

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL:

A Primer to Understanding the Role of Local Elected Officials for Practitioners



SAFE ROUTES
to School
NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

There are many opportunities for local elected officials to improve walking and bicycling 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 bicycling 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.



Introduction to Safe Routes to School

During the past 15 years, Safe Routes to School projects and programs in the United States have grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and bicycling to school is attracting more 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. With declining federal transportation dollars being dedicated to bicycling and walking and uncertainty of state budgets, it is even more important to ensure stable funding streams and supportive policies are pursued locally.

There are additional programs, funding mechanisms and approaches such as Complete Streets that can be leveraged to improve conditions for walking and bicycling throughout the community.

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 robust Safe Routes to School programs.

Before engaging in a conversation with local elected officials (or, in many cases, engaging appointed officials

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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 bicycling—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 bicycling. 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 bicycling 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 childhood obesity, health, smart growth, bicycling/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 supportive state bicycle, pedestrian, and Safe Routes to School policies (*continued on page 3*):

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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 about Safe Routes to School or its priorities. 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.
- » Attend public meetings or review the regularly published minutes of key meetings that affect funding and policies for walking and bicycling projects.

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 general 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 intended audiences. Prepare to connect and participate.

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 personal staff about the priorities of bicycling, walking and Safe Routes to School. Participate in relevant committees, coalition meetings, and bicycle and pedestrian or Safe Routes to School 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 bicycling. 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 bicycling 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.

Economy

- In a survey of mayors in 176 cities, 60 percent said that the lack of additional funding for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure was hindering their efforts to reduce congestion, improve livability and increase economic competitiveness.¹
- Reducing the miles parents drive to school by just one percent would reduce 300 million miles of vehicle travel nationally and save an estimated \$50 million in fuel costs each year, thereby reducing traffic congestion.²
- Bicycling is good for business. A study in Toronto, Ontario showed that people who walked or bicycled to the city spent more money per month than those who drove.³ Also, two-third of business owners along San Francisco's Valencia Street where a bike lane had been installed for almost four years said that the bike lanes had a positive overall impact on their businesses.⁴
- Given that \$14 billion is spent nationally in annual direct medical costs to treat childhood obesity, creating more opportunities for children to be physically active can reduce the burden on our public health system.⁵

Safety

- A recent study of Safe Routes to School projects in New York City found that census tracts with Safe Routes to School interventions saw a 44 percent decline in school-aged pedestrian injury during school travel hours while locations without Safe Routes to School interventions stayed the same.⁶
- A motorist is less likely to collide with a person walking and bicycling if more people walk or bicycle. For example, in a community with two times as much walking, pedestrians are 66 percent less likely to be involved in a crash with a vehicle.⁷
- In 2005, the medical costs of hospitalization and treatment for children's bicycle and pedestrian injuries and fatalities totaled \$839 million—more than four times what the federal government allocated to Safe Routes to School in 2012.⁸

Health

- Research demonstrates that children who walk or bicycle to school have higher daily levels of physical activity and better cardiovascular fitness⁹ than their counterparts.
- Children in neighborhoods with sidewalks and safe places to cross streets are more likely to be physically active than children living in neighborhoods without those safe infrastructure elements.¹¹
- Safe Routes to School programs and projects can increase walking and bicycling by 20 to 200 percent.¹²
- Over the last 25 years, among children age 5 to 14, there has been a 74 percent increase in asthma cases.¹³ In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.¹⁴

Education

- Findings from large, nationally representative studies show that physical activity has a positive impact on academic achievement in both young children¹⁵ and adolescents,¹⁶ regardless of other factors such as age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and prior achievement scores.

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- A Danish study of 20,000 students showed that children who actively commute to school perform measurably better on tasks demanding concentration¹⁷ once at school than do children who do not actively commute to school.
- After adjusting for socioeconomic status and gender, the percentage of eighth graders at academic risk (report usually getting C's, D's or F's) was significantly higher for those with insufficient exercise (35 percent at risk) versus those who had sufficient exercise (22 percent).¹⁸

Transportation and Environment

- In 2009, American families drove 30 billion miles and made 6.5 billion vehicle trips to take their children to and from schools, representing 10-14 percent of traffic on the road during the morning commute.¹⁹
- A five percent increase in a neighborhood's "walkability" reduces vehicle miles traveled by six percent.²⁰

Conclusion

Encouraging children to walk and bicycle 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 bicycling to school and in daily life.

Resources

[What is Safe Routes to School?: Quick Facts](#)
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)

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

[Local Safe Routes to School Involvement](#)
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

[Fact Sheet: Safe Routes to School: Helping Communities Save Lives and Dollars](#)
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

[Best Practices for Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committees](#) (Advocacy Advance, 2012)

[Complete Streets Local Policy Workbook](#) (Smart Growth America, 2012)

The [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#) works to promote safe walking and bicycling to and from schools and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America's children, and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities.

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