



Safe Routes  
to School  
**National  
Partnership**

# How to be a Parent Champion for Safe Routes to School



Schools, cities, parents, and students are embracing the Safe Routes to School movement and establishing tens of thousands of Safe Routes to School programs throughout the United States. This document describes how parents and families can get involved in Safe Routes to School, though data collection, school and neighborhood improvements, policy change, and programs to enable and encourage more walking and bicycling.

## **Education, Encouragement, and Enforcement**

Education, encouragement, and enforcement are additional strategies for implementing Safe Routes to School in your community. Often they require few resources and can be started right away. Discuss with other families, school staff, and neighbors which ideas below could be good options for your school. Ensure education, encouragement, and enforcement methods are inclusive of all members in your school. Consider language and cultural barriers when producing materials.

### *Organize a Walk or Bike to School Day Event*

Encouragement activities such as Walk to School or Bike to School Day can show families how easy and fun it is to walk or bike. Start campaigns for these national events and get teachers, staff members, students, and parents committed to participating. Register your event online at [walkandbike.org](http://walkandbike.org). For tips on walk or bike to school day read our [Bike to School Day blog](#).

### *Organize a Walking School Bus or Bike Train*

Walking school buses or bike trains are safe and fun ways for children to get physical activity as they travel to and from school with adult supervision. Each “bus” or “train” walks or bikes along a set route with one or more adults leading it, picking children up at designated stops along a predetermined route and using active travel to get them to school. The process is reversed in the afternoons on the way home from school. It is that easy! For information about starting a walking school bus or bike train refer to [Step In to a Walking School Bus Program](#) and [Get Rolling with a Bike Train Program](#).

### *Bicycle and Pedestrian Curricula in the Classroom*

To ensure that children receive appropriate safety training, work with your school to provide education about walking and bicycling safely. This type of training helps to address parent and school administrator concerns about traffic safety. For more information about why this training is important and what to look for in a training program refer to [Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Curriculum for Safe Routes to School](#).

### *Remote Drop Off*

Many schools that struggle with including students that live too far to walk or bicycle to school have created remote drop off programs. Programs work with schools and school district transportation departments (including school buses) to designate student drop off locations at a short distance from the school. This helps to reduce traffic congestion around the school and encourages students to get additional exercise. [Read tips on remote drop off](#).

### *Create Partnerships with Law Enforcement*

Creating partnerships between law enforcement, schools, and community organizations can help bolster Safe Routes to School programs. Working with your local police department to increase patrols during school commute hours or implement measures to decrease speeding are two examples of partnerships with law enforcement. Work with families and law enforcement to make sure that a police presence will not end up targeting students of color.

### *Addressing School Bus Cuts*

When school districts face financial challenges, a common target for cuts is the school transportation system -- cutting back bus routes and stops as well as widening the walk zone around a school. However, reducing busing without also addressing student safety risks often leads to more traffic congestion, poorer air quality, increased safety risks, and higher family transportation costs as more parents drive children to school. If your school district is talking about transportation cuts, work with district and school staff members to ensure that a Safe Routes to School program is being implemented simultaneously.



## **Understanding the Problem and Opportunity**

Understand the challenges preventing many students from safely walking or biking to school. Using the [National Center for Safe Routes to School](#)'s parent survey you can begin gathering information on issues specific to your school. Survey parents every two to three years. Work with your school to understand how students are getting to and from school by conducting student travel tallies at the beginning and end of each school year.

Conduct a walk audit by surveying walking conditions around the school. Look for sidewalks, crosswalks, school zone signs, parent behavior during arrival and dismissal to better understand the challenges families and students face. Refer to [Let's Go For A Walk: A Toolkit for Planning and Conducting a Walk Audit](#) for more information and templates for conducting a walk audit. Walk audits are not the only method for establishing baseline data. Interviewing school staff, students, and parents is also a great way to discover your school's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to opportunities for walking and bicycling to and from school. When interviewing school staff members, students, and parents, make sure educational and marketing materials are accessible, and consider all languages and cultures in your school.

Historically, low income communities and communities of color have streets and schools with fewer sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, bike racks, and less lighting than communities whose residents have higher incomes. These communities shoulder the burden of increased rates of death and injury because of missing or unsafe places to walk and bike. Many things contribute to street safety, but the presence or lack of safe places to walk and bike plays a major role. For more information on disparities in street infrastructure refer to "[At the Intersection of Active Transportation and Equity](#)."

## **School and Neighborhood Changes**

While changing the way streets and sidewalks function in your community may seem intimidating, it is quite possible. Cities and counties make decisions about traffic speeds, crosswalks, signage and other neighborhood design issues. School campus design can also support walking and bicycling. By talking with the principal, city traffic engineer, city councilperson, or other officials, families can change the environment in and around the school and throughout the neighborhood. You can help improve the school and neighborhood environment with the actions listed below.

### *Getting Bike Racks at the School*

Students won't bicycle to school if there isn't a place to safely store their bicycles. Creating space and securing funding or a donation for school bike racks assures the safety of bikes while children are in class. Work with the school and school district to make sure bike racks are secure, in a visible place, and easily accessible from school entrances. Asking the school district or city to provide needed bike racks is a great place to start.

## Maintenance

Regular maintenance of streets, sidewalks, trees, and bushes means the difference between a pleasant walk or bicycle ride to school and a harrowing experience tiptoeing over shards of glass and dodging overhanging bushes that push you into the street. The city often decides when to trim bushes and sweep streets, and what streets and paths to clear first when it snows. A walk audit with city officials can make maintenance a higher priority. Work with city staff or start by talking with an elected official, to address maintenance issues—they are often easy to solve. Consider organizing a cleanup party that brings families, students, and the community together to make sidewalks and paths clear and beautiful.

## Painting Crosswalks and Signage

Encourage communication between your city and school. Discuss problems that students encounter walking and bicycling to school with the city engineer and/or elected officials and help gather information for needed city projects. Share walk audit findings with city officials. Remember that the key to successful change is to share specific problems, such as busy intersections, pedestrian lights that don't allow enough time, or missing crosswalks, instead of telling the city 'the solution.' Ask about organizing temporary or low cost improvements such as a community crosswalk or intersection painting at your school.

## Safe Routes to School Grant Application

If your walk audit shows that the area around the school needs extensive improvements, work with your local decision makers at the city and school to apply for funding to initiate these projects. There may be local, regional, state, or private funding available. A well thought out proposal that includes strong partnerships in the community will lead to a powerful funding application that can improve the streets around your school.

## Policy Changes

The idea of changing government and school policies may seem overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. Schools, cities, and counties all make policies that govern use of agency resources including funding. With parents and families advocating for changes, you can help these agencies support opportunities for children to walk and bicycle to school and in daily life. The following are policy changes that can improve walking and bicycling to schools. We suggest that you pick one or two policies that interest you, and work together with other concerned families to encourage changes.

### Reversing a No Walk/Bike Policy

Does your school prohibit walking or bicycling to school? If so, you can change this! There are many examples across the country of schools that have changed their policies after parents have asked them to be reviewed or reconsidered. For more information, see our [Safe Routes to School Local Policy Guide](#) and [Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#).



## Integrating Safe Routes to School in Wellness Policies

Federal law requires all school districts that participate in the federal school meal program to adopt wellness policies that focus on nutrition and physical activity. Many schools have policies that focus on nutrition, but they need more ways to increase physical activity. Getting more students to walk and bike through this simple change is an excellent way to support your Safe Routes to School program. Find out if your school has a wellness policy, how it can be amended, and get Safe Routes to School included! This will help later with getting additional programs and policies initiated. For more information reference the [Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#).

## School Siting and Closure Policies

When school districts grow, budgets contract, or the student population changes, there are often discussions around building or closing schools. Local districts have wide discretion regarding where they locate schools; where a school is built or which school is closed are critical components in enabling or preventing students from walking or bicycling to school. Find out more about school siting and closures [here](#). These policy initiatives provide preliminary ideas for how parents and community advocates can start implementing policies that support Safe Routes to School, changes to the built environment, and increased physical activity. Children can also get involved as advocates for better walking and bicycling conditions.

## Complete Streets

The design of streets is essential to the livability of the area around the school. Getting your city to pass a complete streets policy can lead to roads being designed and maintained for all modes of travel. By ensuring that streets are accessible to people walking, biking, driving, and taking transit, you can maximize the use of the street while creating a healthy place for everyone to move about. For more information, read our guide [Complete Streets: Making Roads Safe and Accessible for All Users](#).

**Be a champion for Safe Routes to School today! Find a strategy you're interested in and help make walking and biking to and around your school safer.**