



Safe Routes
to School
**National
Partnership**

We Rely on Safe Routes to School Volunteers: Recruiting Volunteers

Volunteers are the lifeblood of most Safe Routes to School programs! This means that it is key for Safe Routes to School coordinators to figure out how to find volunteers, train them, and keep them coming back. This resource highlights strategies for recruiting volunteers and discusses some of the common challenges programs face.

Who can be a volunteer for my program?

As a coordinator, your first steps are to find volunteers and get them on board. Start with parents, family members, school staff, and others who are already connected with your school and are invested in the health and success of students. Most programs stick with this inner circle if they are able to find enough volunteers within it.

If the number of volunteers from your school community is limited, consider expanding to the volunteer pool to include older students, community members, city staff, or school neighbors. Extend your search to the wider community by contacting high schools, colleges, community centers, senior centers, bicycling groups, non-profits, businesses, and faith-based organizations. If you are recruiting volunteers from the wider community, consider focusing on one or just a few outside sources. You may get a large response from prospective volunteers from a single volunteer program marketing effort or training. Using the same group for volunteer recruitment can help build relationships and sustain consistent volunteer recruitment.

It is also possible to recruit volunteers from the general public through websites such as [Volunteer Match](#) and [Idealist](#). Volunteers from the general public may require more screening and training.

How do I recruit family volunteers?

Do not try to put volunteer recruitment on the plates of teachers and school administration--their plates are already full. Look for help recruiting volunteers from individuals at your school that already have access to families such as parents or family coordinators.

Since word-of-mouth advertising is a great recruitment strategy, enlist active family volunteers to recruit other families. Encourage active family volunteers to share sign-up forms with prospective volunteers. Recruit volunteers from families who are already walking or biking with their children to school; these guardians are likely to be more enthusiastic and prepared to volunteer with your program.



Be creative — see how you can provide a stipend for family involvement. These stipends may attract guardians whose childcare responsibilities are a barrier to full-time employment. But, be careful — this approach can backfire when funding runs out, leaving programs short on family leaders and volunteers.

Refer to the Volunteer Recruitment Checklist for more ideas about how to recruit volunteers.

What are the barriers to obtaining and retaining volunteers?

While juggling many responsibilities and demands, parents and family members are often flooded with requests to volunteer. For many parents, lacking spare time is a big barrier to joining a volunteer program.

Meanwhile, retention challenges are baked into school-based volunteer programs. Parents often stop volunteering when their child graduates and sometimes school staff members leave one school to go to another. As a result, Safe Routes to School programs typically need new volunteer recruitment campaigns every year. Fortunately, when volunteers feel appreciated and fulfilled, they tend to keep volunteering for programs and causes they believe in. Understanding the importance of volunteer engagement will lead to success with volunteers and help create robust support for Safe Routes to School.

For information on volunteer appreciation reference our [Volunteer Toolkit](#).

What are additional challenges for engaging volunteers in low-income schools?

Volunteer coordinators often experience challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers in low-income schools. Schools in low-income areas may be understaffed and are often already serving additional support functions for students, juggling family crises, ensuring students are fed, and providing additional services. As a result, their availability to support a Safe Routes to School program may be limited. Relying on parent and other caregiver volunteers can be a challenge in low income communities, since many parents and family members are overstressed and may be working full time or juggling multiple jobs. Understanding these dynamics is important. A strong volunteer program may need to rely less on staff and parents, but might be able to tap into community organizations and other neighborhood resources.

In some communities, schools that require background checks for volunteers may have a hard time recruiting volunteers for Safe Routes to School and other programs. There are many reasons for this including an inability to pay the fee to obtain a background check, if the school district does not cover such costs. Immigration status fears (discussed more below) should also be considered when implementing background checks.

What are additional challenges for engaging volunteers in schools with large Immigrant populations?

In communities with large immigrant populations, language barriers can lead to limited parental engagement. In some communities, fear about deportation or imprisonment related to immigration status are having negative effects on school-related engagement of community members and families. Refugee and undocumented community members may be reluctant to participate in anything that brings them into contact with government officials, particularly law enforcement. In addition, some immigrants with legal status are deterred from volunteering because of the fear that volunteer engagements may lead to uncovering the undocumented status of another member of their household.

What are strategies for engaging volunteers in low income schools and schools with large immigrant populations?

Build trust over time: The most successful programs in low income schools can pinpoint the component that led to their success – trusting relationships. Building relationships with students, families, and administration takes time, sometimes years. The sense of trust that is built by these relationships supports successful and sustainable Safe Routes to School programs. To build trust, community members need to know details about the coordinator and program, including who you are, what you stand for, what the program is, why it's important, and how Safe Routes to School benefits them. They

should be partners in the program and not a population you are merely serving. Having a vested interest in the success of the school and community—not just the program—is critical. Your visibility within the community at various events and meetings can assist with building rapport.

Make program efforts culturally and linguistically relevant:

Efforts tailored to culture and language will be best received. Various communities like to engage in different ways. Early on, invest time and energy in figuring out the preferences for communication and participation so that you save time in the long run. An example of this type of tailoring for one Spanish speaking community in Tucson, AZ: the coordinator holds “cafecitas” or discussions over coffee. Speaking over coffee feels informal, like participants are friends meeting up to say hello. This type of tailoring might help potential volunteers feel less intimidated and more likely to participate. It also helps to have a coordinator that has personal ties to the community or school. If that's not possible, securing a volunteer who could serve as a cultural liaison will be invaluable.

Support other goals: Safe Routes to School is certainly a coordinator's priority. However, by supporting and contributing to other programs and needs within the school and community, it shows that the Safe Routes to School program isn't there to only zap resources and take up time. Showing a larger commitment to the school community's concerns can result in more connections and deep returns. Attracting volunteers may require you to build your Safe Routes to School program so that it is connected to other community goals and efforts, such as violence prevention or reductions in absenteeism.

Go where the people are: In some low-income communities, the school may not be the most trusted or effective setting for recruitment. Instead, get to know where community members gather. In these trusted gathering places, implement a call to volunteer. Include local businesses, community based organizations, churches, parks, and recreation centers in your volunteer search.

What resources can I use to get started?

Use the [Volunteer Recruitment Checklist](#) to organize how, when, and where you will recruit volunteers. Start recruitment off strong with the [Volunteer Recruitment Flyer Template](#). Customize the flyer to fit your school's specific Safe Routes to School needs. Sign up volunteers using the [Volunteer Interest Form](#). If you are recruiting volunteers specifically to lead walking school buses or bike trains, see our resources “[Step by Step: How to Start a Walking School Bus at Your School](#),” “[The Wheels on the Bike Go Round and Round: How to Get a Bike Train Rolling at Your School](#),” “[Bike Train Leader Information and Sign-up Form](#)” and the “[Request for Walking School Bus Routes Leaders Form](#).”