



Safe Routes

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Active Paths for Equity & Health

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Safe Routes to School is a national and international movement to get more students walking and rolling to school and daily life. Safe Routes to School initiatives can save money, decrease traffic congestion, increase safety, improve health, and have long-term positive economic impacts. Municipal transportation departments can advance Safe Routes to School and other walking and rolling programs by evaluating their policies concerning all modes of transportation and implementing strategies to initiate or support projects and programs that increase active transportation to school.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Municipal Transportation Departments



Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, 48 percent of all students walked or rolled to school, and 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school walked or rolled. Today, less than 14 percent of students walk or roll to school. These changes have had a significant negative impact on transportation costs, traffic congestion near schools, and the health and safety of students and the surrounding community. Safe Routes to School offers an alternative to these issues by getting more students to walk and roll to school and in daily life. The Safe Routes to School momentum accelerated in 2005 with the passage of the [federal transportation law](#), SAFETEA-LU and subsequent extensions, which dedicated \$1.1 billion to Safe Routes to School projects and programs through state departments of transportation.

The current federal transportation bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, also known as the [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#), provides funding for Safe Routes to School and other walking and rolling projects. Decisions on use of these funds are made by the state department of transportation and large metropolitan planning organizations. While federal funding is available and some states provide additional resources to support Safe Routes to School, roadway improvements, educational programs, and encouragement activities are developed and implemented at the local level – in neighborhoods and with schools.



Communities implementing Safe Route to School have seen a number of improvements including a [44 percent decrease in pedestrian crashes](#), increases in walking and rolling rates ranging from [20 to 200 percent](#), and [reduced traffic congestion](#). To date, more than 17,400 schools and over [6.8 million children nationally](#) have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to provide an affordable, accessible and simple alternative to driving. This action brief provides information and strategies for municipal transportation departments to support Safe Routes to School efforts.

Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

The following strategies are excellent opportunities to boost walking and rolling and Safe Routes to School as fully funded transportation priorities at the local level. Municipal transportation departments can take leadership in promoting these ideas internally and externally to create safer, more accessible active transportation options for all users through funding and policies that support walking and rolling:

The 6 Es Approach to Safe Routes to School

The Six Es of Safe Routes to School summarize the key components of a comprehensive, integrated approach, that includes:

ENGAGEMENT – Listening to students, families, teachers, and school leaders and working to build intentional, ongoing engagement opportunities into the program structure.

EQUITY – Ensuring initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities, and others.

ENGINEERING – Creating physical improvements to streets and neighborhoods that make walking and rolling safer, and more comfortable and convenient.

ENCOURAGEMENT – Generating enthusiasm and increased walking and rolling for students through events, activities, and programs.

EDUCATION – Providing students and the community with the skills to walk and roll safely, educating them about benefits of walking and rolling, and teaching them about the broad range of transportation choices.

EVALUATION – Assessing which approaches are more or less successful, ensuring that programs and initiatives are supporting equitable outcomes, and identifying unintended consequences or opportunities to improve the effectiveness of each approach.

Strategy: Initiate or Participate in the Safe Routes to School Community Task Force or School Traffic Safety Committee

An easy way for municipal transportation departments to get involved in Safe Routes to School efforts is to participate in the district or community Safe Routes to School task force or traffic safety committee. Many communities form these groups to identify and prioritize projects that get more students walking and rolling. Task forces generally are made up of a diverse mix of stakeholders including city or county staff that are responsible for traffic conditions and the built environment near schools, school board members, staff from the superintendent's office, the student transportation department, risk management, the department of public health, interested community groups, individual schools, students, families, and local elected officials. By gathering stakeholders, the task force and/or traffic safety committee can unify efforts to create a systematic approach to improving programs, projects and policies to encourage walking and rolling to school.



Mecklenburg County Safe Routes to School Prioritizes Partnerships

Safe Routes to School works best when everyone works together. Mecklenburg County Safe Routes to School prioritizes partnerships as a key part of their program. Their Safe Routes to School coordinator sits on a Safe School Zones committee with representatives from the Charlotte Department of Transportation and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District. Together, they tackle school safety travel concerns by sharing community feedback and developing actionable solutions. Their coordinated efforts keep projects moving in a timely manner and increases partner accountability. When lines of communication remain open and everyone does their part, Safe Routes programs can thrive!

Prioritizing Support for Lower-Income Neighborhoods and Schools

Children from lower-income families are twice as likely to walk to school as children from higher-income families but typically face greater personal and traffic safety risks on their route to school. It is critical that Safe Routes to School initiatives reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. Ensure that walking and rolling improvements, whether infrastructure or program related, benefit all schools, especially those with the greatest needs. For example, the Portland, Oregon citywide Safe Routes to School program, serving the Portland Public School district, created a [comprehensive policy](#) that includes a focus on ensuring that schools in underserved neighborhoods have equal access to resources.

Strategy: Lead and Fund a Community-Wide Safe Routes to School Program

Cities around the United States are beginning to see the economic, safety, and health related benefits of creating more walkable and bikeable communities. As such, several cities throughout the country have taken the initiative to fund their own Safe Routes to School and bicycling/walking programs through local funds in order to boost these physical activity programs and accelerate the city's progress toward becoming a walk and roll friendly community.

Strategy: Provide Maps of Nearby Routes

When considering walking and rolling to school, students and caregivers often instinctively consider the same route that they would normally drive. Unfortunately, in many cases, this is the least desirable route to walk or roll because it is on traffic-congested, high-speed roads. The transportation department staff can use their extensive knowledge of city streets and the data they have collected on crashes and other safety issues, as well as where student homes are clustered (with consideration for the location of bicycle and pedestrian facilities) to identify the recommended routes within one or two miles of the school. After gathering these data, transportation departments can provide easily accessible and easy to read maps to schools in the district recommending the best routes to walk or roll in multiple languages. The schools can then help promote the maps to caregivers and students.

Strategy: Encourage A Municipal Safe Routes to School Policy

In a highly supportive community, Safe Routes to School programs can thrive without ever being formally addressed through policy. However, in order to ensure equitable distribution of projects and programming, find and guarantee sustainable funding and political support, and protect the vision of a municipal Safe Routes to School initiative, it is ideal to put forth a formalized policy that explains the reasoning for the decisions that form the municipal Safe Routes to School approach.

Portland, Oregon Uses Policies to Ensure Safe Routes to School

The City of Portland touts one of the most robust [Safe Routes to School](#) programs in the country, providing direct services to over 80 schools. In addition to administering in-classroom bicycle and pedestrian safety education, they also provide support for encouragement events by distributing materials for organizing those events, supporting various campaign ideas, and even providing program staff that can assist schools in establishing Walking School Buses and Bike Trains. The Walking School Buses and Bike Trains can easily find a safe route to their school by referencing the Safe Routes Family Friendly Maps provided by the transportation department that show neighborhood parks, safer low-traffic streets, off-street paths and bike lanes, and are provided in six different languages.

Although the city's program operated for over 10 years without a policy, it was important to the Portland Bureau of Transportation that their partnerships and projects continue to move forward into the future. Therefore, in 2011 they developed higher-level strategic policies that would steer Safe Routes to School programming through 2035, and directive policies that complement the strategic policies by providing guidance for the day-to-day work of Safe Routes to School staff. The final product, the City of Portland's Safe Routes to School Policy, ensures transparency in the equitable distribution of Safe Routes to School programs and projects into the future.

Strategy: Partner with the Health Department, Community Groups and School District(s) on Promotional Events

A [comprehensive “Six E” approach](#) is essential to successfully getting more students walking and rolling to school. To this end, when the transportation department, which normally focuses primarily on engineering treatments, partners with school districts and other agencies and community groups, great things can happen. Transportation departments can contribute to promotional events by helping organize walking school buses or bike trains, delivering marketing materials to schools, creating and providing recommended route maps or even offering bicycle and pedestrian education in the classroom.

Strategy: Dedicate Active Transportation Staff

Dedicate a transportation staff position to evaluate and research programs and projects, and implement programs and policies to help identify best and promising practices in walking and rolling. Better yet, add staff for each mode and/or specifically for Safe Routes to School. This component of the position can focus on developing a procedure to implement programs; liaising with schools, internal staff and community groups to implement active school travel plans – a team-developed document that outlines a community’s approach to getting more students walking and rolling; identifying available funding for Safe Routes to School initiatives; and supporting individual schools in participating in Safe Routes to School education and encouragement activities.

Strategy: Provide Bike Racks for Schools, Parks, Libraries and Nearby Businesses

Providing an easily accessible, safe, secure, and visible place for bicyclists to park their bicycles is essential to creating a welcoming environment and increasing physical activity. Municipal transportation departments can create this environment by providing free bike racks to schools, parks, libraries, and other common destinations for children. Additionally, creating a program and a set of city standards for bike rack type and installation makes it easier for local businesses to consider providing parking for bicycling patrons.

FC Moves Dedicates Staffing to Support Safe Routes to School

FC Moves, the name of the Fort Collins’ transportation department, works to ensure that all modes of transportation receive adequate attention. FC Moves has several staff dedicated to bicycling and one staff person dedicated to advancing Safe Routes to School throughout the city. The City has developed a bicycle library, [bike safety town](#), and a written [Bicycle Safety Education Plan](#) that has been adopted as a part of their larger bicycle master plan. Because bicycling improvements were outlined in these plans, when funding became available through the [Keep Fort Collins Great sales tax](#) measure, funding to implement the plan was provided. Additionally, as part of city protocol, all development review meetings – meetings that review projects that are in the planning process – are attended by FC Moves staff to ensure that walking and bicycling considerations are adopted into all future developments and plans. FC Moves also coordinates Safe Routes to School grants for the city in order to ensure that the schools with the most need receive the programming and infrastructure they require.



Strategy: Connect Schools via Multi-Use Trails, Greenways and Transit

Schools can serve as hubs to an entire community by being a place to learn and play during, before, and after school hours. This increases accessibility and property values for the whole community. While these connections can be included in planning documents such as a bicycle and pedestrian master plan, they can also be pursued individually depending on the project. Connecting schools and other destinations with multi-use trails, greenways, and transit helps to create a healthy, active, and vibrant community.

Strategy: Include Safe Routes to School in Planning Documents

Every day, decisions are made about the location of schools and the roads that lead to and from them. These decisions should be planned for long in advance through city planning documents and prioritization processes, including the comprehensive plan, capital improvement plan, bicycle and pedestrian master plan, and regional transportation plan. Each of these plans are key to the development of a city and its transportation funding and infrastructure over time. Transportation staff have an opportunity to encourage the inclusion of pedestrian and bicycle language and planning through these plans. Refer to [Integrating Safe Walking and Bicycling to School into Comprehensive Planning](#) for more information on including Safe Routes to School in other planning documents.

Strategy: Adopt a Complete Streets Approach

Historically speaking, since the advent of the automobile, most roads have been designed to move automobile traffic at a certain level of service with little to no regard for other road users. This has had a dramatic effect on the way that we travel and a negative impact on overall public health. A [Complete Streets](#) approach works to ensure that all roads are designed to be safe and usable for drivers, bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit of all ages and abilities. Consider adopting a Complete Streets approach either within planning documents or at the city or department level that includes a vision that encompasses all users, applies to new and retrofit projects, encourages connectivity, uses the latest design criteria, establishes performance standards and includes next steps for implementation of such an approach.

Get Involved in School Siting Decision Process

Decisions about where a school is sited, or in the case of consolidation, which schools are closed or combined, have long-term impacts on travel mode and physical activity options for students and staff. Schools that are sited away from where students live result in increased traffic and associated congestion, air quality and infrastructure costs, reduced opportunities for physical activity, and increased busing costs that might not be considered in the initial cost equation for the community. On the other hand, schools that are sited in walkable and bikeable neighborhoods can become a centerpiece of the community, allowing opportunities for physical activity, parent volunteerism and community connection, long-term economic benefits, and financial savings in construction and other costs. While municipal transportation departments are not often involved in the coordinated planning around the school siting process, there are opportunities to work with districts to influence the school district's deliberation process.

Strategy: Work With School District to Establish Comprehensive School Travel Plans at all Schools

School travel plans are written documents that outline a community's intentions for enabling students to engage in active transportation as they travel to and from school. These documents outline a Six E's approach to Safe Routes to School that lay out barriers and solutions to the community or school's transportation issues. Municipal transportation departments can work with a Safe Routes to School team or community task force to contribute their background and knowledge to school travel plans at the school and district levels.

Strategy: Use Data to Prioritize Safety Improvements

Travel and safety data are collected by states, regions, counties, municipalities, and school districts; however, there is an opportunity to collect better data for all modes of transportation, especially walking and rolling. This information can be used to prioritize improvements to the physical infrastructure, address safety concerns near schools and ultimately, evaluate Safe Routes to School efforts. In order to advance data collection efforts regarding walking and rolling to school, municipal transportation departments can work with districts, principals, and their schools to conduct the national standard Safe Routes to School parent survey and annual student tallies or even observational surveys. Additionally this data can be overlaid with crash and other data utilizing GIS technology to clearly illustrate community transportation improvement needs. Improving data collection to understand how students move from one place to the other, to know where there are concerns, conflicts or crashes, and to identify safety improvements is the first step to creating a walkable and bikeable environment. Armed with knowledge of the needs of the school and local community, the transportation department can focus on high-impact strategies that directly address parental concerns and safety issues to get more students physically active.

Cincinnati, Ohio Creates School Travel Plans

As part of a city-driven process to create school travel plans for Cincinnati schools, a team of leaders was assembled, including the [Cincinnati Department of Transportation and Engineering](#) among many other stakeholders. The team was involved in the development of school travel plans for 48 district schools. As a result, the school board adopted the [Cincinnati Public Schools District-Wide Travel Plan](#) in June of 2012.

The plan outlines roughly 300 infrastructure countermeasures (engineering related changes) and 100 non-infrastructure countermeasures (education, evaluation, and encouragement related changes) that were identified through the use of a prioritization matrix. The city, district, and their schools are heavily invested in the ongoing implementation and success of this plan to improve safety, reduce congestion, and increase physical activity.





Accessing State and Federal Funds for Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School is eligible for many federal funding programs, including the Surface Transportation Block Grant, Congestion Mitigation Air Quality, Highway Safety Improvement Program, and Transportation Alternatives Program, as well as others. Many states also have Safe Routes to School “legacy” funds remaining from the dedicated federal funding program under SAFETEA-LU. Visit [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Background and Resources](#) for information about federal funding, including [state-specific fact sheets](#) on the Transportation Alternatives Program – one of the largest sources of federal funding available for Safe Routes to School projects and programs. School districts can be a partner in applying for funding, and in some cases may apply for funding on their own.

In addition to federal funding, some states fund Safe Routes to School projects and programs using their own dollars. Connect with your state’s [Safe Routes to School staff](#) to find out about accessing these funds.

New York City Invests in Infrastructure Improvements

The New York City Department of Transportation was interested in addressing issues of high crash rates near schools throughout the city. In order to be equitable, they evaluated the crash histories near all of the city’s 1,471 elementary and middle schools to identify the schools with high incidences of crashes and those most in need of infrastructure improvements. They identified 135 schools that became their priority list, and each school, including principals, caregivers and community members, was involved in the process. They collected data on student travel and traffic conditions and identified short- and long-term infrastructure solutions for each of the 135 schools. Since the creation of the list in 2003, the New York Department of Transportation has made short-term improvements at all 135 schools, including new traffic and pedestrian signals, exclusive pedestrian crossing time at lights, speed bumps, speed reader boards, high visibility crosswalks and new parking regulations. The long-term improvements continue to be updated; however, as a result of these short-term improvements, the rate of pedestrian injuries during school travel hours decreased 44 percent since the inception of the program.



Conclusion

As schools and districts seek to increase the number of students who safely walk and roll to school, municipal transportation departments can play a key role. There are many strategies to achieve this goal, such as providing committed funding for Safe Routes to School, dedicating staff to walking and rolling programs, including walking and rolling in planning documents, using data to prioritize projects and becoming more involved in school siting and design decisions. Ultimately, implementing these strategies will lead to healthier, more livable communities through better cohesion and efficiency among city, school and community partnerships.



Additional Resources

- [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Integrating Safe Walking and Bicycling to School into Comprehensive Planning](#)
- [Building Blocks: A Guide to Starting and Growing a Safe Routes to School Program](#)
- [Vision Zero and Safe Routes to School: Partners in Safety](#)
- [Policies to Support Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Safe Routes to School by the Numbers](#)
- [Federal Funding for Safe Routes to School: Evolution Through Four Transportation Bills](#)
- [Investing in Health: Robust Local Active Transportation Financing for Healthy Communities](#)
- [Investing in Walking, Biking, and Safe Routes to School: A Win for the Bottom Line](#)