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## 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. School boards, superintendents, and principals are allies that can help 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 School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals



*School boards, superintendents, and principals are the gatekeepers to schools; their investment and relationships with stakeholders are essential to the success of Safe Routes to School. Charged with advancing the academic achievement of students, schools boards, superintendents, and principals are faced with myriad challenges including meeting standardized test results, dealing with shrinking budgets, supporting over-extended teachers and maintaining facilities.*

*At the same time, school boards, superintendents, and principals can have a strong influence on the way in which students travel to and from school. There are many policies, procedures and projects that can be advanced at the school and district level to address concerns to improve safety, increase physical activity and get more students walking and rolling to school. Safe Routes to School practitioners can be most effective by recognizing the priorities of school boards, superintendents, and principals and by better understanding how those priorities align with the benefits of Safe Routes to School.*



## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of the School Board Members

There are more than 16,800 school districts operating throughout the United States whose primary function is to address the educational needs of their students. The make-up of each district varies in size, socioeconomic status, and urbanization; a district's school board could be equally as diverse. These factors are integral to the make-up of the school board and are important to understand before engaging with school boards. School boards can be appointed or elected and work to set the direction for the district, make or approve funding decisions, provide support for the implementation of policies, and hold the system accountable to these policies, all while engaging and representing the community. In order to support and enhance academic achievement, school boards often prioritize teacher quality, school finance, testing and reporting, student safety, parent and caregiver community involvement, upkeep of school facilities, and providing a safe school culture. Because of the varied priorities of school boards, practitioners must understand how Safe Routes to School programs and projects can align with the stated priorities of the school board.

When making decisions about the content of programs in the school, school boards try to incorporate the community's view of what skills students should have, which can and should include walking and rolling safety, an important life skill. With such decision-making power, the school board is poised to pass policies that can affect all of the schools under their purview. Since schools have the most continuous and intensive contact with children, districts are in an ideal position to influence the health and behavior of their students. Therefore, it is vital to focus talking points on benefits such as the proven links between physical activity, academic achievement, overall concentration, and classroom behavior.

Check out [Cultivating Support for Safe Routes to School: A Guide to Building Relationships with School Board Members and Superintendents](#) and [Working With Your School District Board to Support Healthy, Active Students](#) for more detailed information and tips for engaging school boards.



## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of Superintendents

Superintendents are administrators or managers in charge of a number of schools or a school district. All school principals in a respective school district report to the superintendent. The role and powers of the superintendent vary among areas. The superintendent is typically hired by the school board and is tasked with managing employees, balancing the budget, and creating a collaborative vision aimed at providing high-quality education for students.

Superintendents work to implement the policy direction set by the school board. Getting a superintendent on board with Safe Routes to School can ensure that individual schools, the student transportation department, and others within a school district will prioritize safe walking and rolling as transportation options for students.

## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of Principals

School principals are notorious for their ability to constantly multitask, morphing from one role to another as they deal with the ever-changing needs of their students, staff, and facilities. Principals can wear a number of hats including being the school leader, student disciplinarian, teacher evaluator, policy reviewer, program developer, teacher hirer and trainer, parent and community liaison, and chief delegator. As with school boards and principals, this demanding role is focused on supporting and improving academic achievement in students.

Principals can be faced with the challenges of fewer resources, lack of qualified teachers, and behavior issues, all while assuring that instruction is aligned with state academic content standards, maintaining the site facilities, ensuring instruction is designed for student success, and developing partnerships with caregivers and the community. Successful schools address these challenges by creating a positive culture that promotes learning and engages students and adults. School principals are also often trusted community leaders, serving as a resource and champion for the students and their families in and out of school.

Safe Routes to School practitioners are wise to respect the many competing priorities of principals by being aware of the limited time most principals have to offer and minimizing the amount of work requested from principals and their staff. Instead, it is useful to principals to demonstrate how Safe Routes to School can contribute to a positive school culture, stronger community, safer arrival and dismissal, and, of course, positively influence academic outcomes and classroom behavioral issues.

Finally, acknowledging that their time is valuable and working to connect with whomever will be the liaison to the project is recommended.



## What You Can Do

As with most successful work, success is predicated on knowledge of the processes and people involved. Use the following tips as a starting point for engaging school boards, superintendents and principals:

### LEARN

- Talk to district employees and conduct research to learn about your district's past involvement in walking and rolling efforts, if any.
- Talk with a school board member or review any policies and laws that dictate the behavior of the school district.
- Talk with a school board member or administrator to understand the actual distribution of authority between the district and schools – this varies depending on the state and district.
- Check with individual schools to learn about their school policies and how they support or prevent walking and rolling to school.
- Find out about existing task forces, school teams and initiatives that focus on walking and rolling to school at individual schools and throughout the district.
- Identify the staff or appointed committees that liaise with district decision makers on transportation decisions.

### REVIEW

- Become familiar with the school or school district's written transportation, health, safety, wellness and other Safe Route to School related policies.
- Read the accompanying [Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals](#) to better understand the strategies and initiatives that school boards and principals can support to increase walking and rolling.
- Learn the “Six Es” of Safe Routes to School to understand how a well-rounded policy or program.
- Utilizing all the information you have learned and reviewed, construct a strong case for Safe Routes to School that will resonate with educational leaders.
- Prepare to connect and participate.

### CONNECT

- Develop a working relationship with the school board, superintendent, and/or principal; educate them on key talking points that are relevant to their stated priorities, position and authority. The board, superintendent, and principal may also direct another administrator such as an assistant superintendent in charge of transportation or a vice principal to work with you.
- Invite a school board member, administrator, or principal to join the district or community-wide Safe Routes to School task force or to attend a school team meeting to offer more opportunities for collaboration.
- Attend school board meetings to understand the challenges that the district faces and to inform them about the priorities, practices and benefits of walking, rolling, and Safe Routes to School.

### PARTICIPATE

- Encourage school boards, superintendents, and principals to seek funding opportunities to enhance walking and rolling through programs and infrastructure projects.
- Schedule a Safe Routes to School training for school board members, administrators, and principals to serve as an expert on walking and rolling to school programs and projects.
- Ask the school board, superintendent, and principals if they can publicize walking and rolling initiatives as a viable alternative to taking the bus or the family car on their websites, newsletters and back-to-school packets and/or other take-homes.
- Invite school board members, the superintendent, and principals to participate in Safe Routes to School events and include them in the planning, implementation, and evaluation process.
- Offer public acknowledgement of school board member, superintendent, and principals' support and utilize opportunities to demonstrate the positive outcomes of their work.
- Be persistent, professional and understanding of people balancing multiple priorities and busy schedules.

## Align Talking Points with the Stated Priorities of School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals

In addition to providing school board members, superintendents, and principals with the companion "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals](#)" action brief and reviewing the strategies outlined within that document, you can customize your talking points by encouraging them to consider common priorities and how their priorities align with Safe Routes to School priorities. Priorities may include improved academic performance and increased student safety. After choosing impactful talking points, supplement those with stories, photos and real-life situations to identify the hazards students face while walking or rolling, and highlight Safe Routes to School successes that have involved collaboration with school boards, superintendents, or principals.

### 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.<sup>1</sup>
- > 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.<sup>2</sup>



### 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.<sup>3</sup>
- > 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.<sup>4</sup>



## Transportation Costs

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.

- > 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.<sup>5</sup>
- > Approximately 55 percent of children are bused to school, and we spend \$21.5 billion nationally each year on school bus transportation, an average of \$854 per child transported per year.<sup>6</sup>
- > 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.<sup>7</sup>

## 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.<sup>8,9</sup>
- > 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).<sup>10,11</sup>

## 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.<sup>12</sup>
- > 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. Children also completed learning tasks faster and more accurately following physical activity.<sup>13</sup>



## 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.<sup>14,15</sup>
- > 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.<sup>18</sup>
- > 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.<sup>17</sup> In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.<sup>18</sup>
- > 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.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

School boards, superintendents, and principals are essential partners in Safe Routes to School. Safe Routes to School practitioners can engage and inform education leaders by carefully considering the roles and responsibilities, reviewing the key talking points, utilizing the suggestions in the “What You Can Do” section to develop relationships and achieve goals, and becoming familiar with the potential strategies to bolster walking and rolling in the accompanying "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals.](#)"

## Additional Resources

- > [Cultivating Support for Safe Routes to School: A Guide to Building Relationships with School Board Members and Superintendents](#)
- > [Working With Your School District Board to Support Healthy, Active Students](#)
- > [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](#)
- > [Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#)
- > [Safe Routes to School Policy Resources](#)

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