

# Learn it. Do it. Live it!

## PARENT SURVEYS



Parents have the ultimate say on whether their children walk or bike to school, so understanding their opinions is valuable for building your SRTS program.

Parent surveys are an effective way to reach out to parents, get them thinking about Safe Routes to School, and gives them an opportunity to voice their opinions about student transportation. Parent involvement is also an important part of making your SRTS program sustainable over time.

### ✓ *What information do we want from parents?*

Decide what you want to know and how to get the information first. You may find that the National Center for SRTS's Parent Survey can provide what you need. This survey asks parents how their children generally get to and from school, which factors affect their decision to allow (or not allow) their children to walk or bike to school, and provides an opportunity for parents to cite specific barriers or areas of concern. The survey results will identify the most prevalent parental concerns, which, if corrected, should increase the number of students walking and bicycling.

### ✓ *Parent Surveys, Student Travel Tallies... Which do we need?*

Use both! Parent surveys and Student Travel Tallies are two sides of the same coin.

Student travel tallies are done in the classroom with a simple show of hands, they tell a school *what* happened -- a snapshot of how students get to school on a particular day.

Parent surveys talk about the *why* it happened – the usual mode, how far students live from school, things affecting why students use a particular mode to get to school, and parents' opinions about walking and biking to school.

Together they can really help inform student travel patterns and even help guide an SRTS program.



Students and parents participate in the Healthy Living Festival at Shreveview Elementary School

### ✓ *Getting parent input*

In contrast to student travel tallies which have a very high rate of participation, **Parent Surveys are voluntary**, with parents usually completing them at home or 'on their own time.' The survey takes only 5 to 10 minutes to complete, so the more parents who complete the survey the more insights you'll get for your SRTS program. To get a higher response rate, have a quick turn-around time or ask parents to complete the survey during an event at school. Experience shows that parents who are going to complete the survey will do so right away or in the first couple of days after receiving it. It'll take a lot of effort to get other parents to respond.

Here are some tried and true examples from around the country:

- Schools in Michigan often incentivize parent participation by entering survey respondents into a lottery.
- Teachers in South Carolina have used a mobile app to capture parent opinions while waiting in queue to pick up their children after school
- Public schools in Alexandria, VA include their parent survey as part of the back-to-school packet each year.



A parent watches students cross the street on a Scooter Train to Swansboro Elementary School.

## ✓ Coordinating the survey process

The survey takes a bit of organization, coordination, marketing, and follow-up to complete, but it's well worth the effort.

### First, get organized:

- Reach out to the school administrators to explain the 'what's, how's, and why's' of parent surveys. If they aren't already familiar with your SRTS program, this is a good opportunity to tell them about it.
- School administrators can then better tell you what needs to happen for surveys to take place. School divisions often have very specific rules for conducting surveys.
- Now you can set the date for administering the survey. We recommend the spring, but any time of year that works for your school will work. If your school has completed surveys in the past, try to conduct the next surveys around the same time of year, this way it'll be easier to track the change in student travel.

### Put together a plan aimed at getting the most responses. Here are some tips:

- Be bilingual. Don't forget about parents for whom Spanish is an easier language to provide input. Create Spanish versions of key outreach materials and offer the survey in English and Spanish. The National

Center for Safe Routes to School provides their survey in Spanish as well. Be sure to have someone who can translate the surveys completed in Spanish.

- Online or on paper? A single school can either do paper surveys or online surveys – not a mix of both, so figure out which works better at your school. How can you reach the most parents?
- Get the word out. Regardless of the type of survey, let people know about the survey and how valuable their input is. Include it on the school calendar and website. Use take home flyers, include it in the school and PTA newsletters, etc.

## ✓ The results are in. Now what?

**First, thank everyone who helped with the survey and all the parents who responded.** Offer one more opportunity for those who didn't complete a survey to do so.

**Then, look at the results.** You're likely to find that there are some quick and easy solutions, and there are others that will take more time. Often, the issues are the same, regardless of the specific location.

- If parents have a low opinion of walking/biking – **stress education programs**
- If parents think it's too far to walk or bike or the weather isn't good enough – **stress encouragement programs**
- If parents think it's just not safe enough – **stress engineering, enforcement, and education programs.**

Lastly, **add the Parent Survey on next year's calendar** to do again! Be sure to conduct the surveys at the same time during the year so you can compare years and see the change in travel patterns.

More information on administering Parent Surveys is available on the Virginia SRTS website and at National Center for Safe Routes to School.

**Still have questions? Contact our Local Technical Assistance Coordinators at 1-855-601-7787 or email us at [info@VirginiaSRTS.org](mailto:info@VirginiaSRTS.org).**

