

TIPS FOR ENGAGING SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Successful Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs rely on and reflect the input and commitment of multiple partners. Support from school administrators is an essential component of a successful SRTS program, as they play an important role, either directly or indirectly, in virtually any school wellness initiative. In fact, having a school principal champion a SRTS program has been identified as one key element for achieving travel mode shift among students. ⁺

Every school is unique, but the following recommendations will assist SRTS champions in successfully engaging school principals and their lead staff to initiate new, and strengthen existing, SRTS programs.

Do Your Homework

Answer the following questions before meeting with the school principal so you can tailor your messages and approach.

- What are the principal's responsibilities? How do these support a SRTS program?

The Role of School Principals

Understanding the principal's role and responsibilities is a crucial first step in developing a collaborative relationship. Principals serve as the chief administrator of a school and ensure that school district guidelines are being met. Most school leaders accept the belief that healthy students learn better, but school safety and student achievement issues take priority.

The day-to-day activities of principals can include:

- Setting performance goals and objectives.
- Preparing budgets and reports.
- Hiring, evaluating, and developing the overall teaching skills of teachers and staff.
- Advising, explaining, and answering staff's procedural questions.
- Ensuring that students meet national, state and local academic standards.
- Ensuring that the school's facilities and grounds are safe and free from hazards.
- Communicating with students' parents

⁺"Shifting Modes: A Comparative Analysis of Safe Routes to School Program Elements and Travel Mode Outcomes." National Center for Safe Routes to School. 2012.

- What are the principal's priorities? How do these relate to SRTS?

- What are the principal's positions on school wellness issues and/or SRTS?

- What positive steps has the principal already taken to support SRTS?

- What, if any, SRTS challenges have been experienced (e.g., in local news stories) at the school or in the community?

What is the traffic safety situation around the school? Consider sharing the [SRTS Pedestrian or Bicycle Collision Maps](#) with the principal and discuss how SRTS can help address traffic safety risks.

- Talk with your peers/colleagues. Have other programs/groups approached this school? What successes, opportunities, or challenges have they experienced?

Colleagues to contact: _____

Findings: _____

Spark the Conversation

Consider using the questions below when starting the conversation with a school principal. Choose the questions that work best for your situation, taking into account the receptiveness of the principal, as well as any previous relationship or outreach with the school (if applicable).

Put a check mark next to the questions that you think are right for your conversation:

- What are the top priorities facing your school?
- How does wellness/physical activity/SRTS fit into your vision of student achievement?
- What are your beliefs and concerns about SRTS?
- How receptive do you think students' parents are to SRTS?
- What would make SRTS more appealing and less burdensome for your school to adopt?
- How can SRTS help address some of your most pressing priorities?
- How can we work together?
- How can we help you?

Don't Be Discouraged

Not all principals will initially support SRTS. So, it is important to remain positive even if your initial conversation does not end with enthusiastic support of SRTS. Use this first conversation as a stepping-stone to build a relationship with the school and continue to check-in with the principal on a regular basis. Set up future meetings to provide new resources (e.g. safety tips, etc.) the principal can share with parents and students, and to share successes of nearby schools to help encourage future participation in SRTS. Whatever happens, know that some schools need time to get on board and leave with a follow-up plan in mind.

Consider the following questions to ask if you find yourself in a discouraging meeting. **Put a check mark next to the comments/questions that you think would best resonate with the principal:**

- It seems like it may not be the right time for a full program at your school, but I know...
 - ...*traffic safety* at your school is still a big concern. SRTS can help schools address and improve traffic safety by working with the public works department to slow traffic down, improve street crossings, and other similar improvements.
 - ...*student health and wellness* at your school is still a big concern. SRTS can help schools improve student health and wellness by helping children get physical activity in the morning so they arrive at school focused and ready to learn.

Note: Refer to the [Frequently Asked Questions and Suggested Answers Guide](#) in this Toolkit for more information.

- Are there specific concerns that a SRTS program can address that you would like more information about?
- Do you have any additional concerns that I did not address today?
- Who else would you like to have involved as we work together to bring SRTS to your school?
- When would be a good time for us to meet again?

Build a Relationship

Successful SRTS programs are a result of relationship building, not just a single conversation. Below are some tips for building a relationship with your school principal.

1. Work Collaboratively

- Start a dialogue to learn, as well as share information, rather than trying to sell your issue up front.
- Applaud efforts the school has already taken to support SRTS.
- Remind the principal that SRTS successes involve interested parents, teachers, students, other organizations and community stakeholders in the discussion and planning, and offer to lead the process.

2. Offer Value and Communicate Benefits

- Position SRTS as a way to help the school achieve its goals.
- Stress the connection between a healthy mind and a healthy body.
- Present accurate and compelling data.
- Find out what matters to the principal and tailor your message appropriately.

3. Be Respectful of the Principal's Other Priorities

- Acknowledge competing priorities.
- Work together to set reasonable goals instead of seeking an immediate response or action.
- Be patient and flexible, but be persistent.

4. Think Long Term

- Success requires a long-term commitment.
- Get to know the principal and his/her key concerns and interests.
- Offer to support activities to address related issues if possible (potential cross-overs).
- Continue to solicit and incorporate the principal's feedback—and let the principal know when his/her feedback was particularly helpful in moving forward.
- Publicly give the principal (and the school) praise for SRTS successes.

This material was adapted from Action for Healthy Kids
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Read the full *Crosswalk* issue brief and supplemental tip sheets online at www.CAsaferoutestoschool.org.



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