

How to Be A PTA Champion for Safe Routes to School



Tens of thousands of Safe Routes to School programs are being established throughout the country as more and more schools, cities, parents, and students embrace the Safe Routes to School movement. Naturally, as programs evolve and schools begin to see increased participation, it becomes more important to make sure that policies that support students walking and bicycling are not only in place, but also effective. It is also important to enhance the built environment around schools so that there are more sidewalks, bike lanes, pathways and safer street crossings. This document describes ways that parents can get involved in policy change and improvements to the built environment to enable and encourage more walking and bicycling, which is a healthy form of physical activity.

Built Environment Changes

While affecting the way streets and sidewalks are installed may seem intimidating, it is quite possible. According to parent surveys nationwide, the number one reason why more children don't walk and bicycle to schools is fear of traffic safety. Decisions about traffic speeds, crosswalks, signage and other built environment issues are made by schools, cities, and counties. Engaging these key stakeholders is a key way that parents can affect changes to the environment around the school and throughout the neighborhood. Through engagement with your principal, local engineer, city councilperson and/or other officials, you can assess the situation around the neighborhood by conducting a walk/bicycle audit. [Walk/Bicycle audits](#) provide parent and volunteer feedback on the conditions around the school and help decision makers better understand what challenges the parents and students face such as a lack of sidewalks, difficulty crossing streets, speeding cars, and more. With these issues documented, you can work with the school and city to develop solutions. Here are some ways to get started once you've done your audit.

Getting Bike Racks at the School

If you build it, they will come! 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 parents and students of the safety of their bicycles while learning in the classroom. For more information on bicycle racks check out page 24 of our [Curricula Guide](#).

Maintenance

Regular maintenance to the streets, sidewalks, trees, and bushes can be the difference between a pleasant walk or bicycle to school and a harrowing experience dodging shards of glass and overhanging bushes that push you into the street. The city often decides when to trim bushes regularly, sweep streets and what streets and paths to plow first when it snows. Working with city staff, or starting by talking with an elected official, is an excellent way to get to the heart of what can be an easily solvable problem.

Painting Crosswalks and Signage

The city also is in charge of signage and crosswalks throughout the city. Working closely with your city engineer and/or elected officials to discuss problems that students encounter walking and bicycling to school will help gather information for a to-do list of city projects. Remember that talking about the specifics problems, such as busy intersections, pedestrian lights that don't allow enough time, or missing crosswalks, rather than trying to tell the city 'the solution', is the key to successful policy change.

SRTS Grant Application

If your walk/bicycle audit shows that the area around the school needs extensive improvements, this is a great opportunity to work with your local decision makers at the city and school to apply for federal Safe Routes to School funding through your state department of transportation to initiate these projects. A well thought

How to Be A PTA Champion for Safe Routes to School

out proposal that includes strong partnerships in the community will lead to a great application that can improve the built environment around your school. [Read more here](#) to get additional information about the Safe Routes to School grant process in your state.

Make Your School A Healthier, More Active Place!

Fire Up Your Feet programs encourage families, students and schools to work together and create active lifestyles, which inspire our children to be healthy and physically active. Learn how you can help sustain Safe Routes to School programs, access a variety of resources on school wellness, or create a healthy fundraiser for your PTA: www.fireupyourfeet.org.

Policy Changes

Policy change may sound scary, but it doesn't have to be. Schools, cities and various departments all make policies that govern staff hours and use of agency resources including funding. With parents advocating for changes, you can help government agencies make adjustments that will lead to improved opportunities for children to walk and bicycle to schools and in daily life. This document includes several policies that pertain specifically to improving walking and bicycling to schools. We suggest that you pick one or two policies that interest you, and work together with other concerned parents to make some changes.

Reverse a no walk/bike policy

Does your school prohibit walking and/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 [Local Policy Guide](#).

Wellness Policies

A 2004 federal law requires all school districts that receive free or reduced meals to adopt wellness policies

that focus on nutrition and physical activity. Many schools have a detailed focus on nutrition, but need more ways to increase physical activity. Getting more students walking and bicycling 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. Read some [best practices for wellness policies](#).

Law Enforcement

Partnerships with community and government organizations help solidify Safe Routes to School. Working with your local police department to increase patrols during school commute hours or implement measures to decrease speeding are two excellent examples of effective policy change. For more ideas, read our guide on [Involving Law Enforcement](#).

Bicycle and Pedestrian Curricula in the Classroom

Working with your school to adopt a reliable and effective walking and bicycling education program ensures that students receive training on how to behave near traffic and begin to gain the trust of administrators and parents. For more information on why this is important and what to look for in a curricula you can refer to the [National Partnership's Bicycle and Pedestrian Curricula Guide](#).

Complete Streets

The design of streets is essential to the livability of the area around the school, and 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 pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users and motorists you can maximize the use of the street while creating a healthy, habitable place for all users to move about. For more information, read our guide: [Complete Streets: Making Roads Safe and Accessible for All Users](#).

How to Be A PTA Champion for Safe Routes to School

Data Collection

In order to implement effective policies you must first know what are the deep seeded issues preventing your school from actively participating in Safe Routes to School. Using the [National Center for Safe Routes to School's parent survey evaluation tool](#) you can zero in on issues specific to your school. Work with your school to make it a policy that student tallies are collected at the beginning and end of each school year, and that parent surveys are conducted every two-three years.

Remote Drop Off

Many schools that struggle with including students that live too far to walk or bicycle to school have instituted remote drop off policies. Policies involve schools and transportation departments (including school buses) to create a manner to drop students off several blocks from the school to decrease traffic congestion around the school and allow the opportunity for students to get additional exercise. [Read tips on Remote Drop Offs.](#)

Shared Use Policies

Shared Use Policies are agreements between two government entities, such as cities and schools to allow facilities to be shared with the general public or used after-hours. Examples of this include sharing a sports field between the school and a weekend league, having a school playground open as an after-hours park, or sharing a school site for continuing education programs, sports and recreational teams, or even just providing a place for community members to get active. In so doing, no single party is fully liable for the costs and responsibilities associated with the recreational facilities. Furthermore, after regular school hours, schools can continue to provide their students and the local community with the facilities needed to maintain active and healthy lifestyles, while incurring little to no additional costs. Click [here](#) for more information on Shared Use Agreements.

School Bus Cuts

When school districts face financial challenges, a common target for cuts are the school transportation

system by cutting back bus routes, trimming the number of bus stops, or widening the walk radius around a school. However, cutting bus routes without a simultaneous and planned effort to address student safety concerns often leads to greater traffic congestion, poorer air quality, increased safety risks and higher parent transportation costs due to an increase in parents driving children to school. It is essential that school districts collaborate with parents and city officials to make it safer for children to walk and bicycle, particularly when cuts to school bus services are being proposed. If your school is talking about bus cuts, work with them to ensure that a Safe Routes to School program is being implemented simultaneously. [Find out more about Bus Cuts here.](#)

School Siting and Closures

When school districts grow, budgets contract or the student population changes, there are often discussions around building or closing schools. The guidelines that dictate where a school is built or which school is closed are critical components in effectively encouraging students to walk or bicycle to school. Getting involved in the process now can significantly affect your community. It's critical to have parents, schools and cities all talking together. [Find out more about School Siting and Closures here.](#)

These policy initiatives provide preliminary ideas for how parents and community advocates can get started implementing policies that support Safe Routes to School, changes to the built environment and increased physical activity. Parents can also work with their children to get them involved as advocates for supporting better walking and bicycling conditions.

Get fired up! You can do it.