



Safe Routes
to School
**National
Partnership**

Rural Communities: Making Safe Routes Work

Safe Routes to School programs are taking off around the nation.

In over 17,000 schools around the country, these programs are making it easier and safer for students to be healthy by walking or bicycling to school. Although there are important considerations for how to make Safe Routes to School programs succeed in rural environments, rural communities can benefit greatly from Safe Routes to School – and many already are. This factsheet provides an overview of why Safe Routes to School initiatives are important in rural communities, approaches to explore, and how to get started.

What is a Safe Routes to School Program?

Safe Routes to School programs encourage children to walk or bicycle to or from school and make sure it is safe to do so. Programs can be volunteer run, or can be coordinated by paid staff from the school district, public health department, or a local nonprofit.

Some programs simply focus on getting students to walk or bicycle on National Walk to School Day, and may provide brief education on safe walking and bicycling. Other programs establish regular walking school buses and bicycle trains, with parents or volunteers who accompany groups of children on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis as they walk or bicycle to and from school.

Federal or state funding is often available to support Safe Routes to School programs and to make safety improvements to street crossings, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes on the route to school.



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Safe Routes to Healthier Kids

Walking and bicycling to school used to be the norm in rural communities across the United States. In 1969, nearly 50 percent of all rural, suburban, and urban elementary and middle school students walked or bicycled to school. But nowadays, only 13 percent of children get to school by foot or bicycle.¹ In rural areas, these numbers are even lower, ranging from a high of 12 percent of rural students on the West Coast, to only 1.1 percent of rural children in the South Atlantic region.² Low rates of walking and bicycling have contributed to many children experiencing childhood obesity, diabetes, and other significant health problems.

The good news is that communities are working nationally and locally to reverse today's low rates of walking and bicycling to school. Safe Routes to School initiatives improve safety on streets near schools while providing encouragement for children walking and bicycling to school. Walking and bicycling to school allows students to get daily physical activity, improve their health,³ and get a boost in academic achievement,⁴ while decreasing traffic congestion around school.⁵

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Why Do Rural Communities Need Safe Routes to School?

Rates of obesity are high for all American children, but they are even higher in rural communities, with 40-50% of rural children overweight or obese, and children getting less physical activity than urban and suburban children.⁶ Small towns and rural areas often lack safe walking conditions, like sidewalks, lighting, and crosswalks. At the same time, there is a great need to make streets safe

for walking, because 1.6 million rural households do not have access to cars.⁷

Safe Routes to School initiatives can be a great way to safely increase physical activity for children, while providing additional benefits for all community members such as improved traffic safety and reduced air pollution.



Getting Kids Active in Humboldt County

Walking Wednesdays are a regular feature at Washington Elementary School in rural Humboldt County. To make Walking Wednesdays successful, the school set up a remote drop off program, which enables students who live far from school to join those who bicycle or walk from home. At the remote drop off location, students congregate as they are dropped off, and then walk the rest of the way to school in a walking school bus with an adult volunteer. The program is organized to allow students who take the school bus to participate too – if students bring in a permission slip, the bus driver will drop them off at the remote drop off location to walk with the others. To include students who aren't able to participate in these options, the school also allows students who are driven to school to contribute to classroom participation goals by walking around the track.

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Making It Work

Rural communities have many advantages in working on Safe Routes to School. Schools often play a more central role in community life, making it easier to convince decision-makers to invest in safe access. Because rural communities are small, parents and coordinators are more likely to have personal relationships with decision-makers. Nonetheless, it can be a challenge to get students walking and bicycling due to challenges like high speed roads, few sidewalks, and long distances between students' homes and school. By focusing on tried and true Safe Routes to School approaches such as walking school buses, walk to school days, educational events, and infrastructure grants and improvements, rural communities are seeing increases in walking and bicycling to school.

In addition, rural communities across the country are instituting creative and innovative approaches to get more students walking and bicycling. One popular approach is known as a remote drop off. When students live far from school, family members or the school bus can drop students at a park or another site a short distance from school. Similarly, groups of students can walk together or with an adult from their homes to a school bus stop. Many rural schools further encourage walking through frequent walker programs in which students walk around the track or playground while at school. Rural communities are also working to keep schools near families in town, resisting efforts to close local schools and move students to new schools that are built far away. All of these approaches work with what is available to improve students' health and strengthen rural communities.

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How to Get Started

- If you don't have a lot of time and resources, start simple. **Begin with a walk to school day event** at one school. Talk to the principal and a few teachers and families and see who else comes out and joins in.
- **Follow up with a monthly or weekly walking day.** Or see if a few families want to host a daily walking school bus, either to the school or to a school bus stop.
- As you get some momentum, **build a team that can prioritize next steps** – like working with the school transportation department to *support remote drop offs* for the school bus, *identifying unsafe intersections or crossings*, and *connecting with city or county planning officials* to prioritize safe walking and bicycling near schools.
- **Apply for funding** for Safe Routes to School programs and street improvements from regional transportation agencies or state departments of transportation.
- Work to **get your school board to take action to support Safe Routes to School**, perhaps by passing a school district policy. *The Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook*, a joint product of the Safe Routes to School National Partnership and ChangeLab Solutions, can help in drafting a solid policy.



Footnotes

¹ The National Center for Safe Routes to School (2011). How Children Get to School: School Travel Patterns from 1969 to 2009, http://saferoutesinfo.org/sites/default/files/resources/NHTS_school_travel_report_2011_0.pdf.

² http://activelivingresearch.org/sites/default/files/Infographic_WalkBikeToSchool_Regional.pdf.

³ Davison KK, Werder, JL and Lawson CT. "Children's Active Commuting to School: Current Knowledge and Future

Directions." *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 5(3): 1-11, 2008, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2483568/pdf/PCD53A100.pdf.

⁴ Martinez-Gomez D, Ruiz JR, Gomez-Martinez S, et al. "Active Commuting to School and Cognitive Performance in Adolescents." *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 165(4): 300-305, 2010, <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=384475>.

⁵ Dimaggio C and Li G. "Effectiveness of a Safe Routes to School Program in Preventing School-Aged Pedestrian Injury." *Pediatrics*, 131(2): 290-296, 2013.

⁶ <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/childrens-health/articles/2010/04/09/child-obesity-soaring-in-rural-america>; see also Bailey-Davis L, Horst M, Hillemeier MM, Lauter A. "Obesity disparities among elementary-aged children: data from school-based BMI surveillance." *Pediatrics*. 2012 Dec;130(6):1102-9. doi: 10.1542/peds.2012-0192. Epub 2012 Nov 12.

⁷ Dabson, Brian, Thomas G. Johnson, and Charles W. Fluharty. A RUPRI Policy Brief: Rethinking Federal Investments in Rural Transportation: Rural Considerations Regarding Reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Act. Columbia, MO: Rural Policy Research Institute, April 2011.

