

Cultivating Support for Safe Routes to School: A Guide to Building Relationships with School Board Members and Superintendents





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When children get to and from school by walking or bicycling, there are benefits for their health, physical activity levels, and academic achievement. However, sometimes school board members and superintendents don't understand why walking and bicycling is relevant to their mission. This factsheet provides an overview of why it is important to engage school district leaders, what results those relationships can achieve, and how to go about doing this work.

Why Work with the School Board?

Many people who work on getting children safely to school by bicycling and walking begin by creating Safe Routes to School programs at schools. Stakeholders may develop Bike to School Day events or may establish walking school buses. But to create larger and longer term effects, it eventually becomes necessary to work at the district level, and that means working with the school board and superintendent. When school boards voice their commitment to Safe Routes to School and work toward district level policies and procedures that support walking and bicycling, that can create the changes that integrate Safe Routes to School permanently throughout a district.

Success in Merced

In Merced County, California, stakeholders nurtured promising initial relationships, leading to great final results. The superintendent of the district was asked to be part of a leadership team advocating for healthier school practices. He invited the Safe Routes to School representatives from the county health department to attend a school board meeting and provide an informational presentation on the benefits of Safe Routes to School. Board members were welcoming to the program due to the support of the superintendent. Meanwhile, a pilot program was thriving. Safe Routes to School supporters presented to the board again, using photos and quotes to show the success of initial efforts. When Safe Routes to School supporters returned a third time, the board was ready to put a comprehensive district Safe Routes to School policy into place, committing to bicycle and pedestrian education and more.



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Building Relationships with School Board Members: Making It Happen

Building positive relationships with board members will motivate them to use their decision-making power to support healthy students and Safe Routes to School. But it is not always obvious how to go about creating a strong relationship with your school board members. The following steps will help you develop lasting connections with board members that will assist you in collaboratively supporting active, healthy students. The steps set out here may not always proceed one after another in an orderly fashion, but this list will help you to understand the components of how this process is likely to unfold.

1. Do Your Homework

Before you pick up the phone and try to convince your school board members of the merits of Safe Routes to School, do some homework to make sure that your next steps are as effective as possible. Learn about the politics and personalities of the board, and look at the priorities of different board members. What are the pressing issues in your district? Understanding the content and having some background will build your credibility, increasing the likelihood that you will be taken seriously. In addition, you will gain important information about who to approach and how to frame your vision to increase your chances of a successful reception.

What are some specific ways to get that background information? Below are a few suggestions to consider as you are beginning to build a relationship with your school district board.

- *Basic research:* Look on your school district's website to learn the names and basic biographies of the board members and superintendent. Read recent news coverage of school board meetings or other happenings or controversies relating to the district.
- *Get the inside scoop:* Some kinds of background information are not likely to be publically available. Is there a split on the board? Do some members dislike each other? What are the main priorities for different

board members? Are there hot button issues? You need to figure out who you can talk to who might know the real deal about what is going on with the district and board. Start with your personal relationships. Can you chat with people that you know at your local school or at the district office? Talk to your school principal or secretary or PTA members, and ask them who else you should talk to. If you find allies during these conversations, keep them involved.

- *Take the pulse of your community:* In addition to understanding the board, you also want to have an understanding of what is going on in the community at large. What issues are significant in your community? What are residents' general attitudes toward walking or biking? What do parents think about children walking to school? How does this play out at different schools? Talk to parents, volunteers, children and local neighborhood groups. Read your local paper and review local blogs.

It is great to do your homework, but don't get stuck on this task forever! At a certain point, you may need to just plunge into meeting with school officials even though you don't know everything. Collaborate with your partners, who can help you balance your desire for preparation with the need to get started and learn by doing.

It All Started With a Phone Call

In Humboldt County, California, a member of the newly forming Safe Routes to School task force called a school board member to invite her to join the task force. That one call was enough to get the board member to join the group. With the support of the board member, the task force made presentations to the board, at a superintendent's forum, and at the principals' meeting. After educating the stakeholders, they were able to collaborate with the board to ensure the addition of comprehensive transportation safety information to the parent handbooks for all schools in the Eureka City Schools district.



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2. Determine Your Goal

Think about what your goal is, and whether you want to lead with that, or whether there are timing, relationship building, or strategic reasons that you may want to begin with an easy, friendly conversation. Is your goal to achieve a strong new Safe Routes to School program in every school? Great! But you may want to start by inviting a board member to join a walking school bus on Walk to School Day. Think about how you can build more commitment and investment in the success of Safe Routes to School over time.

You also want to think about the timing of your request. For example, in some districts, budget negotiations occur during a particular season, and board members may not be receptive to other topics during that time. Likewise, election season may or may not be the time to float your Safe Routes to School ideas, depending upon local considerations.

If you are still developing a larger strategy, that can be positive as well. In that case, your goal may be to solicit ideas and assistance in figuring out next steps.

Complementary Resources

Healthy Students, Thriving Districts: Including Safe Routes to School in District Policies. This factsheet functions as a rich source of data on the benefits for school districts of supporting Safe Routes to School. It can be given directly to school district and board personnel, or can be used to glean compelling facts and figures for meetings and presentations.

Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook: The free online Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook can be a useful tool for board members. The workbook functions as a detailed educational resource, setting out and exploring the areas of district functioning that intersect with Safe Routes to School. In addition, the workbook can allow a board member to assess the wide array of district policies that can support Safe Routes to School and tailor a policy approach that is right for the community.





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Tips from the Field

- Build a relationship before asking your board member for a specific commitment, so you are familiar, trusted, and credible. Be friendly!
- Provide opportunities for the board to become familiar with your work and areas of expertise, and to see you as an expert on the issue.
- Having an ‘in’ helps with credibility. Sitting on district committees, such as the wellness committee, can establish you as a constructive force and highlight your expertise.
- Approach your superintendent early on, and make sure that she or he is in the loop. See if the superintendent can suggest a board member who has interest. A superintendent might be able to point you to a champion.
- Board members often support other board members, so start with your most likely ally and have them make connections for you with other board members.
- Make sure you have identified steps that board members can take if they are supportive. Board members want to know how they can contribute; they don’t want to just fill a seat.
- Have a board member be your spokesperson to the board, or communicate with them to identify concerns.
- Invite board members or the superintendent to participate in your task force – they may regard this as a prestigious or interesting opportunity, and will become invested in successful outcomes.
- Get parents and students involved – parents have an effective and powerful voice in favor of healthy changes at schools; youth involvement can be uniquely persuasive, while also providing an educational experience.
- Offer resources, technical assistance, and support as the district explores and implements your ideas.

3. Make the Connections

It is wise to introduce an idea by first meeting with board members, before attending a board meeting and presenting a goal. Board members don’t like to be blindsided, and are likely to respond better if they have time to explore a concept and obtain background knowledge. So set up meetings with individual board members and with the superintendent or someone in the superintendent’s office. You are trying to generate interest and stimulate action by board members and school superintendents, but remember to start from their concerns and priorities, not your own. Ask about their initiatives and goals. Make connections between district objectives like student achievement and attendance and Safe Routes to School’s role in promoting student health. If board members are not receptive to your ideas, be open to theirs. Ask what else they would suggest to achieve your goals. Look for events or initiatives that board members are sponsoring that are related to your interests, and be supportive of those. The first meeting is not your only chance to educate them, so stay friendly and look for opportunities to achieve mutual goals while building a relationship. Demonstrate to board members that while Safe Routes to School takes few district resources, it can support district goals, community relations, and student well-being, and your ideas will resonate.



4. Attend Board Meetings

Building a strong supportive relationship with your board means attending school board meetings.

- Listen carefully to board discussions on relevant topics in order to better understand the challenges faced by the school district, as well as the different perspectives on the board. Consider how related initiatives intersect with your goals.
- Bring parent and community champions to board meetings when it seems appropriate. Show that Safe Routes to School has strong community support. Allies include teachers and principals, youth and youth advocates, health departments, local officials, neighborhood groups and residents, and other community stakeholders.
- Speak up in favor of Safe Routes to School, and make sure your allies speak too. When speaking, you will need to be brief, but will want to be able to show through stories and data the impact that Safe Routes to School can have on students and the district. Plan your messages with your allies, so that each speaker conveys a different point or perspective while reinforcing the main message.



5. Celebrate Your Success, Show Your Thanks, and Implement!

When you are successful, you've got to celebrate your victory! Celebrating can be a good opportunity to show your appreciation for the support you got from board members. You want to keep the relationship with your board members strong. Thank them, and where appropriate, support them in return with their priorities and events. You want them to feel appreciated and to maintain a positive working relationship. And of course, the work doesn't stop with a victory – it just moves into the next phase, implementation. As you follow through to ensure that new policies and procedures are implemented in a strong and thoughtful way, you will be glad that you maintained those relationships. You may well have cause to go back to your board members – to request their influence if you encounter a reluctant school employee, to

assist in tweaking a policy to address a problem that's come up, or because you're ready to tackle your next goal, and achieve even more success for healthy students.

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