

YOUTH PARTNERSHIP RESOURCES & ACTION PLAN

Minnesota Safe Routes to School

JUNE 2022



Acknowledgments

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PROJECT MANAGEMENT TEAM

Dave Cowan

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Kelly Corbin

Minnesota Department of Transportation

YOUTH WORKGROUP

Ava Roots

Minnesota Youth Council

Arjun Prasad

Minnesota Youth Council

Charlie Schmit

Minnesota Youth Council

CONSULTANT TEAM

Alta Planning + Design

Minnesota Alliance with Youth





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01 INTRODUCTION



Why Youth?

The Minnesota Safe Routes to School (MnSRTS) Strategic Plan speaks to the importance of youth engagement and leadership in the first sentence, where it says: “[This] Plan establishes a[n]... action plan to improve walking and biking to school **for youth** in Minnesota (emphasis added).” Similarly, the MnSRTS vision is that:

“Youth in Minnesota can safely, confidently, and conveniently walk, bike, and roll to school and in daily life.”

As the intended beneficiaries of MnSRTS’s efforts, youth not only deserve to be included and provided opportunities to shape SRTS work—youth are experts when it comes to their schools, neighborhoods, and transportation, and they have the first-hand knowledge and ideas to build more just transportation systems. Further, youth will inherit the transportation planning decisions we make today and in the years to come; youth will pay the costs of transportation mistakes we make now, but youth also stand to reap the benefits of more thoughtful, youth-informed and -directed planning efforts. Failing to recognize and value youth knowledge, and failing to collaborate with youth in efforts to improve transportation systems for youth, is a tried and true method for poor transportation planning.

In response to the insight and expertise youth bring to SRTS, this document provides recommendations for how the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), MnSRTS, and SRTS practitioners can more equitably collaborate with their most important constituency—youth—to work towards a more just transportation system for Minnesota.

Youth-led meetings (table talks) guided the process in identifying barriers and opportunities, as well as developing resources and recommendations to support youth engagement, empowerment, and leadership opportunities in SRTS across Minnesota. The table talks were led by high school youth. While the resources and recommendations in this guide are primarily focused on older youth, they are also applicable to younger students. Younger students, however, may need additional adult support and time for context and questions. This guide is meant to serve as a resource for MnSRTS, SRTS practitioners, and youth across the state.



Framework for Youth-Adult Partnership

WHY YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP IN SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL?

In order to move towards sustainable adult-youth partnership, it is important to acknowledge that youth already possess the knowledge, skill, and expertise to make changes in their communities. Rather than making decisions on behalf of youth, adults should focus on providing youth with the space to recognize and explore the power and knowledge they already hold. This perspective informs the attitudes and methods used to involve youth in work that often excludes them.

The difference between empowerment and partnership is important to name in the context of Safe Routes to School. High school students are often beginning to make their own decisions about travel, establish more independence, and understand the economic impacts of transportation choices. Partnership recognizes where power lies, with an emphasis on collaboration and power sharing. It sets the stage for youth to see how their transportation choices are significant in the context of a larger system. When the youth-adult partnership is meaningful, it leads to empowerment. Moving forward, it will be important for MnSRTS and SRTS practitioners to use a youth-adult partnership framework as a commitment to meeting young people as equals.

The [Youth-Partnership Assessment](#) facilitated by Youthrise for the Minnesota Youth Council (MYC) in Spring 2022 identified relevant themes about how to build effective partnerships between youth and adults. Members of the Minnesota Youth Council went on to participate as MnSRTS student leaders and developed table talks in partnership with adult organizers. Listed below are the common themes that came from a conversation with MYC about what they need from a youth-adult partnership:

“WHAT DO YOUTH NEED FROM ADULTS IN PARTNERSHIP?”

- Equal power in decision making
- Shared values and common goals
- Communication and transparency; promotes trust
- Collaboration and openness to new ideas
- Enthusiasm for what [they] are doing

“WHAT ACTIONABLE STEPS ARE NEEDED FROM ADULTS IN PARTNERSHIP?”

- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities agreed upon by youth and adults
- Transparency about goals, challenges, and impact of work
- Clearly defined structures of support and accountability for youth and adults
- Honesty and respect for the work/perspectives of young people—don’t infantilize youth

These themes can be integrated into all kinds of youth-adult partnerships, and is important in the context of Safe Routes to School as transportation is a decision making point that many youth are starting to explore independent of their caregivers. Allowing youth the opportunity to collaborate with adults, experience transparency and trust, and feel respected in their exploration of transportation will allow for more significant learning.

THE LADDER OF PARTICIPATION AND SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Roger Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation¹ is an insightful framework to frame any youth-adult partnership. This ladder, shown in Figure 1, describes eight ascending levels of youth participation, ranging from non-participation (which includes the bottom three levels) to fully child-led at the top. Roger Hart developed this framework from Sherry Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation² but adapted it to the participation of children. The lowest level of participation is when youth are merely informed about decisions, and the highest level of participation is when youth initiate decisions and share decision-making authority with adults.

While the ladder implies a linear hierarchy—and the highest level of participation may be the goal for many activities—other levels of participation may be better suited for certain activities. In the context of Safe Routes to School, informing youth may be useful when there is a construction project happening near the school that may impact their commute, but shared decision-making may be useful when there is a school-sponsored Earth Day festival where students can create and lead activities related to active transportation. Roger Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation provides a useful framework for understanding various degrees of youth participation in SRTS, and a jumping off point for forming a more sustainable partnership where there is transparency and collaboration. It can be a tool that SRTS practitioners can utilize alongside youth to be transparent about goals and visions for collaboration.

Certain levels of participation along the ladder will not only depend upon the SRTS activity, but may also vary for youth of different ages. The highest levels of participation will likely be more appropriate for high school youth, while younger youth will need more additional adult support and time for context and questions.

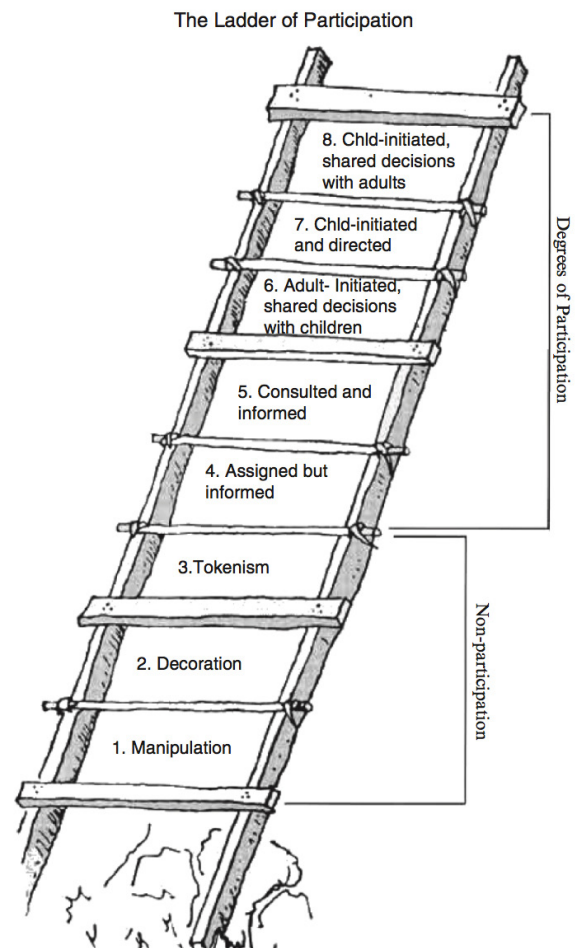


Figure 1: Roger Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation

1 Hart, R. (1992). *Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*, Florence: UNICEF Innocent Research Center

2 Arnstein, S. (1969.) *A ladder of citizen participation*. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35(4), 216–224.



Why Should Youth Care about Safe Routes to Schools?

Working with youth requires making the case for why they should allocate their limited time to this particular effort. Many youth are well-aware of the challenges to walking and biking to school and understand the types of solutions needed (e.g., addressing socioeconomic inequities, improving the built environment, etc.)—but they may be unfamiliar with Safe Routes to School as a distinct local and statewide program, and particular Safe Routes to School initiatives (e.g., Walk and Bike to School Day; Drop and Ride) may not feel relevant or adequate to the specific circumstances that impact their individual transportation choices and experiences.

For youth to be equal partners and take on leadership roles, it is essential for SRTS practitioners to tailor messaging and approaches to address the lived experiences of youth partners. This helps youth feel recognized and meeting them where they are

more likely to lead to the kind of partnership toward the top of Hart’s ladder. The barriers identified by youth through the youth leadership working group below can lead to specific solutions for developing recommendations and communicating about SRTS-related activities and initiatives.

- **Geographic / Income Disparities:**

Youth noted disparities in the quality and prevalence of bicycle, pedestrian, and vehicular infrastructure between lower-income and higher-income communities as well as between urban and rural communities. Targeting SRTS activities to address transportation inequities, and framing SRTS initiatives around themes of equity and justice, may better engage youth and better align with youth’s experiences and needs around walking and biking.

- **Winter Weather:**

Winter weather conditions, including cold temperatures, limited daylight, and poor maintenance of bike and pedestrian facilities from ice and snow are major barriers to walking and biking for youth. Youth-engaged design solutions and peer-to-peer encouragement could reduce these barriers in a way that also addresses other youth concerns. For example, installing pedestrian-scale lighting can address limited winter daylight and also relates to personal safety and concerns about visibility for students participating in after-school activities.

- **After-School Activities:**

Students who have after-school activities may have limited transportation options and travel during dark hours, and therefore may be less inclined to walk/bike home. Student-engaged design and implementation of infrastructure improvements (e.g., demonstration projects, permanent infrastructure projects, pedestrian-scale lighting placement, etc.) and identifying travel options could reduce these barriers.

- **Long Distances:**

Many students in Minnesota live too far from their school to comfortably and conveniently walk/bike the entire distance to school. Initiatives focused on school siting, school assignment policy, and land use reform could all be framed in relation to walking and biking access to schools, making these issues more relevant to youth's day-to-day lives and positioning youth to become advocate-leaders around these topics.

- **Major Roadways:**

Youth identified having to cross major roadways with high speeds and minimal bicycle or pedestrian infrastructure as a barrier to walking and biking to school. Partnering with youth to advocate for

and design infrastructure improvements to major roadways could be effective for addressing critical safety barriers for students.

- **Access to Public Transportation:**

Some students walk to school from the nearest public bus stop. Both accessing and waiting at the bus stop can feel unsafe and uncomfortable; SRTS resources could facilitate partnerships between local public works agencies, transit agencies, and schools and youth to improve 'safe routes to bus stops' through accessible infrastructure, and youth could lead placemaking projects at local bus stops.

- **Convenience of Driving:**

Youth acknowledged that driving can be the most convenient and appealing option for those who are able to drive or get a ride. Peer-to-peer encouragement for walking and biking to school can work to increase enthusiasm for walking and biking, by hosting fun and educational events, and by reinforcing the message that active modes are normal, safe, and appealing.

- **Personal Safety Concerns:**

Many students have felt unsafe in their surroundings, including concerns about crime and witnessing or experiencing inappropriate interactions with adults. Identifying opportunities with SRTS outreach as well as Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), and developing student-informed solutions that combine these domains, could be responsive to youths' stated concerns.



02

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

*Streets bring
people together.*

Recommendations and Actions

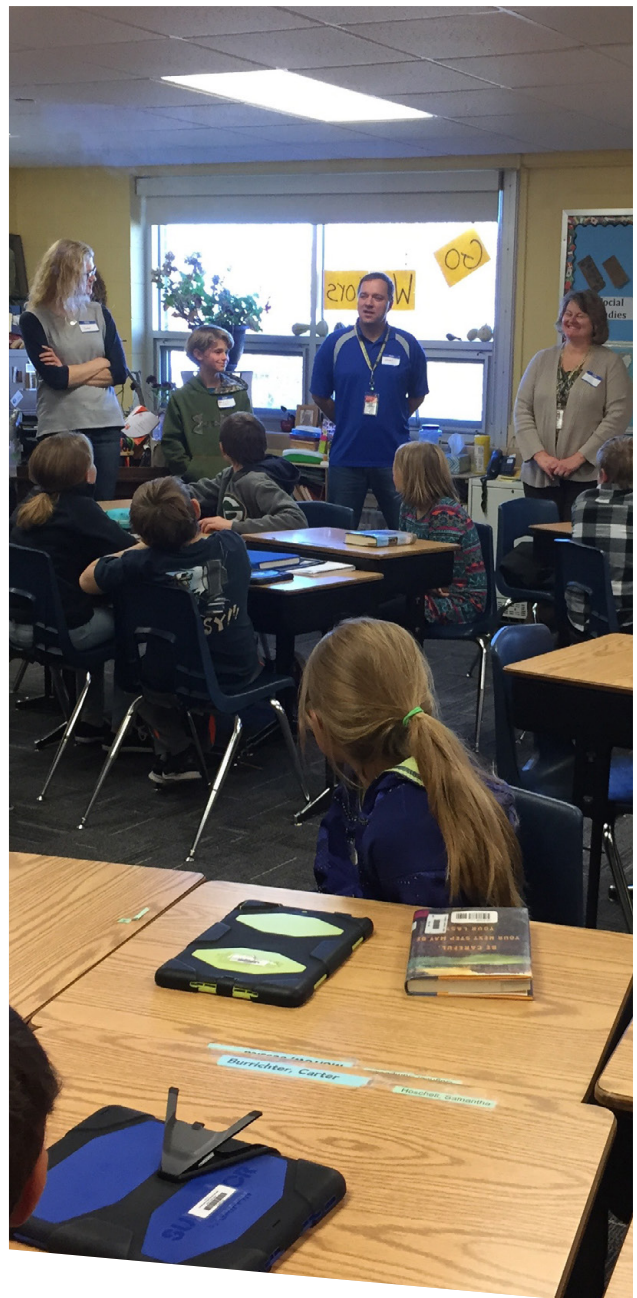
This section connects youth-identified priorities (“What we Heard”) with recommendations and actions for SRTS practitioners to address those priorities. The following recommendations exist across the ladder of youth participation (refer to pg. 5). While youth-adult partnership is the overall goal, the highest levels of participation will likely be more appropriate for high school youth and younger youth may need more additional adult support during the participation process. A core underlying philosophy for the following recommendations is that it is critical for MnSRTS to engage with existing local and statewide organizations that are led by and/or serve youth. Building partnerships with and providing resources to established organizations aligns with the goal of providing youth with space and opportunity to stand in their own power (see “Why Youth-Adult Partnership in Safe Routes to School?”). This approach enables youth to be partners in creating meaningful change in how people travel to and from schools and other key destinations across Minnesota.

RECOMMENDATION 1: CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

WHAT WE HEARD

To build authentic relationships with young people, adults must be intentional in honoring their experiences, reflective of the ways the work is unwelcoming to students, and committed to making the process more accessible. It is not enough to invite young people into working spaces as they exist; SRTS practitioners have to invite youth to collaboratively define the vision.

This means considering what barriers exist for student participation, and addressing them. When are meetings held—is it during school hours? Are work sites available virtually and/or via public transportation? Do we have the staff and resources to support them throughout the process?





RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Use Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation** to determine which level of youth partnership is most appropriate for any given SRTS activity, and assess organizational capacity to meet those needs. Aim for the highest level of the ladder: youth-initiated with shared decisions with adults. However, it is important to be realistic about the project’s timeline and staff capacity; authentic engagement takes time and youth may be better supported by some SRTS practitioner-led activities.
- **Develop and communicate a clear work plan and shared expectations with youth.** While youth should lead the vision and brainstorm activities, it can be helpful for SRTS practitioners to provide clear structures for students. Consider the learning environment in public schools—most students have a clear curriculum of deadlines, expectations, and support available to them. This same consideration should be given when determining the potential for youth partnership.
- **Set realistic expectations in working with youth.** Young people are at the early stages of learning how to operate in professional settings and have

many demands on their time. Youth-produced or youth-led deliverables will not look the same as those developed by professionals with industry experience. SRTS practitioners need to adjust their approach based upon age group as well. Expectations for high school youth will be more involved than for younger youth.

- **Partner with statewide youth leadership.** Minnesota is home to many youth-led initiatives that amplify young people’s power to make systemic change. Invest in building connections with these groups; their young leaders will provide insight for MnSRTS when creating pathways for student partnership and can partner on SRTS efforts. Potential Youth Leadership Partners include:
 - + [Minnesota Youth Council](#)
 - + [Twin Cities Bridgemakers](#)
 - + [YEA! MN \(MN Youth Environmental Activists\)](#)
 - + [St. Paul Youth Services’ YouthPowerMN](#)

RECOMMENDATION 2: COMMUNICATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS AND RELATED EFFORTS

WHAT WE HEARD

When creating pathways for students to engage with SRTS, it is critical for them to be aware of the opportunities. This requires SRTS practitioners being connected to communities outside of the usual transportation professional networks. Connecting with state, school district, and local community youth-centered organizations will allow SRTS practitioners to reach students through avenues with established relationships.

Messaging and framing around SRTS opportunities is key. Students should be informed about existing programs and resources that support SRTS initiatives, the processes that currently exist for SRTS, and (most importantly) how students can be involved with creating change. Be careful about not tokenizing young people; being upfront and realistic about the impact of student involvement in SRTS builds trust and comfort with youth partners, and provides them the opportunity to celebrate milestones in long-term work.

With a myriad of issues facing students today, it is important to draw explicit connections between active transportation and other issues that are at the forefront of youth's minds. The most critical issues shared in our focus groups were equitable access, climate change and environmental sustainability, and mental and physical health. As previously mentioned, it is essential to tailor messaging and approaches to address the lived experiences of youth partners.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Partner with youth-serving organizations in Minnesota:** Working with organizations that are in direct service to students will be helpful in sharing information and opportunities for youth to engage in SRTS. Potential youth-serving organizational partners include:

Potential Youth Serving Organizational Partners:

- + [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#)
- + [YMCA/YWCA](#)
- + [Ignite Afterschool](#)
- + [Full Cycle](#)
- + [Our Streets Minneapolis](#)

- **Partner with youth leadership and youth-serving organizations in Minnesota that prioritize equity, climate change, and mental/physical health:** Invest in building connections with groups that are working on issues that youth care about and make connections to SRTS. Convene conversations with involved youth about their transportation concerns and opportunities they identify, to connect SRTS strategies with youth experiences. See prior recommendations for a list of potential partners.
- **Promote and communicate plans and planning processes** in a way that is accessible to youth, to promote youth involvement and input in planning processes. Additionally, SRTS practitioners should also promote and communicate how SRTS is a climate change issue, an equity issue, and a mental and physical health issue. Specific actions may include:
 - + Provide native web materials (plans, guides, resources, etc. in HTML) instead of static PDFs that do not dynamically format to a viewer's device on the redesigned MnSRTS website and on local communities' websites.



- + Use social media to promote opportunities to engage with SRTS and related planning processes.
- + Utilize engaging ways to communicate plans and planning processes such as through video, graphic novels, illustrations, etc. Highlight youth voices telling their own stories through these media.

Examples: *City of Charlotte* [Charlotte Future 2040 planning process](#) (Charlotte, NC); *City of Toronto* [Youth Engagement Strategy](#) (Toronto, ON); *MTC* [Spare the Air Youth Plan Bay Area 2050 Youth Video Challenge](#) (San Francisco Region, CA)

- **Connect youth to SRTS resources** via communication channels where youth have a greater presence. Youth are easily connected to SRTS resources via a text line or other similar communication tool.

Example: *YODurham* [Text Line for Young People](#) (Durham, NC)

RECOMMENDATION 3: CREATE AVENUES FOR ONGOING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN SRTS

WHAT WE HEARD

SRTS practitioners and school districts should invest in pathways for continued student involvement in SRTS. This allows youth to see the importance of their perspective and to build upon the work of their predecessors, while allowing SRTS/MNDOT to be agile in responding to new challenges and opportunities.

Examples shared by focus group participants speak to institutionalizing the SRTS-student relationship at the district level by incorporating SRTS planning into school curriculum, and working with students serving on their school boards.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Create a SRTS Youth Advisory Board/Commission/Council** to contribute to discussions of statewide resource allocation, youth priorities, and potential opportunities. The goal is for youth to have representation within all related planning processes through a representative body such as a board, commission, or council.

Examples: [Youth Move MN](#) (MN); [Minnesota Youth Council](#) (MN); [Minneapolis Youth Congress](#) (Minneapolis, MN); [Alameda County SRTS Youth Task Force](#) (Alameda County, CA); [MN Dept of Public Safety Juvenile Justice Advisory Council](#) (MN)

- **Integrate SRTS planning into school curricula** to educate students about planning processes. School curricula can connect students to SRTS-related projects with government agencies, teaching them about government and involving them in advocating for improvements that benefit their lives.

Examples: *Classroom presentations and discussions during MnSRTS Rapid Planning Workshops*; [Community Planning Presentation](#) (East Central Wisconsin SRTS); [Design Your Neighborhood](#) (Nashville, TN); [Y-Plan](#) (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act Now) (various places); [Youth Engagement and Action for Health](#) (YEAH!) (various places); [YPAR](#) (Youth-led Participatory Action Research) (various places)

- **Partner with youth on planning processes** by connecting youth with government agencies in SRTS-related planning processes. SRTS practitioners should partner with youth as leaders and stakeholders in all SRTS planning processes and activities, including SRTS Planning Assistance grants and SRTS Demonstration Project grants. Specific actions include:

- + Invite youth to participate as stakeholders on local SRTS teams for Planning Assistance and Demonstration Project grants and should be compensated for their time and expertise.
- + Design (in collaboration with youth) and fund new activities that prioritize youth input and respond to youth-identified needs. For example, SRTS practitioners could work with existing youth-serving workforce readiness organizations and active transportation professionals to design an applied training series focused on active transportation planning and engineering, with youth completing a capstone project such as leading a walk audit of their residential or school neighborhood or designing a preliminary concept for a demonstration project.

Examples: [Smart Trips Youth Initiative](#) (St. Paul, MN); [Off-Ramp Program](#) (BC, Canada); [Growing Up Boulder Youth Engagement Programs](#) (Boulder, CO); [Charlotte Future 2040 Youth Engagement Program](#) (Charlotte, NC)

- **Create a grant program and/or fund for youth-led SRTS work** that provides dedicated money, either through a grant program or fund, to youth-oriented organizations, schools, etc. This requires MnDOT and other sponsoring organizations to first work with

procurement departments to identify strategies for compensating youth for their time (see below), to contract with organizations that work with youth, and to provide contracts with the flexibility of budget and timeline to enable meaningful collaboration with youth.

Examples: [Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program](#) (MN); [MTC Spare the Air Youth high school grant program](#) (San Francisco Bay Area, CA); [Durham Youth Leadership Fund](#) (Durham, NC); [Durham Youth Listening Project](#) (Durham, NC); [Youth Service America Grants](#) (U.S.); [Tobacco Free America “Escape the Vape” Contest](#) (MN)



SPARE THE AIR YOUTH’S HIGH SCHOOL GRANT

Spare the Air Youth is a regional program that aims to educate, inspire and empower youth and families in the San Francisco Bay Area to walk, bicycle, carpool, and take transit. Spare the Air Youth’s High School Grant program funds local organizations that work with high school youth and offer leadership roles for youth to get involved in SRTS encouragement activities. Activities that have been funded through the grant include:

- Youth advisory boards
- Share the Road Education and Encouragement Campaign to address driver behaviors
- SRTS youth champions
- Youth-led encouragement events
- Bicycle repair class/ bike shop

RECOMMENDATION 4: FAIRLY COMPENSATE YOUNG PEOPLE FOR THEIR TIME

WHAT WE HEARD

Youth perspective is often solicited without compensation that fairly values youth's time and expertise. Students' perspectives and insights are invaluable to SRTS, and fair compensation is one of the largest barriers to sustaining youth participation in active transportation work. Paying youth for their labor also communicates that SRTS practitioners understand the value of youth's contributions and can mitigate potential equity-related barriers to participation.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Require MnSRTS planning assistance grant recipients to include paid youth.** Each planning assistance grant ideally should include stipends (\$1,000+ each) for at least two youth to participate on the local stakeholder planning team. Grant awards should be contingent on youth inclusion in the planning effort; applications could receive maximum points based on youth involvement in the local stakeholder team or fewer points for youth-specific pop-up events, classroom presentations, or other youth involvement.
- **Pay youth to participate in MnSRTS demonstration projects.** Each demonstration project grant should ideally include stipends (\$300+ each) for at least two youth to participate on the local stakeholder planning team. Grant awards should be contingent on youth inclusion in the planning effort; applications could receive maximum points based on youth involvement in the local stakeholder team or fewer points for youth-specific pop-up events, classroom presentations, or other youth involvement.
- **Fund part-time youth SRTS coordinators.** In 2020, MnSRTS piloted a project to fund SRTS coordinators in multiple jurisdictions across the state to work in collaboration with full-time coordinators. This approach could differ depending on local contexts and could either entail a limited number (one to three) of youth coordinators with more substantial commitments (e.g., three to five hours per week) or a larger number of youth staff with less frequent obligations, e.g., ten youth who comprise a SRTS planning commission and provide direction to the full-time coordinator's work. Summer internships offer a flexible alternative for students who may not be able to get involved during the school year.
- **Open an annual, competitive SRTS grant opportunity for youth-led organizations** that work to make transportation, housing, land use, school siting, or school assignment policy-making better support MnSRTS's vision. The grant application should have clear, simple requirements, and ensure that grant evaluation criteria map to MnSRTS's vision and goals by prioritizing applications that reflect broad youth leadership and emphasize inclusion of youth from priority equity groups. This will require evaluating procurement mechanisms to minimize paperwork and enable more youth-serving organizations to apply.





Conclusion

As MnSRTS and SRTS practitioners across Minnesota continue to work to develop lasting partnerships with and for youth, there are a few core strategies that can be relatively quickly and easily implemented to enable other longer-term changes. These next steps include:

- Formalize stipends for youth
- Simplify procurement
- Integrate recommendations into Planning Assistance applications
- Review existing communication tools and create a strategy to expand communication tools based upon the recommendations in this document
- Continue conversations with youth organizations

Examples from across the country of successful partnerships with youth demonstrate that thoughtful and meaningful collaborations can produce impactful changes, both in the world of active transportation and in other domains. By adopting the principles and strategies identified by youth and described in this document, MnSRTS and SRTS practitioners will be poised to co-create the long-lasting processes and structures needed to continue to advance the MnSRTS vision and improve the lives of young people across Minnesota.

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