Creating Connections

Opportunities for Safe Routes to School Programs to Support High School Students with Disabilities

Young people travel around their communities for many reasons, such as attending school, socializing, working, engaging in recreational activities, and accomplishing errands. For individuals with disabilities that may be visible or invisible, mobility around their communities can be challenging or impossible. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "a disability is any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them."[1] Whether a person's ability to see or walk is impacted, or they have challenges with memory or planning, or face other obstacles, many limitations are the result of an environment not designed to accommodate their needs.

Independent travel is essential for maintaining quality of life, health, social inclusion, and community integration for adolescents.[3] While independent travel is commonly associated with driving, there is a large population of both voluntary and involuntary nondrivers in the United States. Adolescents with disabilities obtain driver's licenses at lower rates than their peers without disabilities.[4,5] Research shows that individuals with travel-limiting disabilities are two to three times more likely to live in households without a vehicle and rely on buses, subways, and commuter rail, compared to those living without disabilities.[6] This means that many teens with disabilities will be using public transit, which will also require walking trips to and from transit stops, or relying on walking and bicycling when not being driven.

Including the needs of students with disabilities has been a fundamental part of Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs since the establishment of the Federal SRTS program in 2005. SRTS program leaders have engaged families of students with disabilities to understand their needs, assessed infrastructure around schools, organized inclusive Walk, Bike, and Roll to School Day events, and taught students to ride using adaptive bicycles. In 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (also known as

the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) expanded the definition of SRTS to include high schools. This expansion created an opportunity to support active transportation for older students and address the transportation needs of high school students with disabilities. School district transition assistance programs, designed to support students with disabilities as they shift to adulthood, provide an important opening for SRTS programs to make a difference.

> *"As a young person, being able to feel independent was critical to me. As my peers got driver's licenses, I too wanted to be able to go places without asking my parents for a ride. Having communities where nondrivers, and young people in particular, can get around safely is critical to our emotional and physical well-being."*
>
> – Anna Zivarts, Program Manager of Disability Rights Washington and person with low vision[2]

This information brief describes disabilities that impact young people, provides an overview of how Federal education policies inform transportation support for students with disabilities, and explores opportunities for SRTS programs. It also shares examples of how SRTS and transition assistance programs in Saint Paul, Minnesota, Beaverton, Oregon, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, are partnering to empower young people to advocate for their travel needs and live their lives to their fullest potential.

By fostering collaboration between SRTS programs and transition assistance programs, we can create safer, more inclusive communities. Improved infrastructure and inclusive programs not only benefit students with disabilities but also enhance the overall safety and accessibility for all young people.

Young People with Disabilities

Unintentional injuries, such as falls, drownings, and motor vehicle crashes, are the leading cause of death in adolescents. Motor vehicle crashes account for more than two-thirds of these deaths.[7] Adolescents with disabilities are at a significantly higher risk of unintentional injury compared to peers without disabilities.[8] Adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experience similar increased risks, especially those with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).[9,10] For adolescents with developmental disabilities, unintentional injury rates are highest in males and in those aged 15-17.9 When looking specifically at road traffic injuries, injury rates are higher in children with ADHD compared to those without an ADHD diagnosis.[11]

Lack of transportation can negatively impact adolescents' ability to reach health care, recreation, physical activity, employment, and maintain interpersonal relationships.[3,12,13] Students with transportation barriers are less likely to get jobs after high school.[14]

There are many barriers to independent travel among people of all ages with disabilities, such as:

- Licensing: Adults with IDD face challenges obtaining driver's licenses.[4,5]
- Vehicle Access: People aged 18-64 with disabilities have lower vehicle ownership and access rates.[6]
- Cost: Transportation costs are more burdensome for young adults with IDD due to higher poverty rates.[15,16]
- Availability: Transit has limited geographical reach and schedule.[17]
- Psychological: People with disabilities may experience issues with sensory processing, crowding, and anxiety.[18,19]
- Physical Mobility: Challenges include visual impairments and navigating obstacles like steps and uneven pavement.[18]
- Informational: Lack of awareness on how to use transportation effectively, such as purchasing tickets for paratransit services or scheduling rides.[18,19]
- Discriminatory attitudes: Bias from drivers and other travelers, particularly towards those with disabilities that are not readily apparent.

Youth with disabilities need support to gain independent navigation skills which can allow them to fully participate in their community and improve quality of life.

Federal Educational Policies for Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees a free and appropriate public-school education for eligible students aged 3-21. Under IDEA, schools must provide special education services through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which are tailored to address the specific strengths, weaknesses, and needs of each student.

Students eligible for IDEA services are identified as having a disability that significantly impacts their academic performance. IDEA lists 13 categories of disabilities:

1. Autism
2. Deaf-blindness
3. Deafness
4. Emotional disturbance (e.g., anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, oppositional defiant disorder)
5. Hearing impairment
6. Intellectual disability
7. Multiple disabilities
8. Orthopedic impairment
9. Other health impairment (e.g., asthma, ADHD, diabetes)
10. Specific learning disability
11. Speech or language impairment
12. Traumatic brain injury
13. Visual impairment[20]

During the 2022-2023 academic year, 19.2 percent (3 million) of all public-school students aged 13-21 received services under IDEA. The most prevalent disability category was specific learning disabilities, affecting 43.7 percent of these students. Other significant categories included other health impairments (20.2 percent), autism (11.7 percent), and intellectual disabilities (8.2 percent).[21] It is important to note that there are more students with qualifying disabilities than those who receive services, so these numbers should be considered underestimates.

Source: Ann Gaysorn.

Transition Services

IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 mandate transition services for students with disabilities beginning at age 16, although some States require these services to begin at 14 years of age.[22] Transition services prepare students for life beyond high school, equipping them with the skills necessary for independent living and employment. These services can include vocational training, travel training, and life skills education (M. Iyer, personal communication, Feb 8, 2024).

Among students receiving IDEA services who exited school during the 2021-2022 school year, 74 percent received a regular high school diploma and 10 percent received an alternative certificate. The alternative certificate is part of the students' transition plan and is based on the development of functional, life, vocational, and community skills.[23]

Travel training may be part of a student's transition services in typical high school years, or as part of a school district transition assistance program available to students with alternative certificates. In some communities, local transit agencies are critical partners in travel training. Instruction typically includes identifying a specific route to work or school that the student will need to travel. Skills taught include:

- Identifying available transport systems
- Learning how to access transportation
- Planning travel routes[23,24,25]
- Executing travel plans safely (e.g., asking for help, handling strangers, getting off and on at the correct stop)
- Managing unexpected circumstances (e.g., a late bus, getting lost)

Transition Assistance and the Role for SRTS

SRTS programs bring expertise to pedestrian and bicyclist safety. These programs assess student travel patterns and safety concerns to create

comprehensive school travel plans. With established partnerships and networks, SRTS programs are well-positioned to support the unique needs of transition assistance students. Engaging with the high school special education team can open opportunities to use SRTS expertise to support student independent travel and participation in community. Examples of roles include:

- Breaking down the task of crossing a street and teaching pedestrian and bicyclist safety skills.
- Creating opportunities for students to advocate for themselves. Transition plans have an emphasis on building self-advocacy skills. Encouraging students to describe their travel needs and preferences allows them to apply and strengthen these skills. This can range from simply asking about challenges they face when walking to a specific location to more involved activities, such as organizing a walk audit where students present their concerns directly to city, school, and transit staff.
- Understanding options for improving routes. SRTS program staff are knowledgeable about property ownership, transit systems, key decision-makers, potential countermeasures, and how to convene partners to explore these options.
- Gathering feedback and asking questions about the needs and destinations of people with a range of disabilities that may be physical, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities when developing SRTS action plans.
- Connecting transition assistance programs with funding opportunities.
- Planning for the inclusion of adaptive bikes in bike trainings.
- Supporting job skills development. Transition assistance programs may have the capacity to teach bike maintenance skills, or partner with a local bike shop to do so.

Transition assistance and travel training instruction vary by school and school district and SRTS programs can help fill the gaps in services or be valued partners in taking student support to another level.

A combination of SRTS programs in different settings in Saint Paul, Minnesota; Beaverton, Oregon; and Minneapolis, Minnesota show what partnership with transition assistance programs can achieve.

Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Saint Paul Public School System provides travel training and transition services in the traditional high school setting. For students ages 18-22 with additional unmet needs, the Focus Beyond program, which is technically considered a high school, provides students with skills and resources they need to successfully transition to the community. Students with IEPs may receive travel training in the traditional high school grades or through Focus Beyond. The training includes conducting a travel assessment of the student's existing skills, interviewing parents and teachers, identifying a route, and developing the travel plan.

Students at the Focus Beyond Transition Services program have a range of abilities to travel independently. Some students have severe disabilities that make living independently – and traveling alone – unlikely. Many others have the potential and interest in traveling independently for work,

Focus Beyond audit group discusses railroad tracks students must cross to get to a transit stop. *Source: Sarah Stewart.*

socializing, running errands, or other reasons. Nearly all students in the program will not obtain a driver's license.

As students travel the one-third mile between the program site and the closest transit stop, they encounter numerous obstacles including snow covered sidewalks, sidewalk gaps that force students into the street, at-grade rail crossings, and other barriers. In winter, teachers bring shovels to clear walkways so that students can use the route. With approximately 200 students, most of whom rely on transit, these barriers have a big impact for all, including students and a teacher who use wheelchairs and those with vision disabilities. The SRTS Coordinator, Sarah Stewart, wanted to set the stage for future infrastructure work by creating a SRTS plan. In Spring 2024, Sarah and Community Travel Instructor Justin Lamphere planned a walk audit that would bring together students and representatives from city transportation, public works, police, transit, and school district facilities. The Minnesota Department of Transportation and Ramsey County also participated as the road is owned by the State and transit planning was already underway along the corridor.

In preparation, Sarah and Justin walked the route and identified issues. They then met with teachers to ask about their concerns and get input on how to prepare the students. This led to a pre-walk with some of the students to gather input and help plan pacing and opportunities for students to voice their concerns to the group. They then developed a map marked with key locations.

On the morning of the audit, the team gathered with attendees for a brief orientation before starting the walk. To ensure students felt comfortable and their voices were heard, the attendees were divided into three smaller groups. Sarah noted that a downside was that the adults did not get to hear from all students. Students explained challenges they faced when the group arrived at key locations along the route. For example, students described the challenges of getting across the railroad tracks in a wheelchair or wayfinding. For people who experience pain as part of their disability, the tracks cause additional discomfort. Experiencing the route as a group, the school facilities team was able to see

Focus Beyond teacher demonstrates the challenge in getting around a fire hydrant placed in the middle of the sidewalk. *Source: Sarah Stewart.*

that the gate access they thought would address the sidewalk gap did not actually solve the problem. They also learned more about the long crossings because of angled streets, utility poles in sidewalks, curb ramps that are not aligned with crosswalks, and many other barriers. Sarah drafted a summary report to share with all participants. The walk audit will also inform a corridor plan and transit plan that are both underway. A SRTS plan will be submitted to request funding to address some of the issues. "This is going to change how I think about planning," noted a county transit representative.

Takeaways from the SRTS Coordinator and Community Travel Instructor

- Know your partners and who can address which types of issues so that all are included.
- Be prepared. Input from the teachers was critical in making the experience welcoming for students and emphasizing that the walk audit should be an opportunity for students to use their self-advocacy skills.
- For seasonal issues, like snow blocking sidewalks, use online images to show barriers at other times of year.
- If possible, time the walk to align when other plans are being written so needs that are identified can be represented in more than one plan.

Beaverton School District Community Transition Program students and teachers. *Source: Julia Sanders.*

Beaverton, Oregon

"We wanted to make sure we were addressing the needs of students with mobility issues. We saw it lacking in our program and were looking to connect with those students," said Beaverton SRTS Coordinator Leah Biado-Luis, noting that the previous SRTS Coordinator had also observed the gap. Beaverton School District's Community Transition Program (CTP) serves students ages 18-21 who have a special education IEP, have completed four years of high school and have a nonstandard diploma or alternative certificate. In the program, students gain work and independent living skills, including using public transportation.

SRTS Assistant Coordinator Julia Sanders met with the CTP program administrator to offer help from the SRTS program. She said that the simple offer resulted in specific ideas to help improve safety and accessibility. The main concern was around missing infrastructure. Many students in the program ride public transit from the program site to work locations, sometimes multiple times a day. However, there is no accessible, direct route to the stop, and students must take a route that takes more time and effort. This can be particularly challenging for people with chronic pain, people who use wheelchairs, and people who have difficulties sensing their body's position and movement. As Julia noted "these are often lifelong pedestrians and have needs that can easily be overlooked."

Julia developed a presentation for the school district monthly multidepartmental safety meeting incorporating timelapse videos to illustrate the difference between the existing, circuitous accessible route and the direct yet still inaccessible route to the transit stop. The school created a plan for the improvements and a revised design for a safer, direct walkway that is awaiting funding. In the interim, the SRTS team helped the program secure a minigrant for reflective flags for wheelchairs, reflective vests, and other safety supplies to increase visibility. Julia and Leah have several ideas for additional collaboration with the CTP, including: fostering leadership among the students to create a video for the community that illustrates the students' particular transportation challenges and needs; offering a range of pedestrian safety education lessons tailored to student needs; hosting a social media campaign for disability awareness month; working with the local transit agency to adopt the **Sunflower Program**, lanyards that "indicate that you need extra support or more time"; and sensory kits for students to use during travel."

Takeaways from the SRTS Program Team

- Students have a range of abilities and diverse needs.
- Start by reaching out. Julia noted that the CTP program administrator was extremely receptive to meeting and discussing how they could work together. "Make initial contact and there will be ideas," said Julia.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

When Minneapolis Public School District began teaching the **Minnesota Walk! Bike! Fun! Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Curriculum** in 2013, Active Living Coordinator Jenny Bordon, whose role includes SRTS coordination, faced a challenge: maintenance of the fleet of bikes used for teaching bike safety. She received suggestions to contact the School District's Minneapolis Transition Plus program to discuss whether teachers and students would be able to repair the new traveling bicycle fleet, and from that conversation a partnership was born.

The Transition Plus program serves students ages 18-22 with disabilities and transition needs and includes job skills development in their offerings. Students range from those with significant needs requiring help with personal care to others who have a high degree of independence. When Jenny approached the program, bike maintenance classes had already been part of their offerings for several years.

Jenny offered additional trainings and curriculum such as the **Frame Works bike maintenance curriculum**. Teachers found readily available bike maintenance videos on the internet to be the most helpful and used them to develop their bike maintenance lessons alongside the students. Bike parts were the next crucial component, so Jenny secured funding to purchase them. The program also receives support from Quality Bicycle Products in Minneapolis, a distributor of bike parts and accessories. While the program had already been involved in bike maintenance, working on the bike fleet elevated it to a new level. Students now had better bikes to work on, and the program gained sustainability and greater legitimacy through its connection to the school district's bike safety education program. Over the past ten years, the bike education program has grown and now has four bike fleets, all maintained by the program. The Transition Plus program receives the bikes in the winter, which they clean, tune, and fix in time for spring bike education to begin. Many of the bike maintenance program students enjoy biking and the program provides maintenance at the School District's Bike to School Day group bicycle ride.

Transition Plus students maintain bicycles used for bicycle education. *Source: Jenny Bordon.*

Transition Plus teacher coaches a student through bicycle maintenance. *Source: Jenny Bordon.*

The partnership between Active Living and Transition Plus benefited everyone; Active Living received essential support in maintaining the bike fleet, while Transition Plus gained access to bike safety information and resources. According to Greg Kalberer, administrator and teacher at Transition Plus, bike maintenance is an opportunity for social-emotional learning, practicing project initiation and completion, and improving communication skills. Many students have their own bikes and enjoy riding, and this experience has sparked interest in potential future jobs.

Takeaways from the Active Living Coordinator

- Listen to and understand potential partner priorities, in this case the Transition Plus program teachers and students.
- Ask what they need and get it for them.
- Even if a collaboration does not happen at first, it could become a yes next year.
- Write down the plan so everyone knows respective responsibilities, timing, and what to expect.

City of Minneapolis Transportation Planner and SRTS Program Manager Bria Fast has a lot of experience gathering community input, including from school staff and students, using walk, bike, and roll audits. She saw the value in conducting an audit with Transition Plus, where many students enjoy biking and have a lot of experience with it. Additionally, their teachers are champions for biking and teach bike skills to their students, making the audit a great fit.

Prior to the audit, a Transition Plus teacher led a session to review safety tips and the planned route. On the day of the audit, Bria, students, and staff rode a four-mile route (two miles each way) stopping periodically at planned stops to gather input. Along the route, Bria asked students questions about their experience, such as, "what do you feel at this intersection?" She soon realized that students offered valuable feedback between the planned stops, making it essential to stay engaged and listen throughout the entire event, not just during the scheduled stops. The group quickly pivoted away from a written paper audit form, which felt cumbersome, not only because of the wet weather but also because the structured approach did not suit the dynamic nature of the audit.

Student feedback revealed that they felt less safe on high injury network streets (a subset of streets that account for a disproportionate percentage of serious and fatal crashes) and that high-speed vehicles were a big concern. Students also enjoyed the process and took their input role very seriously. As Bria noted from her perspective, "interaction with infrastructure, reactions to noise and traffic are so important as a project manager...There are more nuanced aspects of the urban environment, it's not just 'is there a bollard between me and a car?'"

Takeaways from the SRTS Manager/Transportation Planner

- Gather all feedback while outside and engaged in the activity. Once the group returned to the classroom, they were more distracted.
- Consider your audience. Sometimes open-ended questions can help spur conversation better than structured forms.
- Whatever you do, make it fun. Building relationships with students, and helping students build confidence with active transportation, will yield more authentic feedback than any questionnaire or survey ever could.

Transition Plus Program bike audit with City of Minneapolis. *Source: Bria Fast.*

Conclusion

SRTS programs have had a long-standing commitment to improving safety and encouraging more students and families to actively travel to school. With the expansion of SRTS initiatives to high school, these programs can play a valuable role in providing training, fostering community connection, and highlighting the need for changes in infrastructure or roadway operations to improve connections for students with disabilities. All transportation professionals are encouraged to actively engage with their disability communities and collaborate with young people who have different disabilities so that they can better understand and identify necessary improvements to both existing and new routes to schools and other common destinations. Making travel more comfortable and accessible for youth with disabilities supports every young person's journey towards independence.

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Cover Image information: Transition Plus Program bike audit with City of Minneapolis. *Source: Bria Fast.*

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