

Walking, Riding, and Rolling for a New Generation

HOW TO PARTNER WITH YOUTH ON SAFE ROUTES PROJECTS



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Young people have long advocated for safe and accessible transportation. Their advocacy efforts usually begin at home. Teens might talk with their families about traveling independently as they get older. They ask permission to walk to school without adult supervision, ride transit alone, or get their driver's license. Sometimes it takes convincing to allow teens to change their travel habits, despite those habits being common rites of passage.

Talking with teens about their travel habits reveal two competing priorities: teens' desires to be independent and their parents and caregivers' desires to keep them safe. The good news is that it doesn't have to be either or. Teens should not have to sacrifice safety in order to be independent. In fact, teens care about being independent and being safe. Recent youth advocacy efforts have shown that teens can hold multiple priorities as they work to advance social change. Issues like [climate justice](#), LGBTQ+ rights, and mental health are impacting how teens live on a daily basis. Youth advocates recognize the intersectionality of these issues and craft their projects and campaigns accordingly. The movement to improve road safety for youth is no different.

Young people are interested in safe walking, biking, rolling, riding, and driving. They are developing their own traffic safety projects that expertly combine safety, independent travel, and other youth priorities. New ability to use federal funding for Safe Routes to School high school programs

can provide resources to support more youth-led safety projects. This guide offers strategies for how Safe Routes practitioners can champion youth-led safety projects like Safe Routes to School and advocacy campaigns. It also spotlights youth-led traffic safety projects from across the country.

Strategy: Let Teens Lead

Young people have their own unique skill sets and areas of expertise. One of them is being able to effectively communicate with their peers. Safe Routes practitioners who work with elementary and middle school students are often the ones implementing activities. But when you work with teens, it's best to let them lead. Not only will messages go over better if they come from someone their own age, but teens want the opportunity to lead their own projects. Here is how students and young adults in Atlanta, the Bay Area, and at a national organization are leading road safety efforts in their own communities.

ATLANTA STUDENTS ADVOCATING FOR PEDESTRIANS (ASAP)

High school students in Atlanta are working to make it safer for young people to walk and roll in their neighborhoods. Atlanta Students Advocating for Pedestrians (ASAP) was created in 2016 after the [death of a student at Grady High School](#). The student was struck and killed by a car while riding her bike through an intersection after school. The student was trying to navigate a four-way intersection with a number of blind spots. Her classmates sprung to action and created ASAP to raise awareness about bike and pedestrian safety and advocate for safer road design.

Following the death of their classmate, ASAP advocated for a [pedestrian scramble](#) and a [hot signal](#) at the dangerous intersection. They have gone on to work alongside elected officials and collaborate with local organizations like PropelATL, the city's bike and pedestrian coalition. ASAP also supported a city Safe Routes to School tactical urbanism project that installed a walking and biking lane at a local middle school. They promoted the opening of the walking and biking lane and offered bike repair services to students. ASAP shows that swift change can save lives and that students are essential partners in safety.

ALAMEDA COUNTY SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

[Alameda County Safe Routes to School](#) has been implementing high school programs in the Northern California Bay Area for over a decade. Their approach to working with high school students is what makes their program so successful. Safe Routes to School coordinators in Alameda County understand that students want to travel around their communities independently and that they want to lead their own projects. In order to do this, students need to learn basic school travel skills, including how to use transit, and they need resources to implement their own activities.

Alameda Safe Routes to School includes travel training as part of their high school program offerings. Students learn how get a transit pass and how to use transit independently. In this [Wheels Bus Ride Guide](#), students from Dublin High School created a video to show other students how to use the local bus. Students can also learn about safe railroad crossings as part of the travel training program.



Strong school partnerships also contribute to the success of this program. Alameda County has dedicated high school program coordinators to maintain on-campus connections. They find opportunities to integrate Safe Routes to School into content area curricula like talking about lowering car emissions in the context of Environmental Science. Students can learn how their transportation choices impact the environment. Coordinators also provide students materials to implement their own Safe Routes to School activities like the Golden Sneaker Contest and a youth task force focused on climate change. [Read more](#) about how Alameda County Safe Routes to School is supporting young people to be confident, independent travelers.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS FOR YOUTH SAFETY (NOYS)

[National Organizations for Youth Safety \(NOYS\)](#) believes in the power of young people. NOYS works to position youth to advocate for social and political changes to improve safety. Access to safe and equitable transportation is a priority advocacy area. NOYS supports a broad coalition of partners working to improve road safety for young people, including Safe Routes to School programs. NOYS also has several initiatives aimed at uplifting young people most impacted by traffic violence. Their programs for Black youth, Indigenous youth, and youth of color show a commitment to advancing equity in road safety programs.

Strategy: Connect to What Teens Care About

Young people are facing a number of issues that impact their safety and well-being – and they are speaking out about it. Some of today's most powerful social movements are being led by young people. Issues like climate justice, gun violence, and LGBTQ+ rights have galvanized youth across the country to take action and demand change from lawmakers. When it comes to traffic safety, we must frame it in context of a larger movement to build a safer and more equitable society. Here is how high school students in small towns and rural communities are tackling multiple issues in their traffic safety initiatives.

CLIMATE ACTION PATHWAYS FOR SCHOOLS: PORTERVILLE, CALIFORNIA

Located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Porterville is a gateway to a number of natural resources. Yet, residents face barriers to accessing water, energy, and safe active transportation. Lack of walking and rolling infrastructure makes it nearly impossible for students to travel to school without driving. High school students participating in the Climate Action Pathways for Schools program wanted to take a deeper look at how climate and sustainability challenges are impacting school travel. Their goal was to make the case for developing a Safe Routes to School program and investing active transportation infrastructure.

The students conducted walk audits around elementary school campuses to better understand the barriers to safe walking and biking. They also surveyed parents, caregivers, and school staff about sustainability challenges and the types of improvements they would like to prioritize. Transportation was listed as a sustainability category because it is the second highest emissions generator for Porterville Unified School District behind buildings. Many parents and caregivers do not feel comfortable letting their kids walk and bike due to the lack of infrastructure, so most students travel by car or bus. The high school students wanted to make the case that by investing in active transportation infrastructure, students would be able to walk and roll to school and it would lower car emissions. They compiled their findings in a climate and sustainability report to present to City officials. The students also used their survey findings to show support for an official Safe Routes to School program.

RAINBOW CROSSWALKS: ELLSWORTH, MAINE AND WEYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS

High school students in two New England towns are using asphalt art to show support for the LGBTQ+ community. When students in Ellsworth, Maine wanted to paint a rainbow crosswalk on Main Street, they were met with [resistance from City Council](#). Ellsworth High School's Gender and Sexuality Diversity Alliance (GSDA) wanted to celebrate Pride during the pandemic and a rainbow crosswalk seemed to be a safe option. City Council initially rejected the students' request to paint the crosswalk. Objectors to the crosswalk raised safety concerns about turning a crosswalk into a piece of art. Some students believed that safety was not the main concern, but rather certain decision-makers did not want a crosswalk celebrating LGBTQ+ individuals. The GSDA turned to school staff, fellow students, local business owners, and community members to advocate for the crosswalk and ultimately got Council approval. Ellsworth has gone on to paint crosswalks at the high school and middle school and has hosted a number of Pride events across the community.

Another student group in Weymouth, Massachusetts wanted to create a visible display of pride on their campus. The Weymouth High School Human Rights Coalition teamed up with the Black Student Union to drum up support for a [rainbow crosswalk](#) celebrate Pride Month. Hundreds of students signed the petition for the project which was ultimately approved by the superintendent. School staff advised students on the permitting and painting process. They wanted the students to feel empowered to do the job themselves since the project was their idea. Students successfully painted the crosswalk in front of the school, making it one of many Pride month celebrations in Weymouth.

For more information on the safety of asphalt art, check out the [Bloomberg Philanthropies Asphalt Art Safety Study](#).



Tip: Partner with Driver's Education Programs

Teens want multimodal transportation options, including the option to travel by car. [Despite declining rates of youth getting their driver's license](#), teens are still driving. For some young people, especially those living in rural communities and small towns, driving is a necessity. For other teens, they might drive to a destination then elect to walk, bike, or roll the rest of the way. No matter the mode, teens want to feel safe and confident navigating the road.

Safe Routes programs can partner with driver's education programs to provide supplemental bike and pedestrian safety education. While car crashes are the [leading cause of death among teens in the U.S.](#), teens also want to stay safe while walking, biking, and rolling. A comprehensive road safety education program will allow teens to develop a range of safe behaviors whether they are driving or using active transportation. Reach out to your local driver's education programs to explore partnership opportunities. You can also ask teens for input on what bike and pedestrian safety skills they would like incorporate into driver's education programs. By addressing multimodal safety education, young people can develop all the necessary skills to travel safely and independently.

Students put in the effort to expertly craft videos using digital animation, special effects, editing software, and even original music, all in the name of safety.

The County also launched a [Vision Zero Youth Ambassadors program](#) for high school students who want to make a deeper impact on road safety. Participating students learn about the Vision Zero movement and raise awareness in the wider community. The [2022 cohort](#) developed Vision Zero educational materials, created a walk audit plan, and designed a survey to gather feedback on how students feel about road safety. Students also [speak about Vision Zero to local media outlets](#) and highlight the Heads Up, Phones Down contest as a popular initiative. Montgomery County shows that young people can be effective messages both online and on the ground.

Strategy: Go Digital

Young people are a digital generation. Technology and digital media influence how they engage with their peers, their communities, and the wider world. Through the touch of a phone screen, they can find a scooter, report a crack in the sidewalk, or broadcast a Vision Zero call to action to thousands of followers. If we want to engage teens, we must embrace technology. Check out how two Safe Routes to School programs and one public library are going digital on youth engagement.

HEADS UP, PHONES DOWN: MONTGOMERY COUNTY SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Students in Montgomery County, Maryland look forward to the [Heads Up, Phones Down Video Contest](#) every year. The contest is part of the county's Vision Zero initiative and Safe Routes to School program. Each year, high school students are invited to make a 30-second video encouraging safe driving, walking, and biking. The goal is to reduce distracted driving and save more lives on county roadways. The contest receives hundreds of applications as students vie for highly coveted prizes including Apple products, gift cards, and service learning hours. But the prizes are not the main draw.





MARKHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY TRAIL PROJECT: MARKHAM, ONTARIO, CANADA

Markham Public Library in Ontario, Canada embarked on an [innovative project](#) to celebrate local history and ecology. The library received a [placemaking grant](#) to connect residents and visitors to Markham's main streets. Local students [developed an app](#) to digitally animate trails with historical markers. App users are able to explore local and natural history as they walk and roll along Markham's Rogue Trail System. Library staff provide the audio that guides users along the trail. The student developers were key project contributors, helping to improve trail access and boost engagement with Markham's local destinations.

Conclusion

Young people are essential partners in road safety. When we give them the resources to lead their own projects, frame road safety in the context of other social issues, and utilize technology as an effective engagement tool, we create an environment where youth feel empowered to make change in their communities. New investments in high school Safe Routes to School programs show the growing need for youth leadership in this space. Let's work to make it easier for young people to make their mark.

MASSACHUSETTS SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL AND MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

High school students across Massachusetts are tackling road safety from all angles. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation's (MassDOT) popular [Safe Streets Smart Trips Statewide High School Video Contest](#) encourages teens make videos that demonstrate safe walking, rolling, and driving behaviors. The contest also acknowledges that while technology can be used to spread safety messages, technology can also [cause of distracted driving](#). Teaching teens how to safely use technology without disparaging their favorite apps is a delicate balance. Allowing teens to create their own educational materials ensures that the messaging strikes the right tone for younger audiences.

Massachusetts Safe Routes to School is inspiring high school campuses to go car-free. [Car-Free Campus Day](#) ask high schools to select a day in April, May, or June to go car-free and encourage people to walk, bike, roll, ride the bus, or use transit to travel to school. They provide schools with a [helpful tip sheet](#) and social media graphics to promote the event. Even though teens are capable to creating their own social media posts, it never hurts to provide a few pre-designed graphics that students and community members can use. Car-Free Campus Day is also another example of Safe Routes to School programs using climate justice engage high school students. A climate initiative plus digital engagement is a winning combo!

