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
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 SAF-ETEA-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.

Lee Kokinakis, director of Safe Routes to School at the Michigan Fitness Found-
According to the center, Delaware incorporated several innovative elements into the application process to ensure the long-term sustainability of the funded projects. Delaware regulations require representatives of different stakeholders within a community to submit applications. Proposals must be comprehensive, covering each of the five E’s relating to Safe Routes to School: education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement and evaluation.

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Michigan’s Safe Routes to School

Additionally, Delaware’s Department of Transportation created a streamlined application process that allows funding for individual projects to be available sooner, 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 legislation. “While it may be a small program from a funding perspective, it has the ability to affect the health benefits of children and parents, community benefits, as well as cost benefits from reducing bus transportation,” she said.

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership says model legislation should include permanent funding sources and require expert direction for program 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 opportunities for more children to walk or ride their bicycles to school, supporters acknowledge convincing some parents that it’s safe for their children to do so may be one of the most difficult barriers to overcome.

“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 active lifestyle.”

In Michigan, Armstrong hopes this program will also jumpstart a new focus on policies that extend long after the funding is exhausted. He wants to convince Michigan legislators that all public infrastructure 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 walkability in everything that gets built in society,” 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 practices 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. However, 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.

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