Introduction to
Safe Routes to School

In 1969, 48 percent of all students walked or bicycled to school, and 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school walked or bicycled. Today, fewer than 14 percent of students walk or bicycle 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 bicycle to school and in daily life. It has been quickly gaining momentum at the local, regional, state and national levels. This 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. Communities implementing Safe Route to School have seen a number of improvements including a 44 percent decrease in pedestrian crashes, increases in walking and bicycling rates ranging from 20 to 200 percent, and reduced traffic congestion. In some communities, students that walk or bicycle have even higher levels of concentration. To date, more than 13,000 schools and over 5 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

In a slow economy, budget cuts to municipal transportation departments and reduced access to state and federal funding can mean scaling back on active transportation projects or bicycle and pedestrian focused staff. This is an excellent opportunity to become
familiar with strategies and best practices around projects, plans and policies that support walking and bicycling to and from school and in daily life. Municipal transportation departments can have a significant influence by sharing these ideas internally and externally, with the ultimate goal of creating safer, more accessible active transportation options.

**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 bicycling. 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 bicycling to school.

**Case Study: Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle, Washington**

The chaotic and unsafe environment created by many people and vehicles arriving at and departing from school can discourage parents and students from walking and bicycling. In an effort to contribute to the improvement of safety and efficiency during the morning and afternoon pick-up/drop-off process the Seattle Department of Transportation participates in the School Traffic Safety Committee. This committee helps schools evaluate the traffic conditions around the school and makes recommendations for potential solutions.

**Safe Routes to School: An Issue of Equity**

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 bicycling and walking improvements, whether infrastructure or program related, benefit all schools, especially those with the greatest needs. 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 bicycle friendly community.

Case Study: The City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation, Los Angeles, California

The City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation staff, in collaboration with multiple local organizations, notably the Safe Routes to School National Partnership and the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, have been working together to develop a comprehensive Safe Routes to School plan for the City’s 700 plus schools. Prior to this, the city had competed poorly for state-administered Safe Routes to School funds because their proposals lacked the overall strategy and vision for making a significant impact. This plan was the first step in making it a strong competitor among other California cities. Another critical step was having the plan included as a component of the city’s recently adopted Bicycle Master Plan. As a result of these collaborative efforts and conversations, in April 2011 the city of Los Angeles allocated $1.2 million in local sales tax dollars to fund such a plan (Measure R Local Return). A strategic Safe Routes to School citywide plan will allow the City to prioritize and methodically address ways for students to safely walk and/or bicycle to school, as well as ensure that Safe Routes to School funds succeed in Los Angeles, leverage additional resources and achieve regional and state transportation and health goals.
SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
A Primer for Municipal Transportation Departments

Strategy: Provide Maps of Nearby Routes

When considering walking and bicycling to school, parents and students often instinctively consider the same route that they would normally drive. Unfortunately, in many cases, this is the least desirable route to walk or bicycle 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 bicycle in multiple languages. The schools can then help promote the maps to parents 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.

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

A comprehensive “Five E” approach is essential to successfully getting more students walking and bicycling to school. To this end, when the transportation department, which normally focuses primarily on engineering treatments, partners with 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.

Case Study: City of Portland, Portland, Oregon

The city of Portland touts one of the most robust Five E’s-based 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 has 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 though 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 Five E’s-based Safe Routes to School programs and projects into the future.
SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
A Primer for Municipal Transportation Departments

Strategy: Add 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 bicycling. 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 bicycling; 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: Apply for Safe Routes to School Funding from the State Department of Transportation

School districts and schools are focused on academic achievement first and foremost. While they see the benefits of more students walking and bicycling, they do not always have the time or resources to apply for funding to address major hurdles. Municipal transportation departments are well poised to provide this service for schools and districts within their purview. Using a prioritized and systematic approach that is coordinated by a transportation department with experience in grant writing can be a great way to ensure that federal dollars for walking and bicycling projects are siphoned into the community.

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.

Case Study: FC Moves, Fort Collins, Colorado

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, which was recently given the Platinum Bicycle Friendly Community award from the League of American Bicyclists, an award that only three other cities in the country have received – and a Bronze Level Walk Friendly Community award from Walk Friendly Communities. Many efforts contributed to this award, including 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.
SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
A Primer for Municipal Transportation Departments

(continued from page 5)

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. To date, these successful grants have brought in $366,273 in programming and $295,079 in infrastructure projects since the beginning of the program in 2005. Lastly, in 2011, FC Moves received $50,000 in Safe Routes to School infrastructure grant funding that it uses to provide free bike racks to interested and prioritized schools to encourage bicycling to all destinations. As old, less efficient bike racks are replaced with new racks, the old racks are moved to schools that have few to no bike racks, recycling older racks and giving more bicycle parking to schools in need. As part of the bike rack program, students receive education on how to properly use a bike rack to safely secure their bicycle. By the end of 2013, FC Moves will have installed 40 bike racks at 10-15 schools.

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.

Case Study: Thompson’s Station and Spring Hill, Tennessee

Thompson’s Station, Tennessee, a rural community of about 1,500 citizens, received a Safe Routes to School grant from the Tennessee Department of Transportation for installation of a sidewalk between Heritage Elementary School and adjoining Heritage Middle School. The neighboring town of Spring Hill, which has a population of about 30,000 and is a fast-growing city in Tennessee, wanted to connect to Thompson’s Station through a raised pathway since many Spring Hill children attend the schools in Thompson’s Station, but dangerous road conditions prohibited children from walking or bicycling to school. Spring Hill applied for a $69,000 state Transportation Enhancements grant to build a connection from Thompson’s Station’s new sidewalk to a neighborhood in Spring Hill. The Governor of Tennessee visited Spring Hill to award them with the grant and recognized their efforts to connect their schools and communities. The pathway was completed and the grand opening celebration was held on August 15, 2011.
SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL
A Primer for Municipal Transportation Departments

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.

Case Study: Bozeman, Montana

The City of Bozeman, Montana created detailed Safe Routes to School Improvement Plans for its seven elementary schools concurrently within the updated Greater Bozeman Area Transportation Plan. Since the Improvement Plans were completed, the City has used them to prioritize its sidewalk maintenance program, including the ADA curb ramp retrofit program near schools. In addition, radar speed signs have been installed near the main entrances for each of the schools, and bicycle lanes and trails have been added on several roads where recommended. Individual schools have also been successful in using the plans to apply for federal Safe Routes to School funds to support education and encouragement efforts.

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.

Case Study: Indianapolis, Indiana

In 2012, the city council in Indianapolis, Indiana unanimously passed an ordinance that was voted the number one Complete Streets policy in the nation. Indianapolis gained this honor by directly addressing all ten components of a comprehensive Complete Streets policy. As a result of this approach, Indianapolis residents will see new roads constructed and old roads retrofitted to accommodate all users, encouraging physical activity, reducing traffic congestion, and increasing ease of mobility.
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 Five 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.

Case Study: Cincinnati Department of Transportation and Engineering, Cincinnati, Ohio

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, enforcement 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.
Strategic Plan: 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 bicycling. 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 bicycling 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, these 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.

Case Study: New York Department of Transportation, New York City, New York

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, parents 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 bicycle 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 bicycling programs, including walking and bicycling 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.

Resources

What is Safe Routes to School?: Quick Facts (Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

Safe Routes to School Local Policy Guide (Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)

Transportation Health Equity Principles (Transportation Health Equity Network and Upstream Public Health, 2012)

Complete Streets: Best Policy and Implementation Practices (Smart Growth America, 2012)

Transportation and the New Generation: Why Young People are Driving Less and What It Means for Transportation Policy (Frontier Group, and US PIRG Education Fund, April 2012)


Dangerous by Design 2011: Solving the Epidemic of Preventable Pedestrian Deaths (Transportation for America, 2011)

Helping Johnny Walk to School: Policy Recommendations for Removing Barriers to Community Centered Schools (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2008)

Steps to Starting a Safe Routes to School Program (National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2013)