

## **Re-Thinking the Transportation Manager: Focusing on Access to School**

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Student transportation has traditionally focused on moving the students furthest away from school to their designated school sites in the most efficient and cost effective manner. The nature of transportation is also to exclude a certain population of students who live within a designated walk zone and are otherwise ineligible for services. Given the cost pressures on transportation departments and the growing Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS) movement, it is time to reconsider the issue of transportation and evaluate how we can increase access to school for all students rather than just transportation for some students.

The combination of the Safe Routes to Schools movement and student transportation is about ensuring that students can get to and from school safely. Better integrating the constituencies of these two services would ultimately result in more effective use of the total dollars available to provide students access to school.

### **Points of Intersection**

At first glance the goals of the SRTS movement and the job security of transportation managers would appear to be contradictory. The goal of SRTS is “to enable and encourage more children to safely walk and bicycle to school.” While the transportation manager is interested in ensuring that there are a sufficient number of students requiring transportation for their management skills to be necessary. However, when consider in the context of ensuring access to school, student transportation managers and advocates for SRTS both face the same challenge: how best to leverage the funding available to them to maximize service delivery.

Communities that are able to integrate the goals and expectations of these groups will be more likely to develop solutions that are better for all students rather than just a specific subset, be they walking or riding, groups of students. A simple example of this approach is the use of SRTS resources to eliminate a hazard area that currently requires transportation. The elimination of the hazard would allow for the redirecting of the bus, which ultimately will reduce costs and would allow the school district to redirect the funds to class room related activities. However, this “leveraging” of the funding can only happen if the SRTS coordinators and the transportation department are actively engaging each other to identify potential projects.

### **What will be required?**

There are two primary activities that must occur for communities to better integrate the resources of SRTS and student transportation. The first, as previously stated, is the reconsideration of the goal of what is to be accomplished. A rethinking of the interdependence of these groups and a focus on providing access to school for all students will result in more and better options.

The second major task will be to more effectively integrate the different disciplines that currently participate separately. Transportation managers should have more interaction

with the land use planners, traffic engineers, and law enforcement that commonly work on SRTS projects. Given that funding for SRTS programs is received through State Departments of Transportation, it is necessary for engineering professionals to gain more of an understanding of the educational and operational demands of student transportation. Increasing integration of and cooperation among these groups will provide communities with the opportunity to identify creative solutions to the challenge of getting students to school.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional consideration of access to school is finding a way to get the students who live furthest away from their buildings to school while spending the least amount of money. The continuing financial pressure on school districts to minimize the cost of support services in combination with the growing Safe Routes to Schools movement presents a unique opportunity to rethink how all students access the educational resources of a community.