Despite a recent drop in energy costs, many states continue to look for ways to reduce student transportation expenses. One program aimed at encouraging more students to walk to school might have benefits far beyond lessening the cost of transporting students to school. The Safe Routes to School program is giving states $612 million over five years to improve infrastructure and educate children and motorists about pedestrian safety. But some say the amount Congress approved for the program is just a fraction what is needed to accomplish the job.

By Tim Weldon
Michigan may be the country's automobile capital, but these days the state is also earning a reputation as a pioneer in convincing people to leave their cars at home and walk.

It may sound like a paradoxical message in this mecca of the automobile industry, but Michigan was singled out in 2007 as the winner of the first James L. Oberstar Safe Routes to School Award, named after the Minnesota congressman who authored legislation in 2005 that provided funding for a national Safe Routes to School program.

That initiative was created in 2005 to encourage children to walk or bike to school, rather than ride in buses or the family car, whenever practical. So far, more than 4,000 schools and communities across the U.S. have received federal funds to build sidewalks, improve crosswalks and make other infrastructure improvements, according to the National Center for Safe Routes to Schools. Under the program, federal funds are distributed to state departments of transportation, which steer the money to local schools and communities.

States have awarded 80 percent of available funding through the program's first three years, a clear sign that providing safe routes for children to walk or ride bicycles to school is gaining traction, according to Lauren Marchetti director of the National Center for Safe Routes to School, based in Chapel Hill, N.C.

"The Safe Routes to School program is an excellent opportunity to start changing a mindset that we've got to change," she said.

The Idea Behind Safe Routes

As recently as four decades ago, walking to school was the norm, not the exception. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 50 percent of all children walked to school in 1969. Today, that number has dropped to a scant 15 percent.

Inactivity is one factor that has led one-third of young people in the U.S. to become overweight or obese. Meanwhile, numerous studies show approximately one-fourth of morning traffic is attributed to parents driving their children to school. Supporters contend that if children walk or ride bicycles to school, they will become more active, reducing child obesity levels. Less traffic also would have environmental benefits, according to proponents.

"First and foremost, places where kids are walking and biking that are unsafe need to be fixed," Marchetti said. "Without safety, none of the rest of it can move forward."

In 2005, as part of the comprehensive transportation bill commonly called SAFETEA-LU, Congress designated $612 million to fund the Safe Routes to School program. It guarantees that each state will receive at least $1 million per year during the five-year program. Oberstar called it the most important bill he's been able to pass in Congress.

"By giving kids a fun and safe way to incorporate exercise into their daily routines, we are teaching them at a young age how to lead a healthy lifestyle," Oberstar told the Congressional Subcommittee on Highways and Transit in 2007.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have appointed full-time coordinators to oversee the program. Forty-two states have released application guidelines for cities and schools to apply for funding, according to the Safe Routes to School National Partnership.

"I think we're moving toward solutions. We probably haven't found them all yet," Marchetti explained. Despite early successes, however, some say the program is dramatically underfunded.

Michigan's Success Story

Michigan became a pioneer in promoting safe routes to school even before Congress appropriated funding for the program. In 2003, Michigan developed a Safe Routes to School Handbook, which more than 350 elementary and middle schools have registered to use as a prerequisite to apply for funding.

The Safe Routes to School program has given Michigan, like all states, funding to create an environment where children can walk to school more safely. From the 2005 through 2009 fiscal years, Michigan is slated to receive $17 million in federal funds, an amount that Michigan's Safe Routes to School Coordinator Bryan Armstrong calls miniscule.

"I could easily envision over five years being able to spend 100 times the money that we have now," Armstrong said. Nevertheless, he contends the program provides benefits that outweigh the limited dollars provided by the federal legislation.

"The federal funding is not the mechanism that will make Safe Routes to School work," Armstrong said. "It is the buy-in from the stakeholders from across the policy areas and the implementation areas that will cause it to have traction."

So far, Michigan has been able to convince groups such as the Michigan Fitness Foundation and the state departments of community health and education, as well as several nonprofit organizations and universities, to get behind Safe Routes to School.

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That bill was approved and signed into

law the following year.

Winans Elementary in Lansing, a school

that Miles previously attended, was one of

the first schools in Michigan to receive

funding under the Safe Routes to School

program. The school was awarded nearly

$500,000 to construct a pedestrian island

students can use while crossing a busy

street. Additional projects include resur-

facing and expanding a connector path

around the school and constructing side-

walks near the school. The work is slated

for completion in 2009.

Michigan isn’t alone in touting success

under Safe Routes to School. Delaware and

seven other states passed legislation prior
to the program’s creation to provide access
to state or federal funds or to regulate how
funds are spent, according to the Safe
Routes to School National Partnership.

Even though Delaware receives the min-
imum funding available to states through
the program—$1 million per year—the
National Center for Safe Routes to School
considers it a model program. Accord-
ing to the center, Delaware incorporated

several innovative elements into the ap-
lication process to ensure the long-term
sustainability of the funded projects. Del-
aware regulations require representatives
of different stakeholders within a com-
unity to submit applications. Proposals
must be comprehensive, covering each
of the five E’s relating to Safe Routes to
School: education, encouragement, engi-
neering, enforcement and evaluation.

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—Bryan Armstrong, coordinator
Michigan’s Safe Routes to School

Additionally, Delaware’s Department of
Transportation created a streamlined ap-
plication process that allows funding for
individual projects to be available soon-
er, and the state has created partnerships
with groups of stakeholders, which makes
them an exemplary program, according to
the national center.

Delaware’s program coordinator, Sarah
Coakley, said state policymakers need to
consider the many benefits of children
walking to school when considering leg-
islation. “While it may be a small program
from a funding perspective, it has the abili-
ty to affect the health benefits of children
and parents, community benefits, as well
as cost benefits from reducing bus trans-
portation,” she said.

The Safe Routes to School National
Partnership says model legislation should
include permanent funding sources and
require expert direction for program ac-
activities. Legislators should also require
that local programs be guided by a diverse
group of stakeholders and that each of
the five E’s be considered when developing a
local program.

Barriers Remain

But while states aim to provide oppor-
tunities for more children to walk or ride
their bicycles to school, supporters ac-
knowledge convincing some parents that
it’s safe for their children to do so may be
one of the most difficult barriers to over-
come.

“We’ve created a safety culture where
parents truly believe that if we take them
from the box of the house to the box of
the car to the box of the school, then we
have made the trip as safe as possible,”
Marchetti said. “But what we’re robbing
children of is the sense of independence—
the ability to navigate on your own the ac-
tive lifestyle.”

In Michigan, Armstrong hopes this pro-
gram will also jumpstart a new focus on
policies that extend long after the fund-
ing is exhausted. He wants to convince
Michigan legislators that all public infra-
structure should accommodate those who
walk or ride bicycles, not just those in cars
and trucks. That includes city and county
roads, which account for more than 90
percent of all roads in Michigan.

“We want policymakers and officials
at all levels, from the state legislature to
staff at local agencies, to recognize walk-
bility in everything that gets built in so-
ciety,” Armstrong said. "The thing that
policymakers need to recognize is, what
are the benefits to health—and they are
huge—and what are the policies and prac-
tices and incentives that we need to put in
place to cause these behaviors, to change
these behaviors?" 

Also on the minds of Safe Routes to
School advocates is uncertain future
funding in austere budget times. How-
ever, Marchetti points out Oberstar, the
program’s biggest supporter in Congress,
chairs the powerful House Transportation
Committee, and she believes he will use
that position to steer additional funding to
support that students have safe routes to
walk or ride bicycles to school.

—Tim Weldon is an education policy analyst
with The Council of State Governments.