



Safe Routes  
to School  
**National  
Partnership**

## **Rural Communities: Best Practices and Promising Approaches for Safe Routes**



### **Safe Routes to School programs can succeed in rural areas.**

But ensuring that schoolchildren can get the benefits of walking and bicycling to school in rural communities requires dealing with some challenges and barriers that may be different than in other areas. This tipsheet delves into these issues. It describes the needs for and benefits of Safe Routes to School in rural areas, explores the challenges that may arise, spells out specific approaches that show promise, and showcases successful rural examples.



## High Need for Safe Routes to School in Rural Areas

Rural communities have a special need for the benefits of Safe Routes to School and for improved walkable and bikeable features. This is because rural communities have particularly high obesity rates for children and adults, high injury and fatality rates from collisions, and poorer infrastructure for safe and convenient walking and bicycling.

### Key Facts

While rates of obesity are high for all American children, they are even higher in rural communities, with **40-50 percent of rural children overweight or obese**. Rural children are 25 percent more likely to be overweight than urban children.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Rural children and adults have higher levels of **physical inactivity**.<sup>4,5</sup>

Small towns and rural areas often have a particular **lack of safe walking conditions**, like sidewalks, lighting, and crosswalks.<sup>7</sup>

Rural regions often have **higher rates of injuries and fatalities** from traffic collisions.<sup>6</sup>

**High speed roads** and highways that divide communities, a common feature in rural communities, add particular danger for people walking and bicycling.

1.6 million rural households **do not have access to cars**,<sup>8</sup> and rural communities generally have high rates of poverty,<sup>9</sup> creating a heightened need for safe walking and bicycling options.

**Safe Routes to School initiatives can address many of these challenges.**

They increase physical activity for students, reducing childhood obesity levels and improving fitness and physical activity. Safe Routes to School programming and infrastructure improvements increase safety for students who walk and ride bicycles and for other community members as well. In addition, providing transportation options allows rural families to better manage their budgets; transportation is the largest expense for American families after housing<sup>10</sup> and rural residents have lower incomes on average than city dwellers.<sup>11</sup> Safe Routes to School initiatives have the potential to bring much needed funds and infrastructure improvements to rural areas. In fact, of all schools that have received federal Safe Routes to School funds, 41% are in small towns or rural areas and 23% are low-income schools.<sup>12</sup>

By advancing Safe Routes to School in rural areas, the trip to school will become safer for children, with economic, environmental and health benefits for the entire community.

## Connecting Schools and Community in Lawrence County, Tennessee

In Lawrence County, Tennessee, approximately seventy-five miles south of Nashville, students couldn't walk from South Lawrence Elementary School to nearby Loretto High School. Although the schools were located less than half a mile apart on the same street, there was no sidewalk and no safe way to travel on the busy, narrow road, lined by trees, cornfields, and homes. Students, teachers and families found it frustrating, time consuming, and costly to have to drive or take the bus the short distance from the elementary school to events at the high school.

But when South Lawrence Elementary School's principal learned about funding available through the federal Safe Routes to School Program, he saw an opportunity to address the situation.

After successfully winning a grant, a sidewalk was built along the street between the schools. Students can walk to and from school and to events, and athletic teams use the sidewalk to practice and warm up before sports competitions. The connection between the schools not only allows students to safely walk, but also benefits the community more broadly.



A senior center and assisted living facility sit in between the two schools, and residents use the sidewalks to access school grounds and walk there for exercise. Young students, elderly neighbors, and other community members regularly use the sidewalks to get around and get exercise. The sidewalk has created a pedestrian friendly campus that increases the interconnectivity of the schools and the sense of community in the area.

## A Variety of Obstacles

People working to increase walking and bicycling and physical activity for children in rural areas know well the different obstacles that emerge in these environments. While many of these challenges also exist in other areas, they can be more pronounced in rural areas, and may cumulatively create some serious obstacles.

### Long distances

One of the biggest challenges for active transportation in rural areas is the fact that many trips involve very long distances. Although distance is one of the biggest barriers to children walking and bicycling to school in the United States as a whole, the distances can be much further in rural areas. In addition, a higher percentage of children are likely to live very far from school. This challenge has been worsened by the decades-long trend of closing small rural schools and school districts in the name of cost savings and of improved educational offerings.<sup>13</sup>

### High speeds and few sidewalks

Related to these challenges is the problem of high speeds on many rural roads and highways. Because drivers often perceive rural roads as having low traffic and going through sparsely populated areas, they may drive dangerously fast. Particularly when combined with the scarcity of sidewalks or bicycle lanes, these high speeds increase the likelihood of hitting a child who is walking or bicycling, and also increase the severity of injuries if such a collision takes place. Moreover, some rural communities are resistant to sidewalks, which they perceive as suburban, despite the substantial benefits that sidewalks provide for the safety of people walking or bicycling.

### County highways bisecting towns

Even for children who live near rural schools, there may be obstacles. Because many small rural towns are bisected by county highways, children may face a perilous trip to school if they live on one side but attend school on the other side. Drivers on rural highways often do not slow down adequately when passing through towns, creating hazards for children and others people walking and bicycling.<sup>14</sup>



### Schools off highways

Another common phenomenon involves schools that are located on highway exits. While these locations make sense to accommodate parents or buses that are driving from far away, they can make it very difficult to find a safe, child friendly route to approach the school on foot or bicycle.

### Staff playing many roles and spread thin

Another set of challenges relates to the limited agency staff available to advocate for improvements, seek funding, or run programs. In larger urban and suburban communities, cities and towns may have dozens of staff in their planning and transportation departments, with specialized staff who have expertise in comprehensive planning, bicycle and pedestrian issues, the latest trends in transportation engineering, and the like. But in many rural areas, staff wear many hats. They are stretched very thin, and may find it very challenging to add new responsibilities, find extra time to seek funding for new programs or infrastructure, and may have less ability to stay up to date on new trends in land use planning, active school travel, or the like.

### Financial constraints

In addition to limited staff, rural areas may have limited sources of revenue, and may need to spread funding from state or federal sources over large areas. Rural regions do well per capita in accessing federal Safe Routes to School funds, with 41% of such funds going to projects in small towns or rural areas and 23% in low-income schools.<sup>15</sup> But these funds still go only a limited way in addressing the challenges of maintaining and upgrading hundreds of miles of rural roads.

### Dogs

An additional challenge for children walking in some rural areas is the danger posed by aggressive dogs. Unattended dogs have been identified as a barrier to physical activity, and lower income individuals report a significantly greater exposure to unattended dogs than upper income individuals.<sup>16</sup> In one study, 40-50% of rural respondents indicated that unattended dogs were a moderate to substantial problem in their neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup>

### Association of biking and walking with poverty

A final challenge is the association of bicycling and walking with poverty in many rural areas. This can be a challenge in many parts of the country, but is particularly pronounced in higher poverty areas, where often when people walk or bicycle it is from need, not choice, due to the heavy financial burden of car ownership, gas, or maintenance. As a result, many families view driving their children to school as a badge of honor, a declaration that they are wealthy enough to afford to drive, creating another barrier to overcome in trying to make walking and bicycling appealing and desirable.

## Many Strengths

These challenges noted above should certainly not be underestimated. And yet, there are many creative solutions that have been developed to work around and overcome them, and many successful stories of Safe Routes to School in rural areas.

Part of what enables rural communities to successfully move forward with Safe Routes to School programs is the fact that while rural communities experience specific challenges, they also have a number of advantages over many urban and suburban communities. In many rural communities, schools already serve as centers of community life. This role as a community focal point can mean that



residents are more easily persuaded that it is worth investing in the school environment, and that they see benefits for everyone in the community from doing so. In rural communities, people are more likely to know each other, and it can be much easier for an impassioned advocate to access and convince decisionmakers to consider a new initiative or new investment in Safe Routes to School. Additionally, although rural agencies may not have the amount of staffing to allow deep specialization, the fact that people are accustomed to playing many roles regardless of their professional training can encourage

a plucky can do attitude that benefits Safe Routes to School efforts, which often don't fit tidily into any one existing job description.

Moreover, although some rural roads pose particular hazards, other rural roads have low traffic and peaceful conditions that can make them ideal for walking and bicycling. In some ways, rural communities are better poised to improve conditions for walking and bicycling. For instance, in rural communities nearly 40 percent of overall trips are less than three miles, while half of those trips are less than a mile.<sup>18</sup>

## Policy and Practice in Winton, California



Winton is a small mostly Latino rural town of 10,000 residents in California's Central Valley. With four schools located within a few miles of each other, parents and community members were frustrated about the congestion when schools released students at the end of the day. Parents wanted to be able to walk or bicycle to school with their children, but a lack of sidewalks and support made it feel unsafe. "We needed a way to promote safety in the community and build awareness and support for walking and bicycling to school," explained Kristi Boesch, an administrator on special assignment working for the Winton School District.

The Winton School District and Merced Bicycle Coalition partnered to host bike rodeos, provide safety education, and encourage bicycling and walking to school through events and contests. The schools held walk to school days and gave away bicycles. With momentum building around bicycling and walking, Stephanie Nathan, a supervising health educator at the Merced County Department of Public Health, realized that they had a great opportunity to support and sustain the interest in bicycling and walking by establishing a supportive district policy. Stephanie turned to a build-your-own school district policy tool created by Safe Routes to School National Partnership and ChangeLab Solutions, which walks users through a series of policy options to help build a customized Safe Routes to School policy.

With the tool, Stephanie quickly put together a strong policy tailored for local needs. "The tool made my job a lot easier," Stephanie said. "It was helpful to see options for certain categories based on how strong the policy language was – that helped me gauge what our district was ready for."

With the passage of the policy, the district saw increasing excitement building around walking, bicycling and Safe Routes to School. "Safe Routes to School is something we're going to continue to support because we want to promote safety and healthy lifestyles," said Kristi.

## Promising Activities for Rural Safe Routes to School Programs

So how do Safe Routes to School proponents in rural areas successfully advance walking and bicycling to school? As with other Safe Routes to School programs, rural advocates may want to cultivate success and build momentum by starting with schools where conditions are easiest. Proponents can encourage students who live within a mile of school to walk or bicycle, help to identify the safest routes, host walk to school day events, and organize adult volunteers to accompany students in walking school buses. But if only a few students live within a mile of school, or if walking and bicycling routes to school are dangerous due to some of the obstacles described above, then it may be time to explore some of the innovations that rural communities have developed.

### Remote drop offs

Remote drop off programs, also known as “walk on in” programs, were developed to help increase walking and physical activity opportunities for students who live a long way from school. In a remote drop off program, children are driven most of the way to school, but are then dropped off a short distance from school so they can walk the remainder of the way. A remote drop off site may be a park, a parking lot, a church, or anywhere else where students can be easily dropped off, can safely congregate, and can follow a relatively safe route to the school. Once children are dropped off, they may be accompanied to school by a school bus driver, teacher, or adult volunteer, or may walk on their own, depending on their age and how the program is structured.<sup>19</sup>

How far should a remote drop off site be from school? That may depend on where an appropriate site is located, but remote drop off sites are ideally around a quarter mile or half mile from school, so that kids get a decent amount of physical activity. Some remote drop off sites may only be a few blocks from the school. Although such short distances may not add a lot of physical activity to kids’ days, it gets them moving, helps instill walking as a habit and a way to get around, and decreases traffic congestion, injury dangers, and air pollution near schools.



Remote drop off locations are often used as drop off sites for children who are driven by their parents. Where school districts are on board, some school transportation departments have school buses drop students off at remote drop off sites.

### Walk to school bus stops

A program focused on walking to school bus stops addresses the other end of school travel journey from a remote drop off program. The key to these programs is using walking, walking school buses, and perhaps even bicycling to incorporate physical activity into students’ school travel on the way to the school bus stop. These programs can be popular with school transportation departments, since they may require fewer stops by the bus and more children boarding at each stop, which often speeds up bus routes and simplifies route planning. These programs may encounter resistance from parents if they are seen as decreasing convenience, so taking time to work with parents to understand the benefits for children’s health and learning can be important to smoothing implementation.

## Digging in the Dirt in Brevard, North Carolina



Brevard is a small town with a population of around 7,600, located in

the waterfall-filled mountains of Western North Carolina. Although many of Brevard Middle School’s 600 students lived within walking distance of the school, few students were walking. The reason was clear – at the entrance to the school there was a dangerous intersection, where two state roads, a city street, and a bike path all converged. Luckily, there was will to fix the intersection, and city planning staff came up with a creative design that would move pedestrians out of the blind curve, adding crosswalks, curb and gutter, sidewalk extensions, and wheelchair ramps. All of these improvements could be accomplished in existing city and state rights-of-way. But there was a problem. The construction had the potential to damage adjacent landscape plantings on private property.

As staffer Sarah Lutz pointed out, whether the outcome of a project is good or bad, “In a small town, people remember you for a really long time.” Sarah met with the landowners, two elderly women who had spent many years establishing landscaping and plantings, and together they landed on a solution. Sarah went to each property and moved the plants and landscaping materials herself, ensuring that they would not be damaged and diffusing fears about property damage. The project also used public works staff to do most of the construction work, creating a lower-cost solution and giving city staff the chance to do a publicly recognized project that was welcomed by the community. In fall of 2014, city staff held their first bike rodeo at Brevard Middle School and organized a weekly walk to school day. By taking these extra steps to find creative, hands-on solutions, Brevard created a safer walking environment for their students with strong public support.

## Frequent walker programs

Where few children live near school and other approaches to increasing walking and bicycling may have had limited success, frequent walker programs can instill an appreciation for walking and its health benefits in children while increasing physical activity. These programs get kids walking at school, so they do not directly address the trip to school. But their benefits can inspire students to ask to walk or bicycle to school, and they can give students many of the benefits of physical activity. One middle school that implemented this approach saw a reduction of 60-70 percent in disruptions by students within weeks of starting the program, and sustained the improvements over the entire year.



## Making walking school buses work in a rural environment

Just as in other environments, walking school buses are a great approach in rural areas. And, just as in other communities, finding and retaining good volunteers can be a challenge. Rural communities have had particular success in developing walking school buses by partnering with local senior centers or older adult communities. This pool of volunteers is often very reliable, and may derive mental and physical health benefits from assisting children in getting physical activity. In Wisconsin, another popular approach has been to engage with businesses and government agencies that are supporting worksite wellness. Some of these employers allow employees to participate in walking children to school as a worksite wellness activity, which can mean that they receive 30 minutes of pay for that time, or are able to gain points or shift their schedules as part of worksite wellness incentive programs. This has been tremendously helpful for volunteer recruitment, while improving the health of students and adults throughout the community.

## Stoplights and crossing guards for crossing state highways

As noted above, rural communities often are bisected by state highways, and children may have to cross such a street on their way to and from school. Oftentimes, drivers may not slow down sufficiently when passing through towns and populated areas.

When rural communities can show sufficient need, they may be able to convince state departments of transportation to install stop lights or stop signs to reduce the dangers to students crossing the street. Alternatively, securing a crossing guard to assist students in safely crossing the highway may go a long way toward increasing safety and alleviating parental and district concerns.

## Ensuring smart school siting

In rural communities, as in many other communities, there has been a trend over the last 30 years to place schools on the outskirts of communities, far from where most students and residents live. But when schools are moved from walkable locations to sites that are not walkable for anyone, physical activity and Safe Routes to School efforts suffer. Smart school siting is a movement to reverse that trend and encourage local decisionmakers to be thoughtful about the big picture pros and cons of school locations, instead of closing beloved local schools and defaulting to the biggest and cheapest site. Rural communities are seeing that smart school siting provides benefits for school districts – not just because students who are healthy and getting physical activity show higher academic achievement, but also because financially strapped school districts and states can avoid substantial financial costs in the form of additional busing and infrastructure costs.

## Institutionalizing Great Programs with Rural Safe Routes to School Policies

One important way to sustain and ensure the permanence of Safe Routes to School programs in rural and other areas is to include Safe Routes to School in school district policies. Two resources that may assist with these efforts include:

**[On the Move: Safe Routes to School Policies in Rural School Districts](#)**: a factsheet by ChangeLab Solutions on why and how to include Safe Routes to School in school policy to advance walking and bicycling in rural communities.

**[The Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#)**: a free online do it yourself policy builder developed by the Safe Routes to School National Partnership and ChangeLab Solutions that lets advocates and district officials design a Safe Routes to School policy that is just right for their community.

## Creating a Culture of Bicycling in Omro, Wisconsin



Omro Middle School, in Omro, Wisconsin, has developed an inspiring commitment to bicycling, embracing every opportunity to bring bicycling into

students' lives. Omro is a town of 3,500 that lies along the Fox River. Omro Middle School Principal Paul Williams and PE teacher Joe Horvath saw Safe Routes to School as a great way to increase physical activity, improve health, and get students to increase their focus and attention to school work. An early effort involved building a limestone bike and fitness trail around the school. Next, the school assembled a fleet of bicycles for students. The bicycles are used to teach skills and safety during PE class, where students practice road riding and learn to bicycle safely in all weather. The bicycle fleet is also available for students to check out for use on campus during recess or study hall. The school's fully equipped Bike Shoppe is run by its Young Mechanics program, with students learning how to maintain and repair bicycles. The school has also established an eighth grade bicycling field trip for the whole eighth grade. The event is a 25 mile day-long trip where students use their bicycling and academic skills, engage in team building exercises, and have fun getting physical activity.

These efforts have translated into student travel preferences. Despite barriers impeding the route to school in the form of the Fox River and two state highways, 23% of students now walk or bicycle to school – far higher than the national average for any size or type of community. Those trips are becoming safer with a Wisconsin Department of Transportation grant to improve sidewalks and bicycle facilities on the way to school. And the Omro Safe Routes to School program has now developed a task force and action plans for each school in the district.

## Conclusion

Despite lower overall levels of active travel to school, Safe Routes to School programs are thriving in many rural areas. By analyzing potential obstacles and making program and policy choices that help to overcome them, families and advocates can ensure that rural children get access to the benefits of walking and bicycling to school.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/childrens-health/articles/2010/04/09/child-obesity-soaring-in-rural-america>; see also Bailey-Davis L, Horst M, Hillemeier MM, Lauter A. "Obesity disparities among elementary-aged children: data from school-based BMI surveillance." *Pediatrics*. 2012 Dec;130(6):1102-9. doi: 10.1542/peds.2012-0192. Epub 2012 Nov 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors and Obesity of Rural and Urban Elementary School Children. McMurray, Robert G, et al., et al. 4, September 1999, *Journal of Rural Health*, Vol. 15, pp. 365–374.

<sup>3</sup> Lutfiyya MN, Lipsky MS, Wisdom-Behounek J, Inpanbutr-Martinkus M. Is rural residency a risk factor for overweight and obesity for U.S. children? *Obesity*. 2007;15(9):2348–2356. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1038/oby.2007.278/epdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Lutfiyya MN, Lipsky MS, Wisdom-Behounek J, Inpanbutr-Martinkus M. Is rural residency a risk factor for overweight and obesity for U.S. children? *Obesity*. 2007;15(9):2348–2356. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1038/oby.2007.278/epdf>.

<sup>5</sup> PD Patterson, CG Moore, JC Probst, JA Shinogle. Obesity and Physical Inactivity in Rural America. *The Journal of Rural Health*, Volume 20, Issue 2, pages 151–159, March 2004.

<sup>6</sup> FHWA, Highway Safety Information System, Factors Contributing to Pedestrian and Bicycle Crashes on Rural Highways, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/10052/10052.pdf> (25% of nationwide pedestrian and bicycle fatal and injury collisions occur on rural highways); see also Rural Health, "Healthcare disparities & barriers to healthcare," (2010), <http://ruralhealth.stanford.edu/health-pros/factsheets/disparities-barriers.html#sthash.BLZ6kJrZ.dpuf> (rural roads see one-third of motor vehicles collisions, but two-thirds of motor vehicles deaths).

<sup>7</sup> JB Moore, SB Jilcott, KA Shores, KR Evenson. A qualitative examination of perceived barriers and facilitators of physical activity for urban and rural youth. *Health Educ. Res.* (2010) 25 (2): 355-367. doi: 10.1093/her/cyq004.

<sup>8</sup> Dabson, Brian, Thomas G. Johnson, and Charles W. Fluharty. A RUPRI Policy Brief: Rethinking Federal Investments in Rural Transportation: Rural Considerations Regarding Reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Act. Columbia, MO: Rural Policy Research Institute, April 2011.

<sup>9</sup> CBS, "Census: U.S. Poverty Rate Spikes, Nearly 50 Million Americans Affected" November 15, 2012, <http://washington.cbslocal.com/2012/11/15/census-u-s-poverty-rate-spikes-nearly-50-million-americans-affected/>.

<sup>10</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Consumer Expenditures in 2009*. Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, September 2011. Report 1029.

<sup>11</sup> Economic Research Service. *Rural Poverty & Well-being: Income*. US Department of Agriculture. [www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/income.aspx](http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/income.aspx).

<sup>12</sup> National Center for Safe Routes to School. *Federal Safe Routes to School Program Progress Report*. August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> C. Howley, J. Johnson, & J. Petrie, Consolidation of Schools and Districts: What the Research Says and What It Means, National Education Policy Center (2011), <http://www.bricker.com/documents/resources/local/nepc.pdf>; see also S. Redding and H. Walberg, Promoting Learning in Rural Schools (2012) [http://www.adi.org/about/downloads/Promoting\\_Learning\\_in\\_Rural\\_Schools.pdf](http://www.adi.org/about/downloads/Promoting_Learning_in_Rural_Schools.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Hallmark, Shauna, Eric Fitzsimmons, David Plazak, Tom Michael Welch, and Eric Petersen. "Use of Physical Devices for Calming Traffic Along Major Roads through Small Rural Communities in Iowa." *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 2078 (January 16, 2009): 100-107.

<sup>15</sup> National Center for Safe Routes to School. *Federal Safe Routes to School Program Progress Report*. August 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Brownson, R. C., Baker, E. A., Housemann, R. A., Brennan, L. K., & Bacak, S. J. (2001). Environmental and Policy Determinants of Physical Activity in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(12), 1995–2003.

<sup>17</sup> Sara Wilcox, Melissa Bopp, Larissa Oberrecht, Sandra K. Kammermann, and Charles T. McElmurray, "Psychosocial and Perceived Environmental Correlates of Physical Activity in Rural and Older African American and White Women," *Journal of Gerontology: PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES*, 2003, Vol. 58B, No. 6, P329–P337.

<sup>18</sup> Rails to Trails Conservancy. *Beyond Urban Centers*. January, 2012. [www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/ourWork/reports/BeyondUrbanCentersReport.pdf](http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/ourWork/reports/BeyondUrbanCentersReport.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> The following factsheet explores some legal and policy considerations in designing remote drop off programs in California, and may have lessons that are applicable more broadly. ChangeLab Solutions, *Get Out & Get Moving: Opportunities to Walk to School through Remote Drop-Off Programs*, [http://changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/SRTS-Remote-Drop-Off-Rural\\_School\\_Districts-FINAL\\_20140611.pdf](http://changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/SRTS-Remote-Drop-Off-Rural_School_Districts-FINAL_20140611.pdf).