Integrating Safe Routes to School into the Transportation Alternatives Program: Reducing Barriers for Disadvantaged Communities

In 2012, the Congress made changes to the Federal Safe Routes to School program that, among other modifications, added a required State or local match of up to 20 percent of project costs. This informational brief examines the changes in law, the need for Safe Routes to School projects in disadvantaged communities and how some States are using creative approaches to supply the match.

A Change in the Match Requirement

In July 2005, Congress passed the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) Federal highway transportation law, which established and authorized funding for the national Safe Routes to School program between 2005 and 2009 at $612 million[i] (later extended through 2012 at approximately $200 million in additional funding each year). Safe Routes to School projects were eligible for 100 percent Federal funding without any State or local contributions required. Traditionally, most Federal transportation projects require a State or local match of up to 20 percent, but a number of types of transportation safety projects can be funded at up to 100 percent of the project's cost using Federal dollars.[ii]

In 2012, Congress passed a two-year surface transportation law, known as the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), which created significant policy changes for Safe Routes to School.[iii] Included in those changes:

- The funding for the Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements, and Recreational Trails programs were combined into the new Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP);[iv]
- Funding was cut by 30 percent to the total combined program; and
- The Federal share of each project can no longer exceed 80 percent,[v] with either State or local funds making up the difference.

By the Numbers:

Disadvantaged Schools Well Represented in Safe Routes to School Funding

As of July 1, 2014, among the 5,278 schools listed in the Safe Routes to School project award database as benefitting from SAFETEA-LU funding, **3,642 (69 percent) are classified as Title I schools**, which is significantly more than the overall proportion of schools that are Title I (57 percent). Title I schools are those identified by the US Department of Education as having the highest percentage of low income families.

In addition, **47 percent of students enrolled at schools receiving Safe Routes to School funds were eligible to receive free and reduced price meals**, which is nearly identical to national figures.

An estimated total of **$924,548,157 in funding has been awarded to Title I schools**, which is 67 percent of the estimated $1,373,409,665 awarded to all schools and statewide Safe Routes to School programs. The average award amount allocated to Title I schools was $253,857, which is slightly less than the average amount awarded to all schools of $260,214.

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Each State plus Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) representing urbanized areas of population 200,000 or more administers its own TAP program and has some flexibility in how and where funds are allocated. Each State and MPO must establish a competitive process to solicit and select projects from eligible project sponsors. While the changes made under MAP-21 have introduced new challenges in funding Safe Routes to School projects, the State or local matching requirements have been particularly taxing for many small, rural, and urban low-income communities (hereafter referred to as disadvantaged communities), which had received a proportional amount of funding under the old Safe Routes to School program.

Safety Challenges in Disadvantaged Communities

Research shows that the safety challenges in disadvantaged communities are greater, making it important to examine the impact of a matching requirement on these communities.

A meta-analysis looking at a number of research studies on the effects of different social and economic factors on child traffic injuries found that children living in lower-income areas were at increased risk of pedestrian injury, and that children of color also have higher rates of pedestrian injury.[vi] While researchers continue to work to better understand why disadvantaged children have greater pedestrian safety risks, the meta-analysis pointed to environmental factors rather than behavioral factors as the likely culprit. Further studies have demonstrated the differences in the built environment based on income: one examination of the environment around 73 schools in Austin, TX found that higher-poverty schools had higher crash rates, higher crime rates, and streets that were less walkable.[vii] Another study examined the locations of more than 7,000 schools in California and found that low-income children and children of color are more likely to attend schools close to major roads with very high levels of traffic.[viii]

These safety and environmental challenges are also more likely to affect disadvantaged children given their rates of walking to school. Children from families without a vehicle are 16 percent more likely to walk to school.[ix] And children from families earning less than $30,000 are twice as likely to walk to school as students from households with an annual income greater than $60,000.[x]

The implementation of Safe Routes to School projects creates the opportunity for communities to address these problems and improve safety for children on the trip to school. In one study where Safe Routes to School projects were implemented in New York City, there was a resulting reduction of pedestrian injury among school children by 33 percent, and during school-travel hours, by 44 percent. In locations without Safe Routes to School interventions, the number remained almost unchanged.[xi]

Because of the burden of the new Federal matching requirements, many of the disadvantaged communities that have the greatest need for Safe Routes to School projects may be deterred from competing for those funds due to the significant financial barrier of having to find matching funds.

States Finding Creative Solutions

Several States have taken steps to use State dollars to fulfill the new Federal matching requirements, thus creating opportunities for communities that otherwise would face barriers in competing for funding. For this report, interviews were conducted with Safe Routes to School coordinators from California, Florida, New Jersey, and Ohio to better understand the source of the State matching dollars and the rationale for providing those dollars at the State level, rather than requiring local communities to provide the matching funds.[xii] These States were selected because they are the only ones that have already held a Transportation Alternatives Program funding competition under the MAP-21 law and are using State funds to meet Federal matching requirements.

Based on these interviews, there are two main methods that States are using to address this funding issue. The first is to redirect a portion of State transportation dollars to serve as the match for Safe Routes to School projects. This is the approach taken in California. The second is using toll credits, an approach used by three States. By Federal law, toll credits are earned when a State agency, tolling authority, or private entity funds capital transportation investments using toll revenues. These credits are tracked and can then be used to count towards the non-Federal match for new projects. When toll credits are used, States are reimbursed for the full cost of the project without a required match.[xiii]

California

In 2013, California State Senate Bill 99 established a State Active Transportation Program (ATP) to fund pedestrian, bicycle, and Safe Routes to School projects by combining funds from the Federal Transportation Alternatives Program, the California State Highway Account, and other State and Federal funds into one grant program. The ATP is now the primary source for Safe Routes to School grants in California. In addition, Assembly Bill 57, passed in 2007, extended indefinitely the State Safe Routes to School program with funding provided from the State Highway Account. That program is now part of the ATP as well.

Safe Routes to School Implementation under Transportation Alternatives

California held its first round of applications for the Active Transportation Program in May 2014. In total, per the State statute, the State will make a minimum of $24 million available each year in funding for Safe Routes to School projects, of which about $7.2 million will go towards noninfrastructure projects and $16.8 million will go towards infrastructure projects.

Due to the inclusion of State funds in the ATP, California is able to make Safe Routes to School projects available with no required local match. Kevin Atkinson, the Safe Routes to School Coordinator for California, credited the coordination between advocates, the State Department of Transportation, and the Governor for being instrumental in ensuring ongoing State matching funds.

Additional Support for Disadvantaged Communities

In the first funding cycle, which covers three years of funding from 2013 to 2015, a minimum of $72 million will go towards Safe Routes to School projects in California. The State is required by the State ATP statute to allocate at least 25 percent of that Safe Routes to School minimum funding to disadvantaged communities. Disadvantaged communities are defined as those where the median household income is less than 80 percent of the statewide median; where at least 75 percent of public school students are eligible to receive free or reduced price school meals; or where the community is identified as among the most disadvantaged 10% in the State according to the California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool (CalEnviroScreen). In the first application cycle, a total of 301 of the 454 Safe Routes to School applications were from disadvantaged communities.

While the State has a required minimum amount of funding for disadvantaged communities, funding can exceed that minimum threshold if a project scores well. To that end, California provides additional assistance for disadvantaged communities, including giving added points to applicants and making money available to support bicycle and pedestrian plans in low-income communities.

Atkinson believes that this has been a positive decision for the State, noting that California will be able to continue reaching disadvantaged communities, many of which have significant gaps in infrastructure and programming.

Florida

The Florida Department of Transportation is maintaining a standalone application process for Safe Routes to School projects, rather than using a combined process to fund Safe Routes to School, bicycle, pedestrian, and other project types that would be eligible for Transportation Alternatives funding. Florida will provide matching funds for projects using State toll credits.

Safe Routes to School Implementation under Transportation Alternatives

Florida has awarded $48,590,593 to fund Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects from 2012 through 2017. Of this total, $16,339,169 is from Transportation Alternatives Program funds. The remainder comes from a number of sources, including remaining SAFETEA-LU funds, Highway Safety Improvement Program, Surface Transportation Program, and equity bonus funds. Sarita Taylor, Safe Routes to School Coordinator for the Florida Department of Transportation, indicated that the decision to keep Safe Routes to School funded at 100 percent using State toll credits was largely made at the executive leadership level of the Florida Department of Transportation. She stressed that keeping projects fully funded has had a significant impact on communities that would not otherwise have been able to apply. As an example, she noted a low-income community in which a pedestrian bridge was built with Safe Routes to School funding, which allowed approximately 600 children who walk to school each day to move off the main road bridge and cross to school safely.

For Florida, this funding is particularly critical given that pedestrians and bicyclists make up nearly 25 percent of all of its roadway deaths.[xiv]

Additional Support for Disadvantaged Communities

Florida provides funding for engineering and crash data analysis for communities that may not have the capacity to undertake those projects on their own. This assistance is helpful to these communities in developing a more competitive Safe Routes to School application focused on effective safety strategies.

New Jersey

New Jersey is maintaining a standalone Safe Routes to School Program and is using State toll credits to keep the program at 100 percent funding.

Safe Routes to School Implementation under Transportation Alternatives

New Jersey is providing $20 million of combined funding from SAFETEA-LU and MAP-21 for Transportation Enhancements, Safe Routes to School, and Transportation Alternatives Program projects in its 2014 round of awards. For the last several years, Safe Routes to School has been funded at approximately $5 million per year, and is expected to remain at this level moving forward using Transportation Alternatives Program funds.

Elise Bremer-Nei, the Safe Routes to School Coordinator for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, indicated several factors were involved in the decision to keep 100 percent Safe Routes to School funding with no required local match. First, there was a significant advocacy push at the time of MAP-21's passage. The coordinator credited the advocacy community in New Jersey with meeting with decision-makers immediately after the new matching requirements were established. In addition, the State has a long history of providing funding to locals, with a tradition of strong local input on how transportation dollars are spent. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, maintains the Safe Routes to School Resource Center. The Center was able to provide data to the state documenting the number of disadvantaged communities in the State that would be affected by the new matching requirements.

As a result, Bremer-Nei believes the New Jersey Department of Transportation was in a strong position to identify and supply matched funds.

Additional Support for Disadvantaged Communities

All applicants in a disadvantaged community or a disadvantaged school district receive 1 extra point out of a total possible of 25 on their application. In addition, New Jersey's Transportation Management Associations prioritize outreach to assist disadvantaged communities in noninfrastructure projects such as school transportation plans, walking school busses, and traffic safety rodeos.

For the 2014 application cycle, specially designated disadvantaged communities were able to apply for funding to help with design of infrastructure projects. To be eligible, a municipality must either include an "SDA District" school, meaning that the New Jersey Schools Development Authority has determined it to be a special-needs school district based on the socio-economic status of the students and performance on standardized tests, or be provided with Urban Aid by the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. Urban Aid is provided to municipalities based on a formula that looks at the number of low-income children, presence of public housing and local tax rates.

Ohio

Ohio will continue to fund a standalone Safe Routes to School Program using Transportation Alternatives Program funding, and is providing the local match using State toll credits.

Safe Routes to School Implementation under Transportation Alternatives

Ohio has funded two rounds of Safe Routes to School projects using Transportation Alternatives Program funds at $11 million for 110 projects. Given the 20 percent requirement for a state or local match, the state has committed $2.2 million, 20 percent of total TAP funding, in State toll credits thus far towards these projects.

To achieve this outcome, the Ohio Safe Routes to School Program Manager Julie Walcoff credits a combination of education within the Ohio Department of Transportation about the importance of the program for small and low-income communities, strong support from communities that have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects, and a positive relationship with advocates at the grassroots level. She stressed the importance of having begun the advocacy process early in Ohio so that State decision makers were fully aware of the program's positive impact before it came time to make a decision about how to administer the Transportation Alternatives Program.

According to Walcoff, the resulting benefit to the State, beyond continuing funding for disadvantaged communities, is both new and stronger coordination among engineering, health, and education officials at the local level, as well as a reinforced public image that Ohio is invested in multi-modal transportation.

Additional Support for Disadvantaged Communities

Ohio, uniquely among those States interviewed for this report, maps student proximity to schools. For rural schools, defined as schools outside urban areas or city boundaries with a population of 5,000 people or less, projects are ranked based on the percent of students who would benefit from a project based on the proximity to school. In addition, when scoring applications for Safe Routes to School funding, Ohio provides anywhere from 0 to 20 additional points out of a total of 155 points based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the school district (which is determined by the Ohio Department of Education). So, schools with more than 76 percent disadvantaged students receive an extra 20 points, while schools with less than 24 percent disadvantaged students receive no extra points. While the State does not track funded projects by income or population, the State coordinator estimates that between 60 and 70 percent of Safe Routes to School funding goes towards either rural or low-income urban schools.

Relevance for Other States

Because the matching requirement for safe routes to school projects is still relatively new, there are only a few States that can serve as examples regarding their approach to the matching funds requirement and its impact on disadvantaged communities. Many States have not yet completed their first round of Transportation Alternatives Program applications, while others have yet to announce their first round of awards, meaning it is not yet possible to examine the data to see whether disadvantaged communities are being deterred or fewer are being funded than under SAFETEA-LU. Other States interviewed expressed concerns about the viability of funding for disadvantaged communities due to the matching requirements and are seeking solutions before they move from using their remaining Safe Routes to School funds to using TAP funds under MAP-21.

Of the States that are continuing to fully fund Safe Routes to School projects, the availability of toll credits may be the biggest factor in State funding decisions as they do not require the State to contribute actual dollars to the projects. Of note, Michigan also used toll credits to provide 100 percent funding for Safe Routes to School projects in 2013.

Two States, Ohio and New Jersey, stressed the importance of using data to drive support for the program within the State departments of transportation. In the case of New Jersey, the coordinator strongly recommended building relationships with universities. She believed that faculty and student support has been invaluable in providing statistics on economic factors impacting communities, offering experience with grants and securing other sources of funding. She stated that university research centers can also provide the flexibility that allows for the implementation of best practice programs and ideas, the ability to act as advocates in communities, and the opportunity to interact with the media.

For Ohio, the coordinator indicated that data is instrumental in assuring funds are used for the intended purpose. Crash, student location and economic data is synthesized to focus funds on projects that have a positive impact to Ohio school children. Ohio has been effective in building support by educating grantees and State department of transportation officials on program success.

In March 2014, the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee included in its proposed reauthorization of MAP-21 an option for States to waive the matching funds requirement for any or all Safe Routes to School projects and instead fund them using only Federal dollars. However, the future of the Federal transportation bill remains unclear. The proposed change would be an option, not a requirement, for States. It would still take support within each State's department of transportation to fully fund Safe Routes to School projects—again emphasizing the need for data and success stories to build support.

Under SAFETEA-LU, State departments of transportation were successful in reaching underserved populations, and programs are continuing efforts to make funding for them a priority under MAP-21. While the next legislation will determine changes in opportunities for disadvantaged communities, some States are establishing models that other States with similar concerns could look to replicate.

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[iii] Fhwa.dot.gov, (2014). SAFETEA-LU - Legislation. [online] Available at: https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/safetealu/legis.htm [Accessed 17 Jun. 2014].

[iv] The Recreational Trails Program retained a set-aside of funds and continues as a separate program.

[v] Note that the required State or local match for most States is 20 percent, but there are 14 Western states that have lower matching requirements due to the significant portion of Federal or Indian tribal lands. http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/legsregs/directives/notices/n4540-12a1.htm

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[xiv] Fhwa.dot.gov, (2014) Traffic Safety Facts, 2012 Data. [online] Available at: http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811888.pdf; http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812018.pdf

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