



September 18, 2012

The Institute of Medicine Committee on Physical Activity and Physical Education in the School Environment
Keck Center
500 Fifth St. NW
Washington, DC 20001

RE: Written comments on Physical Activity and Physical Education in the School Environment

Committee Members:

Thank you very much for holding your series of meetings on the potential to address obesity prevention through increased physical activity.

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership is a network of more than 600 nonprofit organizations, government agencies, schools, and professionals working together to advance the Safe Routes to School movement in the United States. We work to support the development and implementation of programs and policies nationwide through advocacy, policy change, technical assistance, best practices, publications and parent engagement.

Given the committee's focus on making physical activity a routine part of life and on making schools a focal point for obesity prevention, we believe that Safe Routes to School provides an important bridge to address both of these points.

Safe Routes to School initiatives focus on improving the built environment around schools so that streets are safe for children, and on utilizing education, encouragement and law enforcement techniques to promote safety, and to encourage parents and children to regularly choose the active and healthy way to get to school. This comprehensive approach results in building physical activity into children's daily routines and in improving the built environment around schools so they can be safe hubs for physical activity.

There is a growing body of evidence that support the role that Safe Routes to School can play in increasing physical activity:

- Studies of children who already walk and bicycle to and from school show that they get more physical activity on their trip to school and throughout the day, have better cardiovascular fitness and lower BMIs.
- Studies of the built environment show that shorter distances (between homes and schools) and safe infrastructure (sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.) increase the rates of physical activity.
- Studies of Safe Routes to School initiatives show increases in walking and bicycling. A study in California showed increases in the rates of walking and bicycling ranging from 20 to 200 percent, depending on the school. A new study of Safe Routes to School in five states found that Safe Routes to School projects increased active transportation to school by 37 percent.

P.O. Box 663 / Fairfax, CA 94978 / saferoutespartnership.org

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership is hosted by the Bikes Belong Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Based on these studies and our experience working with Safe Routes to School practitioners throughout the nation, it is clear that Safe Routes to School initiatives are a critical means of building physical activity into children's lives, and extending safe and healthy infrastructure around schools—making them a focal point for healthier living. Additional information on the evidence for Safe Routes to School is available at:

<http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/SRTS-policy-report-fact-sheet.pdf> and <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Physical-activity-research-on-SRTS-5-12.pdf>

In developing your recommendations for strengthening physical activity in the school environment, we ask you to consider the following:

- At the federal level, recommend the expansion of the federal Safe Routes to School program. In the most recent transportation bill, MAP-21, the Safe Routes to School program was consolidated into a new Transportation Alternatives program and funding was reduced. At the state level, urge state Departments of Transportation to fully utilize their available Transportation Alternatives funding and prioritize spending to support Safe Routes to School initiatives, bicycling and walking.
- Encourage states to overturn minimum acreage standards and other policies that favor the construction of large schools on the outskirts of communities, where distances will be so great that few children will ever be able to walk and bicycle to and from school.
- Encourage states and communities to pass Complete Streets policies to ensure that all road construction and repairs are done with the safety of all users (including bicyclists and pedestrians) in mind.
- Encourage states to pass joint use policies that enable shared community-school usage of playgrounds, athletic fields and facilities for physical activity. If those shared-use spaces are accessible by bicycling and walking, this will create even greater ability to build physical activity into people's lives.
- Encourage states and localities to reduce speed limits in school zones to better protect children walking and bicycling.
- Encourage local communities to create built environment and/or Safe Routes to School task forces to facilitate collaboration between law enforcement, planners and engineers, and school systems on bicycle and pedestrian safety, busing routes, deployment of crossing guards and more.

Thank you very much for considering our recommendations. We would be pleased to serve as a resource to your Committee should you have any questions as you identify and prioritize recommendations for strengthening physical activity in the school environment.

Sincerely,



Deb Hubsmith
Director, Safe Routes to School National Partnership