



Why Safe Routes to School is an Essential Part of Reopening: Talking Points for Safe Routes Back to School 2021

During the pandemic, students, families, schools, and other community members have dealt with fear, isolation, and endless attempts to be creative in challenging situations. Now, we are faced with a new challenge: dealing with the chaos of returning to “normal.” As schools re-open, there will be a plethora of daunting challenges. Below is an outline of some of the challenges that have either surfaced because of or were exacerbated by the pandemic and talking points to outline how Safe Routes to School can provide the tools to address some of those concerns. While Safe Routes to School cannot solve every problem, it can address some significant health and safety challenges while enabling easier access to community destinations and resources that fill other gaps. With thoughtfulness and creativity, we can help communities thrive in this period of transition.

COVID-19 Has Taken a Toll on Our Communities and Our Kids

During the pandemic, kids lost access to places and activities (both in and out of school) where they could find social connections and physical activity. This took a serious toll, especially on the most vulnerable populations. For everyone, the sustained periods of stress and fear brought on by the pandemic have contributed to a collective and individual trauma. Keeping that in mind, it makes sense that moving into a new school year may be challenging and everyone involved will require more support than they did pre-pandemic.

The Health and Academic Impacts of Isolation and Remote Learning

Learning loss has been a growing concern as students learning remotely have struggled to stay engaged in a virtual classroom, but there is also significant concern around physical and mental health because of students' isolation. This is particularly acute for the many families coping with significant stress levels during the pandemic, from fear of contracting and recovering from the virus to financial, housing, and food insecurities.

- Parents of students learning remotely or in hybrid models were more likely than parents of students learning in-person to report that their children



experienced decreased physical activity, time spent outdoors, time with friends, and worsened mental or emotional health.¹

- Nearly three-quarters of parents polled in a national survey shared that they were concerned about their children's learning loss during the pandemic due to virtual learning.² That same poll showed that the vast majority of parents in the United States are concerned about the toll remote learning has taken on their children's physical and mental wellbeing.³



Disparate Impacts by Race and Socioeconomic Status

The pandemic and movements for racial justice in 2020 have underscored racial and economic disparities that were decades in the making.

- In 2020, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 150 percent in the nation's largest cities.⁴
- The pandemic disproportionately impacted the mental, physical, and economic health of low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities.
 - Black, Indigenous, and people of color workers are more likely to be employed in frontline or essential fields, which were required to continue going to work in conditions that placed them at high risk for exposure to COVID-19.⁵
 - These same workers are also much more likely to have pre-existing health conditions, lack health insurance, and lack access to health care.⁶
 - Black, Native, and Latinx Americans are also more likely to live in dense, multi-generational housing, further increasing the risk of exposure to their communities.⁷
- As families of color and families with lower incomes face disparate health and economic hardships during COVID-19, children of color and children of families with lower incomes are impacted by those challenges. Children of color have disproportionately

experienced learning loss, challenges with the digital divide, food insecurity, and housing instability during the pandemic.⁸

- The movements for racial justice this year highlighted racial profiling and over-policing in Black communities that have been happening for decades. For example, in a study from Minneapolis, Minnesota, Black cyclists made up almost half of the incident or arrest reports associated with being stopped for a bicycling citation, despite making up only 18 percent of the total Minneapolis population. The report warns that inequitable law enforcement actions may impede efforts to diversify the demographics of bike riders and bike advocates because of fear of targeted policing.⁹

A Spike in Traffic Danger

With fewer people driving, roads that were designed for cars to move quickly facilitated higher speeds and more fatal crashes.

- Even though people were driving less during the pandemic, the number of traffic fatalities did not drop at the same rate, causing deaths per mile to jump by 30 percent.¹⁰
- Traffic crashes were more severe because people were speeding on the emptier roads.¹¹
- Speeding is a serious concern for road users outside of cars, and particularly for Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, who are more likely to live in areas lacking safe, quality walking and biking infrastructure.^{12, 13}





How Walking, Rolling, and Safe Routes to School Can Help

As schools return to in-person learning, students, families, and school districts will be facing significant challenges. Safe Routes to School may not be able to address every one of those challenges, but it can provide tools to help support students and their families as schools reopen. Below is a collection of talking points to outline how Safe Routes to School programming can help students and families safely and affordably navigate their neighborhoods, improve physical and mental health, boost academic performance, cut costs, and build community connections. Even as federal, state, and local guidance changes, Safe Routes to School activities such as walking school buses are easy to adapt to different health and safety guidelines. Thoughtful programming, tailored to the local context with a focus on the most vulnerable families, can help people thrive as our communities reopen.

Improved Physical Health

Safe Routes to School supports increased physical activity, helps students and their families form healthy habits that can last a lifetime, and decreases the risk of chronic disease and obesity.

- In a study of adolescents, 100% of the students who walked both to and from school met the recommended levels of 60 or more minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on weekdays.¹⁴
- Walking and rolling to daily destinations, like school, provide an opportunity for physical activity outside of school time, augmenting physical education in school. Walking one mile to and from school each day is two-thirds of the recommended sixty minutes of physical activity a day. Children who walk to school have higher levels of physical activity throughout the day.^{15, 16}

Improved Social/Emotional Health

During the pandemic, many families were coping with significant stress levels, from fear of contracting and recovering from the virus, financial, housing, and food insecurities, to dealing with grief, and trauma. After the struggle of isolation, physical activity and social connection can help kids and their families reach better social and emotional wellbeing.

- Physical activity, movement, and play can be productive ways of combating stressors. Physical activity and physical education can support students' social and emotional learning, including managing emotions, establishing relationships, and feeling empathy for others.¹⁷
- Students can build stronger friendships and relationships through walking and biking together. Based on a CDC evaluation of 145 informants from 184 walking school bus programs from 2017 to 2018, every additional walking school bus trip per week was related to a 21 percent increase in the odds of experiencing less bullying.¹⁸
- Increasing the number of interactions with families and neighbors by walking and rolling through neighborhoods can build and reinforce positive social connections.

Lower Transportation and Health Care Costs for School Districts and Families

Walking and biking are low-cost options for students to get to and from school, reducing the amount of money needed to purchase and maintain personal and school vehicles.

- Transportation is the second-highest household expense in the United States. In 2019, Americans spent an average of \$10,742 to purchase, fuel, and insure their vehicles.¹⁹

- In 2016, an average of 13 percent of household expenditures went to transportation. However, for people with incomes in the bottom 20% of the U.S., one-third of their expenditures went to transportation costs. People making less money are hardest hit by a lack of affordable transportation options.²⁰
- Safe Routes to School programs can significantly reduce the cost of bussing for school systems. American school districts currently spend \$100 million to \$500 million annually to bus children for just one or two miles due to hazardous conditions. Improving walking conditions near schools could reduce this cost substantially, by decreasing the need for school bus service for students who live close enough to walk or bike to and from school.²¹
 - Approximately 55 percent of children are bused to school, and we spend \$21.5 billion nationally each year on school bus transportation, an average of \$854 per child transported per year.²²
- Safer options for commuting to school can save people from the emotional and financial cost of injuries and fatalities. In New York City, the total cost of implementing SRTS was just over \$10 million, but it produced estimated cost reductions of \$221 million by reducing costs associated with injury, lifelong disability, and death.²³

Reduced Student Tardiness and Absences

Lack of transportation options can be a barrier to getting to school on time or at all, especially for students in communities where there is no option other than to walk or bike to school.

- A Walking School Bus study in Springfield, Massachusetts showed that students participating in the program had a better attendance rate (approximately 2 percent) than their peers. One student who was tardy or absent 22 days in the 2010-11 school year was not late or absent once after joining the program.²⁴
- Based on a CDC evaluation of 145 informants from 184 walking school bus programs from 2017 to 2018, every additional walking school bus trip per week was related to a 23 percent increase in the odds of experiencing a reduction in tardiness.²⁵

Reduced Traffic Congestion and Improved Air Quality

Traffic congestion, particularly at school arrival and dismissal, is not only inefficient but it's also dangerous for kids and bad for air quality as cars sit idling. By boosting the number of children walking and bicycling, Safe Routes to School projects reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality which can reduce asthma attacks

- In 2009, school travel by private vehicle accounted for 10 to 14 percent of all automobile trips made during morning rush hour.²⁶
- While distance to school is the most commonly reported barrier to walking and bicycling, private vehicles still account for half of school trips between 1/4 and 1/2 mile—a distance easily covered on foot or bike.^{27, 28}
- Children exposed to traffic pollution are more likely to have asthma, permanent lung deficits, and a higher risk of heart and lung problems as adults.²⁹
- Over the last 25 years, among children ages 5 to 14, there has been a 74 percent increase in asthma cases.³⁰ In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.³¹
- One-third of schools are located in “air pollution danger zones.”³²



Improved Academic Performance

Student health has been linked to academic performance. Walking and/or rolling to school can help ensure students arrive ready to learn.

- One study found that after walking on a treadmill for 20 minutes, children responded to test questions with greater accuracy and had more brain activity than children who had been sitting. Children also completed learning tasks faster and more accurately following physical activity.³³
- Physically fit children have larger hippocampal volume and basal ganglia, brain components both connected with learning.³⁴
- Sixth- and ninth-grade students with high fitness scored significantly better on math and social studies tests compared with less fit students, even after controlling for socioeconomic status.³⁵
- When children get physical activity before class, they are more focused on their tasks. Data shows that this is particularly beneficial for children who have the most trouble paying attention and those with attention deficit disorders.³⁶

Increased Safety from Personal and Traffic Violence

Safe Routes to School programming can help ensure that walking, rolling, and biking can be a safe and enjoyable choice, not just a necessary risk for those who have no other options.

- Increasing the number of people using the streets, better lighting, and better street design can increase individual sense of safety as well as decrease actual criminal activity. Data shows that the safer that people feel in their neighborhood, the more time they spend walking.³⁷



- Groups of children walking or biking together along with one or more adults can provide a safe space to practice new routes or modes of active transportation.
- Safe Routes to School programming can help prepare children to safely respond to bullying or harassment.
- Safe Routes to School programming can increase safety on the routes to school without increasing police presence, especially in Black communities that experience over-policing and racial profiling.

Conclusion

As schools reopen, Safe Routes to School programming will be an essential part of ensuring children and their families have access to the resources they need and a valuable tool for ensuring the health and safety of school communities. For many, active transportation can be a welcome addition for the physical, social, and mental health benefits, while for other kids and their families, walking and rolling are their only options. Let's make sure that regardless of how people choose to move through their neighborhoods, they are safe doing so.

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