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An Analysis of Safe Routes to School Programs in Eastern Missouri

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Issue

Public school districts in the St. Louis area have encountered significant problems in maintaining and sustaining their schools over the past decade. Due to a continuous decline in enrollment, St. Louis Public Schools, a 19,000-student district in Eastern Missouri, closed six schools in the 2020-21 academic year. As a result, students who previously attended those schools were shuffled around the district for other viable school options. This reconfiguration, coupled with a shortage of buses and the district's reliance on independently organized transportation arrangements such as club, religious, and parent vans, as well as gas vouchers, has heightened the overall sense of anxiety among parents regarding their children's commutes to school.

Programmatic interventions, such as Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs, which aim to promote walking and bicycling to school through infrastructure improvements, enforcement, safety education, and incentives, have not been funded in Eastern Missouri for the last 10 years. However, with the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill in 2021, high schools and nonprofits are now (re) eligible for SRTS funding, which is facilitated and overseen nationwide by the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP). There is an opportunity for SRTS to tackle issues beyond just transportation and education, including youth health indicators, public safety within the built environment, environmental hazards, multimodal transportation, and more.

Trailnet, an active transportation nonprofit based in St. Louis, has tasked this project with addressing three questions:

- Why is there a lack of programmatic funding in the St. Louis region?
- How are successful and engaged SRTS programs around the nation operating?
- How can Trailnet practically support local school districts?

Study Approach

This project used three different research methods to address the three main questions at hand. The researcher first conducted online research, aimed at evaluating every state's safe routes capabilities to provide a broader context for Missouri. The researcher engaged the East-West Gateway, the metropolitan planning organization for the St. Louis region, and used its evaluation criteria to assess funding and equity distribution concerns. These evaluation criteria were then compared with Missouri's policy infrastructure concerning support for safe routes programs.

The second research method involved conducting interviews with safe routes practitioners across the country. These practitioners were categorized into two groups: those highly engaged in national SRTS groups and those in states with similar state support and funding as Missouri.

Lastly, parents and teachers of students attending the small, K-12 Bayless School District in St. Louis County were surveyed about their commuting preferences, reasons for those preferences, and any specific barriers they identified at the local level.

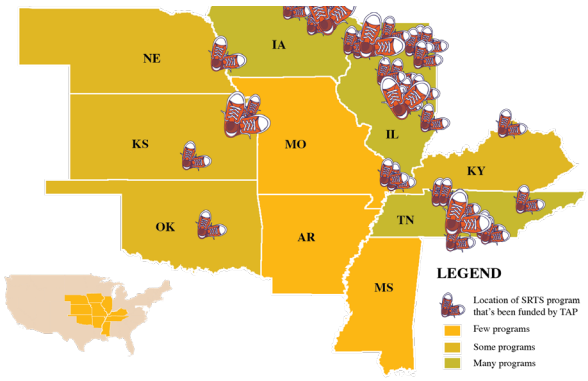

Figure 1: Locations of TAP award recipients in Missouri and surrounding states in 2019.

Findings

State and Regional Ecosystem

While the Missouri Legislature passed a concurrent resolution in 2011 that strongly recommended all governing agencies (MoDOT, cities, counties, MPOs, regional planning commissions) adopt complete street policies, only one-third of all Missourians currently live in a municipality with a complete streets policy. Additionally, schools in the St. Louis region face challenging and inaccessible ranking criteria for federal TAP funding. Specifically, the application calls for an immense amount of upfront financial and time investment from local planning experts, interested schools and districts, and regional advocacy groups.

Practitioner Interviews

Of the 10 practitioners who worked directly with safe routes programming, five mentioned that they are currently rebuilding their programming due to the impacts of COVID-19. These interviewees reported a loss of relationships and champions within schools where they previously had a strong presence. Practitioners highlighted the importance of coalitions and supportive ecosystems that contribute to the planning and implementation process and the need for champions on the ground to advocate for SRTS needs. Some of the interventions practitioners were most excited about included walk/bike buses, Biker's Ed curriculums, children's caretaker bike education programs, and quick-build slow streets.

Bayless School District Data

The Bayless School District, which serves fewer than 2,000 students, has one elementary, junior high, and high school. The survey data breakdown by school does not deviate significantly from the district data breakdown. All three schools reported 85-90% of their students' mode choices as either "school bus" or "family vehicle," consistent with district-level data. Students are primarily engaging with active transportation by walking; the "bike" mode share was close to zero. The average number of students in the Bayless School District who walk (5-15%) is consistent with the national average of around 11% (Bruno, 2022). Districtwide, parents were most concerned about the safety of intersections and crossings, the amount and speed of traffic along routes, and weather or climate conditions.

Conclusions

This project calls for the creation of a planning assistance fund and an administrative support fund, similar to those in Oregon for communities that could be classified as "support priority." The former will help schools compile initial resources necessary to be competitive for national funding, while the latter will help sustain schools with programming support upon receipt of grant money.

Additionally, TAP funding criteria should prioritize environmental and transportation justice considerations, including the following equitable evaluation criteria in the region:

- **Serving Environmentally Disadvantaged Populations**, which would include data on pollution burdens (diesel particulate matter, drinking water contaminants, PM2.5, toxic releases from facilities) and population health characteristics (asthma, cardiovascular diseases, low birth weight) on the census tract level.
- **Serving Transportation Disadvantaged Populations**, which would include data on high rates of "low vehicle access" and "no vehicle access" among school district ZIP codes.
- **Serving Historically Affected Lands and Spaces**, which would include data on proximity to industrial and commercial zones, highways, and large arterial corridors.

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