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Commentary: Dedication of Additional Resources to Evaluation and Low-Income Schools is Critical to Increasing Levels of Safe Walking and Bicycling to School

Margo S. Pedroso

Safe Routes to School National Partnership, margo@saferoutespartnership.org

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BACKGROUND

In this issue of the *Journal*, Mendoza et al. present a study of rates of walking and bicycling to school (active commuting to school or ACS) in several low income, ethnic minority schools in Houston, Texas. The article provides important consideration of the distinctions between rates of ACS and its impact on moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) in Latino and non-Latino populations.

This study is an important contribution to the Safe Routes to School movement. Rates of walking and bicycling to school have declined dramatically over the years, from 48 percent of students ages 5 to 14 in 1969 to just 13 percent in 2009.¹ Yet, young people who walk and bicycle to school are more physically active^{2,3} and have lower body mass index (BMI) scores⁴ than students who are bused or driven to school. A recent review of the research issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also found that there is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement.⁵

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership (<http://www.saferoutespartnership.org>) is a network of nearly 500 organizations and professional groups working together to set goals, share best practices, secure funding and provide educational materials to agencies that implement Safe Routes to School. We believe that increasing the rate of ACS is critical to improving the physical activity levels and health of all children.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The data analysis and conclusions drawn by Mendoza et al. raise two primary policy issues that must be addressed nationally.

First, the analysis demonstrates the high rate of ACS among the low income study schools and low compliance with pedestrian safety behaviors. Nationally, children from low income families are twice as likely to walk to school as children from higher-income families.⁶ And, children from low income households are at greater risk of being injured or killed while walking.⁷

Given these statistics, we must be certain that low income children in particular are able to safely walk and bicycle to school. The federal Safe Routes to School program provides funding to help address safety challenges facing children on the commute to school—including infrastructure improvements such as sidewalks, bike paths and crosswalks and bicycle and pedestrian safety education. Low income schools should be able to easily access Safe Routes to School funds and implement

successful initiatives, but often lack the staff time and expertise required to complete and implement a successful application.

State Departments of Transportation, which administer the federal Safe Routes to School program, should track the income level of schools and communities that apply for and receive Safe Routes to School funding to assess whether low income schools are being adequately served. States with lower levels of participation by low income schools and communities should implement proactive practices such as planning support, specialized technical assistance, and comprehensive initiatives for low income areas to ensure that the children most in need of a safe route to school receive it. City and county governments should also prioritize local government resources and funding—such as funds for sidewalk repairs, crossing guards, and community policing—to the neighborhoods around low income schools.

Serving low income communities through Safe Routes to School is a top priority for the Safe Routes to School National Partnership. We are advocating for these policy recommendations at the federal level and through our State Network Project. In addition, we recently published a best practices guide highlighting Safe Routes to School initiatives in low-income communities.

Second, this is one of the first studies to examine ACS behaviors among Latino children and parents. It reaches the important conclusion that programs seeking to increase rates of ACS must be aware of the different motivations and considerations for parents and children of different races and ethnicities. As Safe Routes to School continues to expand—federal funds are now serving more than 7,000 schools nationwide—it becomes more and more important to have greater breadth of evaluation and data analysis. Evaluation is essential for determining how and in what circumstances Safe Routes to School initiatives can be most effective. Examinations of the different approaches and impacts on children of different ages, races, income levels, geographic regions, and cultures are also indispensable.

Unfortunately, the federal Safe Routes to School legislative language from the 2005 transportation bill, which has provided \$800 million in funding for the program from FY2005 to FY2010, does not require any data collection or evaluation of the program's implementation and effectiveness. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) through the National Center for Safe Routes to School has developed standardized parent surveys and student tallies for voluntary use by local grant recipients, and many researchers in the field have been conducting independent studies of Safe Routes to School.

However, funding for this type of research is limited. Creating a robust federal funding stream for evaluation and research on Safe Routes to School would allow for more diverse research and identification of promising trends and best practices for a variety of school environments and student populations. Along with dedicated funding, FHWA should develop and carry out a comprehensive evaluation plan to ensure the breadth of necessary research is being conducted. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership has been advocating that Congress include funding for comprehensive evaluation as the Safe Routes to School program is reauthorized through the surface transportation bill.

In conclusion, implementing these policy recommendations will help ensure greater diversity of research and evaluation into ACS, and that the distribution of Safe Routes to School resources is equitable and accessible to low income schools and communities.

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