



Saving Transportation Dollars and Alleviating Parental Concerns about Student Safety

Simple Steps to Get Started with Safe Routes to School Resources and Information for Schools

As fuel costs spiked during the summer of 2008, school districts all across the country struggled with how to absorb significant increases in school transportation costs. Even with fuel costs easing, schools are now struggling with a poor economy that has led to decreases in state aid and local budget cuts. Many school districts have been forced to eliminate or consolidate bus routes or restrict busing to children only outside a certain distance from the school. In these circumstances, parents frequently respond with concern for the safety of their children walking or bicycling to school, or anger over their own increased gas usage if they planned to drive their children. One solution that can help school districts through this difficult financial crisis is Safe Routes to School.

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs focus on making it safe for children to bicycle and walk to and from school. These programs are built on collaborative partnerships among many stakeholders that include educators, parents, students, elected officials, engineers, city planners, business and community leaders, health officials, and bicycle and pedestrian advocates. While there are millions of dollars in federal funding available for SRTS, school districts can also get started quickly with small and simple ways to alleviate parental safety concerns.

What Benefits will Safe Routes to School Bring?

1. **A strategic approach to student safety:** As school districts cut back bus routes, parents need reassurance that it will be safe for their children to walk and bicycle. A good Safe Routes to School program engages parents and school officials in a collaborative effort to identify parents' safety concerns and develop short-term and long-term solutions to those safety concerns. This can also help schools address and mitigate liability risks and concerns.
2. **A healthier trip for students:** Students who walk or bicycle to and from school are getting a much-needed dose of physical activity each morning and afternoon. Walking one mile to and from school equals forty minutes of physical activity—two-thirds of the recommended level of physical activity for children. Safe Routes to School programs can play an important part in your school's wellness plans. In addition, research shows that active children tend to have better academic achievement, enhanced concentration, and better classroom behavior.
3. **A way to reduce traffic congestion:** Many schools already struggle with chaotic traffic congestion and idling cars during drop-off and pick-up. If parents losing access to bus routes drive their children, congestion will increase greatly—leading to poorer air quality near the school, more safety incidents, and parents spending more time and gas transporting their children. A Safe Routes to School program can engage parents in identifying other options suitable for the community, such as carpooling, remote drop-off points, walking school buses, and more.

4. **A means of strengthening community involvement:** Schools are always looking to bolster their relationship with parents, community members, and area businesses and city officials. Safe Routes to School programs stress the need for communities to work together to solve student safety issues. Schools often find that parents that get engaged in Safe Routes to School programs end up more involved with the school overall. And, the program can build key relationships with local planning authorities, health departments, and law enforcement officials.

What are Short-Term, Low-Cost Safe Routes to School Solutions?

There are diverse approaches for implementing a Safe Routes to School program, many of which can be implemented with a minimal investment and with just a little thoughtful planning. Here are some suggestions of how you can get started. Please follow the links for resources to guide your efforts.

1. Create a Safe Routes to School team

To be successful, you will need the buy-in and involvement of a range of partners, including parents and students, the mayor or city manager, your local transportation department or Metropolitan Planning Organization, the school nurse and local health officials, school district transportation officials, and school personnel. Having the right people working together from the start will make it much easier to address the school's transportation budget shortfall and make it safer for children to walk and bicycle.

- Getting Started Guide (National Center for Safe Routes to School): <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/steps/index.cfm>
- Michigan's Safe Routes to School Handbook: <http://www.saferoutesmichigan.org/toolkit.htm>

2. Document safety problems around the school and parental concerns

Before you know how to proceed, you must assess where the problems are. Get a group of parents, city officials, and school officials to walk streets in the vicinity of the school and note where sidewalks are in bad repair, branches are obscuring signs, and missing crosswalks. Images available through Google Earth can also help identify missing sidewalks. You can also survey parents to find out what kinds of concerns they have.

- Walkability checklist (National Center for Safe Routes to School): <http://drusilla.hsrrc.unc.edu/cms/downloads/walkabilitychecklist.pdf>
- Parent survey (National Center for Safe Routes to School): http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/resources/evaluation_parent-survey.cfm

3. Make needed short-term safety improvements

While many of the safety problems will likely require longer-term infrastructure improvements, there are ways the city or county can help address safety issues using existing city/county employees and resources. Small improvements could include painting crosswalks on roads around the school, installing signage to warn drivers to slow down around children walking or bicycling, regularly removing debris from sidewalks and road shoulders, trimming branches overhanging sidewalks around the school, or prioritizing sidewalk repair around the school.

- Engineering guide (National Center for Safe Routes to School): <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/engineering/index.cfm>

4. Map “safe walking routes” or create “walking school buses”

Schools and city planning officials can put together “safe walking routes” maps of routes around the school identifying locations of crossing guards, marked crosswalks, sidewalks and traffic signals. Schools can also help parents organize “walking school buses” where parents and volunteers alternate walking groups of students to and from school each day. This can be as informal as encouraging parents in neighborhoods to volunteer to walk neighborhood children, or as formal as an organized, scheduled program.

- School Walking Map: http://alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/tes/info/SRTS%20maps_Barrett.pdf
- Walking School Bus Guide (National Center for Safe Routes to School): http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/walking_school_bus/reaching_out_to_more_children.cfm

5. Hold pedestrian and bicycle safety education workshops

Resources are available to help your students learn how to be safe when walking and bicycling. Your state Department of Transportation or local police department may be able to provide basic training in safe behaviors in crossing the street and avoiding “stranger danger.” Your state or local bicycling advocacy group may be able to provide bicycle safety education classes.

- League of American Bicyclists BikeEd programs and instructors: <http://www.bikeleague.org/programs/education/index.php>
- Safe Kids Walk This Way child pedestrian safety resources: <http://www.usa.safekids.org/wtw/>

6. Step up traffic safety enforcement

A lot of the immediate safety issues—dangerous cross walks or drivers speeding—can be addressed through increased law enforcement in the vicinity of schools to enforce speed limits and man crosswalks. Work with your law enforcement officials to see if they can place mobile speed trailers around the school to show drivers their speed, step up patrols around the school, and add crossing guards. You might be able to get the local media to help encourage drivers to pay attention and obey the speed limit when driving near schools.

- Enforcement Guide (National Center for Safe Routes to School): <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/enforcement/index.cfm>
- Media and Visibility Tips (National Center for Safe Routes to School): <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/media/index.cfm>

7. Build excitement through small promotional contests and activities

Walking and bicycling to school can be a fun activity for children. Consider running a small promotional contest to get parents and students excited about walking and bicycling to school, instead of seeing it as a burden from losing access to the schoolbus. The slogan “*Lost the bus? Short on bucks? Come walk and bike with us!*” can emphasize the social aspect. There are many ideas that schools have used, such as walking mileage contests and punch cards, Walk to School Day, and more. See if area businesses might be willing to donate small prizes or incentives.

- Examples of Mileage Clubs and Contests (National Center for Safe Routes to School): http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/encouragement/mileage_clubs_and_contests.cfm
- Walk to School Day: <http://www.walktoschool-usa.org/getstarted/index.cfm>

What about Long-Term, More Costly Improvements?

Congress created the federal Safe Routes to School program in 2005. A total of \$612 million is available to support infrastructure improvements and non-infrastructure activities. Communities are using this funding to construct new bike lanes, pathways, and sidewalks, as well as to launch Safe Routes to School education, promotion and enforcement campaigns in elementary and middle schools. These funds can be an important source to help your school move forward with a long-term Safe Routes to School program.

Funds are administered by each state’s Department of Transportation. Each state sets its own application processes, deadlines, and award cycles. To learn more about your state, visit:

- State information pages (Safe Routes to School National Partnership): <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/state/5043>

For more information on the Safe Routes to School National Partnership or to sign up for our e-news or list-serv, please visit <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org>.