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Cross-sector collaboration on Safe Routes to School policy advocacy and implementation: A mixed methods evaluation from Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

Cross-sector collaboration has been a crucial element of planning and implementing large-scale obesity prevention-related policies and programs in the United States, including Safe Routes to School (SRTS), which promotes walking and bicycling through physical infrastructure changes and programmatic efforts. Minnesota provides a unique opportunity to evaluate a collaborative partnership that successfully implemented and institutionalized one of the first state-funded SRTS initiatives in the country and included close collaboration between transportation and health officials and advocates at both the state and local levels. This theoretically informed mixed methods case study identified and described the roles of both central and peripheral members of a collaborative SRTS partnership in Minnesota. Qualitative analyses of 18 stakeholder interviews identified key aspects of success, including passionate and skilled individuals with a common objective, structures that facilitated work across partnership functions and geographies, strong interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships, capacity for implementation and advocacy, and information and knowledge sharing. Findings indicate that contributors to partnership success may differ across multiple geographic levels and partnership functions. Contextual factors external to the partnership are also likely to affect whether partnerships achieve their goals.

1. Introduction

Walking or biking to school is associated with greater physical activity and cardiovascular fitness among children (Davison et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008); however, the proportion of children who actively travel to school has declined from 48% in 1969 to just 13% in 2009 (Ping, 2011). Barriers to active school transportation include schools being located far from where students live, parents' concerns about traffic and neighborhood safety, and lack of direct walking routes and pedestrian infrastructure (Davison et al., 2008). Recent efforts in the United States (U.S.) and other countries have sought to reduce these barriers through the establishment of Safe Routes to School (SRTS) initiatives, which promote active school transportation through physical infrastructure changes (e.g., sidewalk redesign) and programmatic efforts (e.g., crossing guard programs).

Evaluation studies have found that SRTS initiatives have increased students' rates of active school transportation and physical activity (Chillon et al., 2011; Hoelscher et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2014) and decreased students' risk of pedestrian injury (DiMaggio

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et al., 2014). However, not all states in the U.S. have been equally successful in creating and implementing SRTS programs, even with the existence of federal funding (Cradock et al., 2012). This study presents research findings using mixed methods to evaluate Minnesota's collaborative approach to implementation and institutionalization of SRTS. Minnesota is a national leader on state policy supporting bicycling and walking and as of 2016 was one of only six states that dedicated state funds for SRTS initiatives (Lieberman et al., 2016).

Cross-sector collaboration has been a crucial element of planning and implementing SRTS programs in the U.S. because of the range of expertise and authority needed to make environmental and policy changes. Local communities (cities, towns, and counties) developed teams that included professionals from public health, education, city planning, and law enforcement, as well as students, parents, and local school staff, to plan and implement comprehensive SRTS programs. Forming and maintaining such collaborative partnerships requires a substantial investment of time and resources, so evaluating the success of these partnerships is critical to informing wise investments in future public health initiatives.

Multi-site evaluation studies have sought to identify characteristics of partnerships that contributed to successful outcomes, such as the way the partnership is structured (e.g., which partners were involved, what roles they played) and the interpersonal and inter-organizational processes in operation (e.g., coordination and leadership, communication, and member engagement) (Baker et al., 2012; Brennan et al., 2012; Litt et al., 2013). The current study builds on this research by using mixed methods to examine whether partnership leaders, staff members, and local stakeholders, may have divergent perspectives on the partnership's operations and success.

Minnesota provides a unique opportunity to evaluate a partnership that successfully implemented and institutionalized SRTS in policy and to increase understanding of collaborative processes that may operate at different levels of partnership functioning. Implementation success was defined as the obligation of federal SRTS funding by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to local schools and communities for engineering (infrastructure) projects and non-infrastructure programming; institutionalization success was defined as the creation of a state SRTS program operated by MnDOT, created and funded by the state legislature. Fig. 1 demonstrates the timing of program creation, partnership formation, and outcome measures.

2006	MnDOT receives federal funding for SRTS
2009	Minnestoa Department of Health begins funding communities to work on SRTS through the Statewide Health Improvement Program
2010	SRTS Network forms to aid implementation efforts after Minnesota receives funding from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's State Network Project
2012	• MnDOT creates Steering Committee to advise on SRTS programming and funding decisions • MnDOT obligated over $17 million in federal SRTS funds to nearly 200 schools since 2006 (Implementation Success) • SRTS Coalition forms and begins advocating at the state legislature for a state-funded SRTS program; Minnesota legislature creates state SRTS program in statute, but does not fund it
2013	Minnesota legislature funds state SRTS program ($250,000 per year for non-infrastructure) (Institutionalization Success)
2014	Minnesota legislature increases funding for state SRTS program ($500,000 per year for non-infrastructure, plus one-time $1 million for infrastructure) (Institutionalization Success)
2015	Evaluation designed; survey & interview data collected

Fig. 1. Timeline of partnership activities and outcomes. Abbreviations: MnDOT: Minnesota Department of Transportation, SRTS: Safe Routes to School.