justice community defined by the state

**Vermont**
- Points are awarded to applications from an economically disadvantaged community

**Virginia**
- Projects that benefit Title I schools are given additional points
- Areas with high crash rates are also given a higher priority
Project Administration Services

- Administrative support is provided to ensure that low-income communities are able to participate, even when they lack the staff to handle administrative burden of the award.
  - Example: a state DOT may assist with administrative activities such as hiring contractors for planning and design, oversee construction, or provide support to ensure compliance with federal and state regulations.

- Several states provide project administration services or technical assistance
Strategies reported that could reach all schools included:

- Providing a website with guidance documents and a resource center that was available upon request.
- Assigning a local agency coordinator to provide local technical assistance on project administration, reviewing contracts and other aspects of project administration.
- State administers all aspects of the program, or administers all aspects of non-infrastructure projects specifically.
- State assigns a local representative to serve as a certified project administrator.
Engineering Services

- Engineering staff and services are provided to implement the project and comply with federal and state regulatory process.
  - A state DOT may have engineering firms on retainer to provide services
    - Funded communities may have the option of using one of these firms or their own staff members or consultants

- Several states provide engineering services or technical assistance
Project Implementation Costs

- Assistance is provided during project implementation so SRTS recipients do not have to absorb as many costs while awaiting reimbursement.
  - A state DOT may order all materials and pay for contracted services needed for non-infrastructure programs
  - States may complete the construction of projects

- Several states assist local projects with project implementation costs
Which practices are most frequently reported in noteworthy states?

- Point priority
- Awareness and education
- Project administration services
- Engineering services
- Provision of funding match
Michigan

- The Michigan Fitness Foundation and MDOT provide all planning, design, and project implementation costs and engineering services and fees for the 8 identified particularly distressed communities
  - MDOT oversees construction or contracts it out
  - Includes preliminary engineering and construction engineering (which are ordinarily required to be paid for by the applicant)
  - MDOT pays for the project directly
Other Comprehensive Approaches Targeted to Vulnerable Communities

Florida

- The District SRTS coordinator has the option to identify projects and assist with application writing
- District SRTS coordinator can administer the project including project design and construction
- District SRTS coordinator can let the project directly resulting in no out of pocket expenses for a community
- Provide a point priority for low income communities
How are states tracking that they are serving low-income communities?

- **WA** maintains a database of applicants and awards and can track (for a particular funding cycle) the number and percent of applications received from low-income schools, as well as the number and percent of awards given to low-income schools.

- **DE** maintains a database with income status of schools receiving awards and the funding amounts they receive.
Moving Toward Sustained Approaches for Equity

- How are states institutionalizing SRTS in their state DOTs, and how have they integrated a focus on low-income or disadvantaged communities?

  - **CA** began its state Active Transportation Program in 2014, which includes SRTS. 25% of funds are set aside for disadvantaged communities.

  - In **FL**, funds will be set aside beginning in 2017 for SRTS projects. Florida DOT will transfer federal safety funds specifically for SRTS activities. The state promotes use of these funds in its Rural Economic Development Initiative Communities.
Moving Toward Sustained Approaches for Equity

- How are states institutionalizing SRTS in their state DOTs, and how have they integrated a focus on low-income or disadvantaged communities?

  - In **WA**, state funds continue the program, as WA has had both a federal and state program

  - **DE** plans to set aside money each year within TAP to pay for the 20% match

  - As of 2016, in **MN**, using a mix of state and federal funding, high schools are now eligible, and there is point priority for high need and high potential schools based on the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced price meals and within two miles of the school
Acknowledgment Information

  - The full report is available at: https://hsph.me/prc-srts-practices

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