

Tip Sheet #6

www.saferoutespartnership.org

Strategies for Increasing Safe Routes to School and Bicycling in Lower-Income Communities



Bicycling is a key strategy for Safe Routes to School programs looking to encourage students to travel short and long distances. However, the challenges in promoting bicycling in most lower-income neighborhoods can seem like an obstacle to even the most persistent Safe Routes to School program. Lower-income communities can face many issues that act as barriers to long term participation in bicycling such as equipment and maintenance, crime and bullying, little to no bicycling infrastructure, lack of green space and recreational destinations, graffiti, even stray dogs and abandoned houses. Ironically, lower-income neighborhoods may have the most to gain from engaging in bicycling for recreation and transportation. We do know that higher-income communities that have effectively implemented bicycling strategies in their Safe Routes to School programs have seen exciting results. In order to simulate similar success in lower-income communities Safe Routes to School practitioners need to be aware of the barriers that lower-income communities face, not just in relation to bicycling, but also the systemic issues and how to deal with them.

Access to Bicycles and Equipment

Families in lower-income communities may not have the resources to purchase and maintain bicycles, or may not see the financial value of purchasing bicycles for their children. Many community groups have worked to combat the lack of bicycles by providing an influx of bicycles through donations from community members, organizations or bicycle manufacturers, grant funding, and **partnerships with bike shops**. Local activists put more bicycles in the hands of the community through **Earn-a-bike/build-a-bike programs**. These programs teach important maintenance skills by working on donated bikes

that the student ultimately keeps. Some Safe Routes to School programs have worked to get donated bicycles from the larger community, through bicycles the police department has recovered and then can donate after a given holding period (typically 90 days) or even bicycles acquired at the city dump or through other groups that are then fixed up by a group of volunteers. A recent Portland, Oregon program is working to introduce bicycling to families without bicycles by providing a very inexpensive rental period to test ride program bicycles as a family. These methods are a fantastic way to inject bicycling into a community and are best when supported by additional programs that address many of the other barriers to bicycling in lower-income neighborhoods.

Crime is a significant issue that affects many aspects of living in many lower-income communities. With regards to bicycling, families may find it difficult or even impossible to justify the purchase of a bicycle that could be stolen from



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the school, the family's garage, backyard or elsewhere. To alleviate the concern of theft, work with your school to ensure that **adequate and well located bicycle parking** is available on or near school grounds. Find out more about issues regarding bicycle parking in the Safe Routes to School National Partnership's **Bicycle Parking Tip sheet**. And, don't forget that students can use their bicycles to go places after school as well! Local recreation centers, libraries, parks, corner stores and other points of interest should provide adequate bicycle parking for school-aged children (and adults). Finding a way to equip students with reliable locks (preferably combination locks for those students who inevitably lose their keys) and

the knowledge to use them properly will go a long way in helping students keep their bicycles and encourage parents to let their children take bicycles to school and other places.

Family budgets are tight in lower-income communities. While middle-class families can easily justify the purchase of additional clothing to make cold and wet weather riding feasible, some lower-income families will dismiss bicycling because of this barrier, but many others may be more concerned about bigger issues such as bikes and theft. Determine whether this is an issue for parents at your school, and then proceed accordingly. If clothing is an issue for the families at your school, partner with local department stores, second hand shops or nonprofits dedicated to providing clothing to sponsor giveaways at the school. Bike shops or outdoor recreation stores may be interested in providing discount clothing to students in their communities.

Additionally, getting helmets to families in lower-income communities may be an important goal. A Safe Routes to School program can offer annual low-cost bulk helmet orders through the school to give parents an affordable option, and there are many low-cost online helmet retailers. Local hospitals and police departments sometimes have funded programs that work to prevent injuries by donating much needed helmets. Nonprofits such as **SafeKids** can be great partners in a Safe Routes to School program by working to help you address the need for helmets in your community. Finally, grant funding may be available to help fund helmet purchases for students in need. Research Safe Routes to School mini-grants, federal funding or foundations dedicated to reducing obesity or increasing physical activity in children to find funding options. Providing helmets is just part of the equation, ensuring that there is adequate education regarding the importance and use of helmets can motivate students to wear their helmets more often.

Access to Skills Training and Maintenance

Many students and parents do not know how to change a flat tire, oil a chain, adjust brakes or perform any other basic maintenance on a bicycle. This becomes

Portland, Oregon

Through **partnership with a local bike shop**, a Portland activist has created a lower-income family bicycle rental program. For an entire month a family can rent an adult bicycle, kid's bicycle, trailer, car rack, helmets, panniers, lights and locks to experience what it is like to comfortably ride, maintain and store bicycles. The program is targeted at schools that participate in a local **Bike Train** program where a strong community of families riding bicycles has been built. A family can check out all these items for fifty dollars per month, and should they choose to purchase a bicycle after participating, the rental fee can go towards buying a new or used bike. Were the bikes to be stolen or damaged they are covered under the bike shop's insurance that protects their normal rentals. Participating bike shops are happy because they get potential new customers and it works great for the rental program organizers because the bike shop agrees to take on the risk, maintenance, and storage of the program's bicycles. While this Portland-based program is still new, it may serve as a new model to engage people who wouldn't otherwise ride a bicycle.

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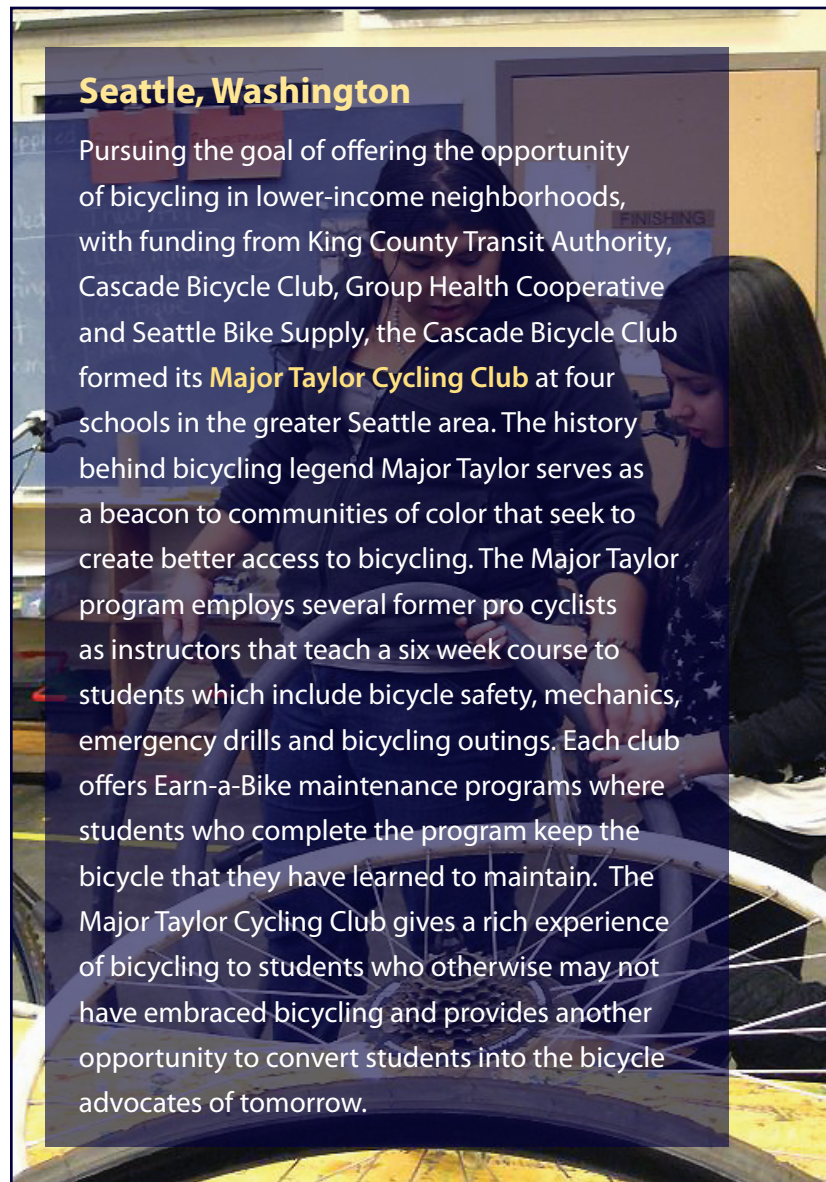


problematic when their bicycle encounters some of its first mechanical issues. Lower-income residents may not have easy access to a neighborhood bike shop to help with these needs nor the additional income to quickly remedy maintenance issues that arise with their bicycles. Counter this lack of access and education by developing a systematic approach to educating families and students. Many Safe Routes to School programs include a bicycle safety component; however, to address the specific needs of lower-income communities, consider additional programmatic options. For example, give students who have never ridden a chance to learn how to ride, or get involved with a **Trips for Kids** program that engages underserved young people through Mountain Biking or **Earn-a-Bike programs**. Creation of a build-a-bike program or an **after school bicycle club** that helps teach students and parents about basic bicycle maintenance such as changing a flat, cleaning and lubing a drive train and tightening brakes gives them the skills that are useful when they encounter issues with their bicycles that would otherwise prevent them from riding more. Engage local bicycle clubs, teams, shops, advocacy groups or even interested volunteer bicyclists that can donate time or money to provide fix-a-flat clinics in the neighborhood or after hours at the school. Work with the local library, recreation center, church or park to provide basic tools and a pump at bicycle racks so students can make quick repairs on the go. They may also be interested in sponsoring classes or providing space. Keep in mind that although currently there may not be easy access to bicycle parts or repair services in the community, with a sufficient increase in the number of bicyclists it may become financially sound for a bike shop to open its doors.

Access to Traffic Safety Education

Lower-income communities are known to have a disproportionate number of crashes when compared to other communities. One piece of this puzzle is adequate traffic safety education as there is quite a bit

of misinformation about how to safely drive a bicycle. Sharing bicycle safety messages with students and parents through school newsletters, local churches and other community groups is a good start. Educating parents about safe bicycling is key to fostering safe habits with their children. Work to teach traffic safety education during school hours. Oftentimes getting access into a lower-income school can be more difficult as the pressure to perform on standardized tests occupies class time, staff energy and focus. Getting to know the school and its needs before proposing a program will help you shape your messages and program to better cater to the needs of the school. If a Physical Education class exists, this is



Seattle, Washington

Pursuing the goal of offering the opportunity of bicycling in lower-income neighborhoods, with funding from King County Transit Authority, Cascade Bicycle Club, Group Health Cooperative and Seattle Bike Supply, the Cascade Bicycle Club formed its **Major Taylor Cycling Club** at four schools in the greater Seattle area. The history behind bicycling legend Major Taylor serves as a beacon to communities of color that seek to create better access to bicycling. The Major Taylor program employs several former pro cyclists as instructors that teach a six week course to students which include bicycle safety, mechanics, emergency drills and bicycling outings. Each club offers Earn-a-Bike maintenance programs where students who complete the program keep the bicycle that they have learned to maintain. The Major Taylor Cycling Club gives a rich experience of bicycling to students who otherwise may not have embraced bicycling and provides another opportunity to convert students into the bicycle advocates of tomorrow.

a great place to integrate traffic safety education. Also, there are opportunities to implement traffic safety lessons throughout the school day in classes such as geography, math and social studies. Try talking to the school nurse, counselor, or science teacher to find champions for bicycle safety education and skills training. Access the Safe Routes to School National Partnership's **Bicycle and Pedestrian Curricula Guide** for more ideas on traffic safety education curricula choices.

The Bicycle Stigma

Also bicycling may have the stigma, similar to riding the city bus, of being something that only the desperate use, or only a sport for middle class white males, or even the symbol of gentrification in some communities. While this may be a difficult stigma to overcome, messages about bicycling as a way for kids to be active and have fun may

be a better starting point than trying to start a program focused on riding to school.

Starting a bicycling club or team that offers the occasion for interested students to take ownership of the program and its goals may give bicycling the best chance to be embraced as 'cool' by the other students. When possible, use opportunities like forming a **Major Taylor Club**

(a bicycle club that is based on Major Taylor, a role model and bicycling world champion of the late 1800s, and the first African American world champion of any sport), to connect bicycling and communities of color as well as relay the passion of a bicyclist who overcame all odds in an era of overt racism to become world champion. Cultural stigmas can be difficult to overcome, but making it 'cool' first may be the beginning of increasing support of bicycling as transportation.



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Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Milwaukee's West Side faces many issues that are common to lower-income communities. Many of these issues contribute to a low participation in bicycling including theft, lack of access to repair, lack of access to quality bicycles and a lack of education around how to bicycle safely and how to maintain your bicycle. **Milwaukee Bicycle Works**, designed to "broaden access to bicycling and its benefits through hands-on programs, volunteer projects and a neighborhood bike shop" created their model to use bicycling as a vehicle for social change. Giving children a place to learn, stay out of trouble and participate in healthy, active living is one way Milwaukee Bicycle Works hopes to contribute to broad based change throughout the community. This type of community-centered shop can work in close collaboration with Safe Routes to School programs to broaden the level of access schools and their students have bicycles, safety education and basic repairs.

Infrastructure Needs and Funding

Lower -income communities are often more likely to have worse bicycle infrastructure and faster moving traffic. While the adoption of **Complete Street policies** can improve bicycle facilities and access in the long term, Safe Routes to School projects can get more students bicycling fairly quickly.

You can get grant funding to improve bicycling infrastructure within two miles of the school by partnering with local government to access federal or state grant funding dedicated to infrastructure improvements that support Safe Routes to School. There is a federal Safe Routes to School program that gives grants and/or technical assistance to local communities and schools. Every state department of transportation has a Safe Routes to School coordinator whose job it is to help local applicants apply for funds that will build projects and launch programs. Find out more about how to access the funds in your state at the following link: <http://www>.

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saferoutespartnership.org/state/statemap

In the short term, you can work with the school and city to create a Suggested Routes to School Map. Your school Safe Routes to School team can identify the roads and paths that will enable your students and parents to quickly find the safer, easier, more traffic free bicycle route to school. This can inspire parents and students to ride, and the map can be used to organize **Bike Trains**, which are organized groups of bicyclists with parental or volunteer supervision that can increase the safety of children riding to school and other places.

Working within lower-income communities to successfully promote bicycling as a component of a Safe Routes to School program requires a thoughtful strategy. Partner with organizations that are already established in the community, oftentimes making these inroads into a lower-income community is the most difficult part of getting started. Ensure that your project works to find the financial, educational, access and infrastructure opportunities that can increase bicycling in lower-income communities and will make certain your project has lasting, positive long-term impacts on children’s health and happiness.

Resources

SRAM Bicycling Webinars and Tip Sheets –
Safe Routes to School National Partnership
<http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/mediacenter/SRAM-Bicycling-Webinars>

Implementing Safe Routes to School in Low Income Schools and Communities –
Safe Routes to School National Partnership
<http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/media/file/LowIncomeGuide.pdf>

Trips for Kids
<http://www.tripsforkids.org/>

Major Taylor Project –
Cascade Bicycle Club Education Foundation
<http://www.cbcef.org/youth-major-taylor.html>

Tools for Life
(Start-up an Earn-a-Bike program) -
Transportation Alternatives
<http://www.transalt.org/files/resources/toolsforlife>

Sprockids
<http://www.sprockids.com>

Community Cycling Center
<http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org/index.php/programs-for-youth>

Understanding Barriers to Bicycling –
Community Cycling Center
<http://www.communitycyclingcenter.org/index.php/understanding-barriers-to-bicycling>

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The mission of the Safe Routes to School National Partnership is to advocate for safe walking and bicycling to and from schools, and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America's children and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities. More information can be found at www.saferoutespartnership.org.



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