

Safe Routes to Schools – An Underfunded Equity Priority

The Proposed “Move Seattle” Transportation Levy Should Significantly Increase Its Commitment to Safe Routes to Schools

Here are key considerations that support the position offered in public comment to the Seattle City Council of May 29, 2015 that a large increase should be made in the proposed allocation to the Safe Routes to School Program.

Justice and equity should be served by higher SRTS funding in transportation investment

School children attending the Seattle Public Schools make up about eight percent of the City’s population:

Kindergarten to Grade 5	27,525
Grade 6 to Grade 8	10,648
High School	13,786
Total	52,000 or 8% of Seattle population

The ethnicity of students in the Seattle School District is *not* a mirror image of the city population as a whole. Students are less likely to be white and almost twice as likely to be Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino or Multi-Racial than citizens at large.¹

Ethnicity	White	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latino	Multi-Racial	Other
Seattle Population	64%	14%	8%	7%	5%	2%
Seattle Sch. Dist. Students	46%	16%	16%	13%	9%	.5%

Over a quarter (26%) of the students are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Almost two fifths (38%) of the students are from economically stressed family circumstances qualifying students for reduced price or free school meals.

Almost one in six (14%) of school age children in Seattle live in poverty.

¹ Data has been rounded and extrapolations from school district data and citywide data have been made to account for complexities of data representations in ethnic categories versus racial categories, but overall picture is certainly correct.

Sources: Seattle School District Student Ethnicity:

http://www.seattleschools.org/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1583136/File/Communications/FactFacts_2014-15_Final.pdf?sessionid=37806660d3761c0d33fefeee09c4c218

Seattle Population Race and Ethnicity:

<http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/cityplanning/populationdemographics/aboutseattle/raceethnicity/default.htm>

The purpose of Safe Routes to School investments towards more convenient, safer and healthier trips for school children back and forth from home to school is a transportation investment manifestly responsive to social justice and equity.

SRTS Effectiveness and Results

Nationwide and Washington State research on *effectiveness* of SRTS programs shows that schools where programs are implemented generally achieve a 20% increase in children walking to school.

We know from WSDOT survey results (2014-15) that nearly 60 percent of parents queried respond that unsafe road crossings are a factor in deciding how their children get to school.

Sampling from classrooms collected by the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction suggests about 1 child in 3 in Seattle already walks to school daily (twice the statewide norm) – underscoring why the safety focus of SRTS is so important. *But* almost half the Seattle students *never* walk to school – underscoring the rich opportunity to improve child health and transportation efficiency from SRTS investments.

We know from national and local research that inactive lifestyles are a major contributor to significant health issues for children. Walking and biking to school are widely seen as delivering multiple important health benefits to children. *Literature summary:*

<http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/program-tools/what-are-health-benefits-children-who-walk-or-bicycle-school>; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:

<http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/program-tools/what-are-health-benefits-children-who-walk-or-bicycle-school> ; Portland, Or:

<http://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/281464> .

We know that SDOT has declared a goal of “*Building America’s Most Walkable City.*” And that the vision of Seattle’s Bicycle Master Plan is that “*Riding a bicycle is a comfortable and integral part of daily life in Seattle for people of all ages and abilities.*” SRTS investments turn rhetoric into reality. Quickly and tangibly.

We know that SRTS programs invariably show ancillary benefits for safer, more walk-able and more bike-able trip choices for everyone, old and young, and often do valuable double-duty as improvements for transit accessibility, a critical need almost everywhere in the city and often especially in lower income neighborhoods.

We know that planning and implementing SRTS programs for individual schools inherently provide rich and welcome opportunities for building positive relationships between the Seattle School District, neighborhood groups and parents, the Seattle Police Department and the Seattle Department of Transportation. The value of these collaborations to daily family and neighborhood life is widely dispersed across the city -- probably unmatched in this respect by any other transportation investment proposed in the levy.

Increased investment in SRTS builds quickly and positively on a program already underway, widely known and favorably viewed.

STRS is a program with existing momentum that can quickly be made even more powerful, successful and meaningful to Seattle citizens.

Working with competitive grant money from the state and funds from school zone speed enforcement fines (both sources, however, now in decline, and Olympia's attention unfortunately focused on big highway spending projects) important beginnings on STRS have been made, giving the program visibility and popularity delivering tangible transportation benefit at very modest cost.² City projects have included new sidewalks (but, since 2007, only 27 block faces), curb bulbs and curb ramps, flashing beacons, newly painted crosswalks and other improvements.

SRTS needs and priorities deserve more investment than now proposed.

We know that despite all the above, the proposed funding level for SRTS in the current proposal for the \$930 million nine-year "Move Seattle" transportation levy proposal is just \$7 million. This would work out to about \$750,000 a year – hardly enough to make a significant dent in SRTS needs and opportunities. This works out to about 7/10^{ths} of 1 percent of the fiscal commitment in the levy – for essential transportation improvements for a population that just counting students alone (not even tallying their parents, or other citizens who directly benefit from these investments) makes up eight percent of the City's population. Members of the population that have uniquely high claims on transportation spending for reasons of age, social equity and overall personal and community health.

We know from the diligent work of the analysis spearheaded by Seattle Neighborhood Greenways that investment on the scale of \$20 million is required to achieve solid STRS progress within the one mile walk zones of ten elementary schools with the highest equity claims for attention. Adding 17 next level equity elementary schools would bring the total scale above \$35 million. Key steps taken for high school walk zones are also badly needed. The funding level in the currently proposed levy of \$7 million (less than 8/10^{ths} of one percent of the total levy amount) would if unchanged signal a lack of intention to make any more than token progress toward the safety, convenience, health and equity benefits the STRS program should deliver. A larger commitment will both strengthen the levy program and strengthen its tangible appeal to prospective Seattle voters.

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² A few of the schools, for example, where state funds have already bought starter investments include Dearborn Park, Roxhill, Olympic Hills, Concord, Baylet Gatzert, Sanislo, High Point, Fairmont Park and Hawthorne, among others. Other important progress, though limited in scale and scope, has also already been made by the City's use of its own resources. Some of the additional schools where progress has been achieved include North Beach, Salmon Bay, Wing Luke and Kimball among others.