

Introduction to Safe Routes to School

Over the past two decades, Safe Routes to School projects and programs have grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and rolling to school has attracted great interest from leaders and decision-makers at the local, regional, state and federal levels.

As such, Safe Routes to School practitioners have been expanding their efforts to encompass policy, systems, and environmental changes in their work. While there is federal, and sometimes state, support for Safe Routes to School, projects and programs are implemented at the local level – in neighborhoods and with schools. The student transportation department is one ally that can help advance efforts to support transportation options for students that include walking and rolling.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer to Understanding the Role of Local Elected Officials



There are many opportunities for local elected officials to improve walking and rolling conditions in their communities by allocating funding streams or adopting supportive policies. This action brief is designed to provide the Safe Routes to School practitioner with the basic tools to determine the priorities of their local elected officials and understand how to further educate them on opportunities to improve walking and rolling at the local level. A companion document, [Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Local Elected Officials](#), focuses on informing these decision-makers about the benefits of Safe Routes to School while sharing best practices in local level decisions, programs, and funding.

Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of Local Elected Officials

Cities, towns, and counties hold regular elections in order to choose officials for both their legislative and executive branches. Your local elected officials (including the mayor, city council members and county commissioners) are in office for as long as state law dictates. While highly dependent on the locale, local elected officials may prioritize encouraging economic development, effectively addressing transportation and land use needs as well as improving health, safety and education. Fortunately, all of these priorities dovetail with the benefits of Safe Routes to School.



Before engaging in a conversation with local elected officials (or, in many cases, engaging appointed officials with the same, useful strategies) around Safe Routes to School, it is wise to understand how much influence these leaders are capable of exerting and what they have identified as important goals for the community.

Therefore, the Safe Routes to School practitioner working to educate local leaders should ensure that problems and solutions are scaled to the capability of the local elected official and include actionable items that they can influence. For example, the Mayor is the official head of the city, executing official documents, appointing staff, serving as an ambassador to important visitors, giving formal talks and exerting their leadership over city affairs. A city councilperson, however, while there is some overlap with the mayor, legislates for the city, directs enforcement of ordinances, transacts city business, manages financial operations, conducts intergovernmental affairs and protects the welfare of the citizens. Elected officials receive innumerable requests; any issue brought to them—including walking and rolling—likely has an opposing point of view. It is valuable to understand the viewpoints of opposing groups and be prepared to address any talking points they may have.

Local elected officials have their own publicly stated priorities and decision-making record, which may reflect or predict their stance on investments in walking and rolling. These are usually available on the city or county website. Local elected officials frequently work with their personal staff, including those with a focus on public works, parks and recreation, environmental health, planning and development, economic development, sustainability, education and safety, to make important decisions. The personal staff can heavily influence their local elected officials and can be a good starting place for practitioners.

Understanding the Capacity and Limitations of Local Elected Officials

Ultimately, local elected officials must balance the competing interests of their colleagues, their constituency and recommendations from their own staff. An educated practitioner will consider the current capacity and limitations - including limited local funds - of their local leaders in advancing Safe Routes to School.

As previously mentioned, Safe Routes to School priorities can affect multiple arms of a local government including safety, transportation, health, sustainability, education and more. Each of these departments has the ability to affect policies, systems and environmental changes that support walking and rolling to school and in daily life and can be heavily influenced by the opinions of local elected officials. Local elected officials can be constrained by politics, local or regional directives, state law, federal law, funding and associated guidance. For example, existing developer agreements or zoning requirements could dictate that sidewalks need not be installed, making it difficult to retroactively require a developer to do so.

Additionally, local elected officials have the opportunity to initiate advisory or local project selection committees and coalitions to address specific issues such as health, environmental sustainability, rolling/walking and Safe Routes to School.

What You Can Do

As with most successful work, your success is predicated on your knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Use the following tips as a starting point for achieving local support for Safe Routes to School:

LEARN

- Talk to local experts and conduct research to learn about your community's record on bicycle and pedestrian projects and programs.
- Learn which office and which official makes decisions around Safe Routes to School. Additionally, understand which committees, staff or local elected officials are involved in the process of developing projects, plans and programs related to Safe Routes to School.
- Subscribe to media updates and announcements from your city, county or town to stay abreast of emerging issues.
- Find out about existing committees, coalitions and other initiatives that can influence Safe Routes to School, Complete Streets, health and related concerns.
- Identify the staff or appointed committees that advise local elected officials in the realm of transportation, land use, safety, sustainability, education, health, and other relevant sectors.

REVIEW

- Familiarize yourself with the city ordinances, guiding principles and other policies and parameters of your community.
- Research your local elected officials' priorities and record of decisions, often listed on their website. Consider how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities and use the appropriate talking points provided within this document, depending on their interests.
- Review key documents that are publicly available and posted online such as the comprehensive plan, development agreements, zoning ordinances, bicycle and pedestrian master plan and other transportation projects.
- Review relevant local government documents that are publicly available (or if not made readily available, complete a Freedom of Information Act form to access it) with regard to zoning or transportation advisory commissions. These groups often make preliminary decisions on projects and programs before they are brought to local elected officials to consider.
- Utilizing all the information you have learned and reviewed, put together a strong case for Safe Routes to School that will resonate with your audience.

CONNECT

- Develop a working relationship with the identified administrative staff and local elected officials and educate them on key points that are relevant to their stated priorities, position and authority.
- Connect with coalitions and their leaders and begin collaborating on similar goals.
- Reach out to organizations whose missions align with the outcomes of Safe Routes to School; align your messages with these organizations so your messages are stronger.
- If one exists, talk to your bicycle and pedestrian planner, Safe Routes to School coordinator, county health department leaders, and other relevant staff.

PARTICIPATE

- Inform local elected officials and their staff about the priorities of rolling, walking and Safe Routes to School. Participate in relevant committees, coalition meetings, and bicycle and pedestrian advisory councils.
- Schedule meetings with the personal staff of local elected officials, as well as with members of advisory and selection committees, to inform them of the community benefits of walking and rolling. They can keep you up to date on issues or even become vocal educators and supporters for Safe Routes to School and related issues.
- Ask your local elected officials to issue a proclamation or written endorsement of International Walk to School Day.
- Invite your local elected officials to community rolling and walking events and include them in the planning of such events. Offering public acknowledgement of their support or a speaking role can go a long way to entice an official to the event.
- Be persistent, professional and understanding. Working with the complexities of local government can be time-consuming. Keep at it though – Safe Routes to School is an important cause!

Align Talking Points with the Stated Priorities of Local Elected Officials

In addition to providing your elected official and their staff with the companion action brief, "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Local Elected Officials](#)," and reviewing the strategies outlined within that document to familiarize yourself with approaches to bolster Safe Routes to School, you can customize your talking points by considering the following common priorities of local government and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities. After choosing impactful talking points, supplement those with local stories, photos, or real-life situations that outline the hazards students face or that highlight successful, local Safe Routes to School projects.

Increased Walking and Rolling

Studies have shown an increase in walking and rolling to school through Safe Routes to School projects and programs.

- > A study of 801 schools in Washington DC, Florida, Texas, and Oregon showed an average 25 percent increase in walking and rolling to school over a five-year period associated with education and encouragement programs, and an average 18 percent increase associated with infrastructure improvements. This means that a school that combines infrastructure improvements with education and encouragement programs is likely to see increases in walking or biking of up to 43 percent.¹
- > A study of 53 schools in four states (FL, MS, WA, and WI) found that schools with Safe Routes to School funded projects increased walking and rolling to school by 37 percent.²



Safety

Safe Routes to School addresses traffic dangers and improves safety for students as well as other community members.

- > A New York City study found a 44 percent decline in pedestrian injury in areas with Safe Routes to School projects, compared to no change in locations without. The costs savings associated with injury reduction would achieve an overall net societal benefit of \$230 million over a projected 50-year period.³
- > A study of 47 schools in California found that Safe Routes to School infrastructure improvements resulted in a 75 percent reduction in collisions involving people walking and rolling of all ages.⁴
- > Increasing the number of people using the streets, better lighting, and better street design can increase individual sense of safety as well as decrease actual criminal activity. Data shows that the safer that people feel in their neighborhood, the more time they spend walking.⁵



Economy

Walking and rolling are low-cost options for students to get to and from school, reducing the amount of money needed to purchase and maintain personal and school vehicles.

- > Transportation is the second-highest household expense in the United States. In 2019, Americans spent an average of \$10,742 to purchase, fuel, and insure their vehicles.⁶
- > Safe Routes to School programs can significantly reduce the cost of bussing for school systems. American school districts currently spend \$100 million to \$500 million annually to bus children for just one or two miles due to hazardous conditions. Improving walking conditions near schools could reduce this cost substantially, by decreasing the need for school bus service for students who live close enough to walk or bike to and from school.⁷
- > Safer options for commuting to school can save people from the emotional and financial cost of injuries and fatalities. In New York City, the total cost of implementing SRTS was just over \$10 million, but it produced estimated cost reductions of \$221 million by reducing costs associated with injury, lifelong disability, and death.⁸

Health

Safe Routes to School supports increased physical activity, helps form healthy habits that can last a lifetime, and decreases the risk of chronic disease.

- > Walking and rolling to daily destinations, like school, provide an opportunity for physical activity outside of school time, augmenting physical education in school. Walking one mile to and from school each day is two-thirds of the recommended sixty minutes of physical activity a day. Children who walk to school have higher levels of physical activity throughout the day.^{9,10}
- > People who live in places that support walking, rolling, and public transportation get more physical activity and are less likely to be overweight than those who live in automobile-oriented communities.¹¹
- > People with access to more and better-quality sidewalks are more likely to walk and meet physical activity recommendations.¹² Similarly, people with access to bicycle lanes and paths are more likely to bicycle and meet physical activity recommendations.¹³
- > Safe Routes to School is one of the most effective evidence-based children's health strategies in the chronic disease realm. As one of only a handful of approaches that the CDC has selected as cost-effective measures that have a health impact in five years (known as HI-5 interventions).^{14, 15}



Education

Lack of transportation options can be a barrier to getting to school on time or at all, especially for students in communities where there is no option other than to walk or bike to school. Student health has been linked to academic performance. Walking or rolling to school can help ensure students arrive ready to learn.

- > Based on a CDC evaluation of 145 informants from 184 walking school bus programs from 2017 to 2018, every additional walking school bus trip per was related to a 23 percent increase in the odds of experiencing a reduction in tardiness.¹⁶
- > One study found that after walking on a treadmill for 20 minutes, children responded to test questions with greater accuracy and had more brain activity than children who had been sitting.¹⁷



Environment

Neighborhoods are becoming increasingly clogged by traffic. By boosting the number of students walking and rolling, Safe Routes to School projects and programs reduce traffic congestion and benefit the environment.

- > School travel by private family vehicle for students grades K through 12 accounted for 10 percent of all automobile trips made during the morning peak period (7:00am to 9:00am) in 2017 and 1.5 percent of the total annual trips made by family vehicle in the U.S.^{18,19}
- > If more children walked or rolled to school, it would reduce the number of cars near the school at pick-up and drop-off times, making it safer for active travelers and reducing congestion.²⁰
- > Safe Routes to School programs can improve air quality by reducing vehicle trips and miles traveled. Over the last 25 years, among children ages 5 to 14, there has been a 74 percent increase in asthma cases.²¹ In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.²²
- > Children exposed to traffic pollution are more likely to have asthma, permanent lung deficits, and a higher risk of heart and lung problems as adults.²³





Conclusion

Encouraging children to walk and roll to school safely should be an important goal for local elected officials looking to protect children, improve livability and boost local economies. Fortunately, Safe Routes to School can meet many overarching goals that are of significance to most, if not all, communities. Elected officials can help to move these priorities forward by ensuring that supportive policies are in place and funding is allocated to projects that get more students safely walking and rolling to school and in daily life.

Additional Resources

- > [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- > [Buses, Boots and Bicycles: Exploring Collaboration Between Safe Routes to School and School Busing Professionals to Get Children to School Safely and Healthily](#)
- > [Buses, Boots, and Bicycles: Getting Safe Routes to School and Student Transportation Departments to Work Together](#)
- > [Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#)
- > [Safe Routes to School Policy Resources](#)



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