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Safe Routes to School is a popular program that works to get more students walking and rolling to school and in daily life. School boards, superintendents, and principals can have a significant influence on the way in which students travel to and from school. There are many policies, procedures and projects that can be advanced at the school and district level to address concerns, improve safety, increase physical activity, and get more students walking and rolling.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards, Superintendents, and Principals



Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost 50 percent of all students walked or rolled to school, and 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school walked or rolled. Today, only 11 percent of students walk or roll to school. These changes have contributed to traffic congestion around schools, increased the expense of busing students, decreased safety for students walking and rolling to and from school, and had a significant long term impact on the physical activity of students.

Safe Routes to School, a national and international movement to increase physical activity, improve health, increase safety and reduce traffic congestion by getting more students walking and rolling to school, has been making changes at the local, regional, state and national levels. The Safe Routes to School momentum accelerated in 2005 with the passage of the [federal transportation law](#), SAFETEA-LU, which dedicated \$1.1 billion to Safe Routes to School projects and programs through state departments of transportation. To date, more than 17,400 schools and more than 6.8 million children nationwide have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to provide a fun, safe and accessible way for students to arrive at school. Communities implementing Safe Route to School have seen as much as a 44 percent decrease in pedestrian crashes, increases in walking and rolling ranging from [20 to 200 percent](#), higher levels of concentration in the classroom from students and reduced traffic congestion. There are numerous benefits for school districts who invest in encouraging more students to walk and roll. This action brief provides background and strategies for school board members, superintendents, and principals to support, or even lead, Safe Routes to School efforts in their districts and schools.



Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

There are many policies and procedures that keep school districts and their schools operating daily. With a focus on academic achievement, student safety and health, and a strong sense of community, districts and schools can and should consider Safe Routes to School as part of the solution. The following strategies and best practices are opportunities to boost walking and rolling to school while addressing safety and health issues. School boards, superintendents, and principals can have a significant influence by sharing these ideas internally and externally, and creating safer, more accessible active transportation options for students.

Strategy: Consider a General “Six Es” Based Policy

Safe Routes to School programs and projects are most effective when they address the Six Es: Engagement, Equity, Education, Encouragement, Engineering, and Evaluation. School board members that are interested in advancing Safe Routes to School can consider implementing a policy that addresses all aspects of the Six Es to support and increase walking and rolling to school safely in the district.

Mill Valley School District, Marin County, California

Understanding the value of an impactful policy, a board member from Mill Valley School District (MVSD) decided in December of 2011 that it was time to cement Safe Routes to School into district policy. MVSD participated in the first federally funded Safe Routes to School program in 2000. As a part of this program, it had been participating in the Transportation Authority of Marin’s Safe Routes to Schools program, which taught safe bicycling and walking skills, and how to manage large scale encouragement programs, trained crossing guards and regularly evaluate success of the program. The MVSD School Board passed a board policy that proclaims support for Safe Routes to School based on the various benefits of health, safety, student achievement and environmental considerations. The policy identifies key partners, requires exploring funding sources for Safe Routes to School, ensures that the program is matched to the developmental levels of the students, identifies evaluation strategies and requires the superintendent to regularly provide reports to the school board. Additionally, the school board added an administrative policy that more clearly defines how the E’s will be addressed to ensure that Safe Routes to School programs and projects throughout the district are effective.

Old Mill Elementary School, Mill Valley, California

Old Mill Elementary School is located in the Mill Valley School District and is affected by their district policy. Old Mill has been closely involved with Safe Routes to School since its inception. The team at Old Mill worked to make sure that every child had a way to walk and roll to school that took 15 minutes or less through their “15 Minutes to School Project.” As part of this goal, the site council created a Safe Routes to School Travel Plan that uses all the E’s while also addressing barriers and opportunities, including opening up the many steps, lanes and paths from the old railroad days that were overgrown and underused and prioritizing implementation processes and ongoing funding. Since the beginning of this program, Old Mill has been able to reduce single-occupant car trips by as much as 38 percent and has seen more than two-fold increase of walking and bicycling to school from 16 to 39 percent.

The 6 Es Approach to Safe Routes to School

The Six Es of Safe Routes to School summarize the key components of a comprehensive, integrated approach, that includes:

ENGAGEMENT – Listening to students, families, teachers, and school leaders and working to build intentional, ongoing engagement opportunities into the program structure.

EQUITY – Ensuring initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities, and others.

ENGINEERING – Creating physical improvements to streets and neighborhoods that make walking and rolling safer, and more comfortable and convenient.

ENCOURAGEMENT – Generating enthusiasm and increased walking and rolling for students through events, activities, and programs.

EDUCATION – Providing students and the community with the skills to walk and roll safely, educating them about benefits of walking and rolling, and teaching them about the broad range of transportation choices.

EVALUATION – Assessing which approaches are more or less successful, ensuring that programs and initiatives are supporting equitable outcomes, and identifying unintended consequences or opportunities to improve the effectiveness of each approach.



Strategy: Encourage Safe Routes to School with a Supportive Walking and Rolling Policy

Make expectations clear at the district and school level by ensuring that the district has a policy that is supportive of walking and rolling. Such a policy is an opportunity for school boards, superintendents, and principals to encourage Safe Routes to School by standardizing expectations around walking and rolling, outlining the benefits for individual schools and ensuring that future principals or superintendents support active transportation. When written well, these policies can create a standard that encourages safer behavior and increases the number of students getting regular physical activity.

Safe Routes to School: An Issue of Equity

Children from lower-income families are twice as likely to walk to school as children from higher-income families but typically face greater personal and traffic safety risks on their route to school. It is critical that Safe Routes to School initiatives reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. School board members, superintendents, and principals should ensure that bicycling and walking improvements, whether infrastructure or program related, benefit all schools, especially those with the greatest needs. For example, the Portland, Oregon citywide Safe Routes to School program, serving the Portland Public School district, created a comprehensive policy that includes a focus on ensuring that schools in underserved neighborhoods have equal access to resources.

Fairfax County School Board, Virginia (Washington, D.C. Area)

In Fairfax County, Virginia, the school board had a policy that gave principals portal to portal authority and responsibility – meaning they were in control of the students' trip to and from school, regardless of their mode of transportation. As such, the principals erred on the side of safety and banned bicycling as a before and after school activity. After concerned caregivers got involved, the school district formed a Safe Routes to School working group that was comprised of stakeholders from inside and outside the school system and began working on a plan. Ultimately, the school district altered their policy to demonstrate that caregivers have the freedom to choose how their children get to and from school. Since this policy changed in January 2012 there has been enormous interest in Safe Routes to School events with 40 schools (20 percent of the district) participating in the 2012 International Walk to School Day.

Marshall Road Elementary, Vienna, Virginia

Marshall Road Elementary School is located very close to Interstate 66 in Vienna, Virginia. As a result, it has a great deal of commuter traffic. In fact, so much so, that in 2010, the principal banned bicycling or scootering to school and would not allow them on school grounds due to a fear of safety concerns. Students who wanted to ride bicycles or use a scooter rode to the edge of the school property and hid their bicycles and scooters in the bushes. After the Fairfax County School Board passed a supportive bicycling policy, students started riding to school more. As momentum built, the principal ordered bike racks from the school district (who provided them for free) to create a space for students to park bikes. The school now regularly participates in walking and rolling encouragement events and runs a monthly bike train composed of 10-15 students. The principal even rode with the bike train to school during the Vienna Bike/Walk Challenge.

Strategy: Participate in the Safe Routes to School Task Force or School Team

Many communities and schools form a Safe Routes to School task force or school team to identify and prioritize projects that get more students physically active by walking and rolling. Joining or initiating a task force or school team is an easy, actionable way for school board members, superintendents, and principals to get involved in larger community Safe Routes to School efforts. Community task forces are generally made up of a diverse mix of stakeholders operating at the district level including school board members, staff from the superintendent's office, the student transportation department, risk management professionals, the department of public health, interested community groups, individual schools, students, caregivers, local elected officials and any city or county staff that are responsible for traffic conditions and the built environment near schools. School teams, on the other hand, are focused at Safe Routes to School at the individual school level and are made up of school and surrounding neighborhood stakeholders, including student transportation staff, principals, PTA leaders, nurses or health assistants, public works staff, students and families. By gathering everyone with a stake in children's safety and health, the task force and school team can unify efforts to create a systematic approach to improving programs, projects and policies to encourage walking and rolling to school at the district and school level.



Lincoln School Principal Leads Efforts in Cañon City, Colorado

When Lincoln School in Cañon City, Colorado wanted to apply for a Safe Routes to School infrastructure team, they assembled a team committed to seeing the project through. One critical team member was the Lincoln School principal who signed on to support the application in its early stages. She attended a Safe Routes to School workshop along with a parent to begin project planning. As other partners came on board, the principal continued to play a key role in the planning process. She supported data collection efforts, like parent surveys and student travel tallies, and communicated updates through the PTO and school newsletter. Her collaboration and leadership led to a successful grant application that funded walking and biking infrastructure improvements around campus.

Strategy: Know How Students Travel Through Data Collection

A great deal of travel and safety data are collected by states, regions, counties, municipalities and school districts – however, there is an opportunity to collect better data for all modes of transportation, including walking and rolling. This information can be used to prioritize improvements to the physical infrastructure, address safety concerns near schools and ultimately evaluate Safe Routes to School efforts. In order to advance data collection regarding walking and rolling to school, the school districts and principals can work with schools to conduct caregiver surveys, student tallies, or even observational surveys. Improving data collection to understand how students move from one place to the other, to know where there are concerns, conflicts or crashes and identify safety improvements should be made a priority. Armed with knowledge of the needs of the school and local community, the school district and principals can work with partners such as a Safe Routes to School school team or a community task force and a local road authority, such as a city or county traffic engineer, to focus on high-impact strategies that directly address safety concerns to get more students physically active.

Strategy: Implement Walking School Buses, Bike Trains and Recommended Routes

Walking school buses and bike trains address parental concerns about personal safety and supervision of students walking or rolling to school by designating volunteers to lead groups of students to school along predetermined routes. Based on a CDC evaluation of 184 walking school bus programs from 2017 to 2018, every additional walking school bus trip per was related to a [23 percent increase in the odds of experiencing a reduction in tardiness](#).

School board members, superintendents, and principals can advance walking school buses and bike trains by implementing policies that support the organization and implementation of these programs at the school level. Such policies encourage schools to identify recommended routes, include walking school bus training materials, and facilitate connections among caregivers. Communities in Minnesota have started Bus Stop and Walk (BSW) programs that drop students a safe and walkable distance from school, allowing them to walk in with the goal of improving physical and mental health, increasing academic performance and building community by dropping students within a walkable distance to school. Learn more about BSW here. Refer to [Step by Step: How to Start a Walking School Bus at Your School](#) and [The Wheels on the Bike Go Round & Round](#) for guidance on starting a walking school bus or bike train.



Strategy: School Travel Plans and Arrival/ Dismissal

Traffic congestion around and in front of schools can create a chaotic, unsafe environment for students and staff. Increasing walking and rolling to school is a great approach to mitigating these traffic congestion issues and creating a safer environment for everyone. Communities and schools can achieve this by implementing and adopting either a district-wide or school-level school travel plan. School travel plans include strategies based on observations and evaluations for systematically addressing the Six E's of Safe Routes to School. Review [Keep Calm and Carry On to School](#) for more strategies on improving arrival and dismissal for walking and rolling.



District Case Study: Cincinnati School District, Ohio

As part of a city driven process to create school travel plans for Cincinnati schools, a team of leaders was assembled including school board members and administration and community stakeholders. The team was involved in the development of school travel plans for 48 district schools; because of the district leadership's involvement from the beginning, the team had a concrete understanding of the expectations of the plan. As a result, the school board adopted the Cincinnati Public Schools District-Wide Travel Plan in June of 2012. The plan outlines roughly 300 infrastructure countermeasures (engineering related changes) and 100 non- infrastructure countermeasures (education, evaluation, and encouragement related changes) that were identified through the use of a prioritization matrix. The district and their schools are heavily invested in the ongoing implementation and success of this plan to improve safety, reduce congestion and increase physical activity.

School Case Study: Rees E. Price Academy, Cincinnati, Ohio

During the design of the Cincinnati Public Schools District-Wide Travel plan, individual schools were asked to participate in molding their sections of the travel plan. Even with the district travel plan in place, principals still have autonomy to facilitate their own individual programs. Rees E. Price Academy worked with the Local School Decision Making Committee (LSDMC) and created a subcommittee focused on customizing the travel plan to the academy. The subcommittee worked with the resource coordinator at the school to adopt the district travel plan infrastructure and non-infrastructure countermeasures and include tailored activities including a robust walking school bus program, active participation in district-wide walking and rolling encouragement events and pedestrian safety education in the classrooms. As a result, the school won an award for its video highlighting its program in a national contest. The comprehensive district-wide policy-driven approach has mobilized the schools within the district with regard to walking and rolling.



Strategy: School Location Policies

Decisions about where a school is sited, or in the case of consolidation, which schools are closed, have long-term impacts on travel mode and physical activity options for students. Schools that are sited away from where students live result in increased traffic and associated congestion, air quality and infrastructure costs, reduced opportunities for physical activity and increased busing costs that might not be considered in the initial cost equation for the community. On the other hand, schools that are sited in walkable and bikeable neighborhoods can become a centerpiece of the community, allowing opportunities for physical activity, parent volunteerism and community connection, and can save money in construction and other costs. It is vital that school districts deliberate their school siting and consolidations policies and processes to ensure that all of the long-term impacts are taken into consideration. Visit ChangeLab Solution's [Smart School Siting](#) for more information including a model school siting policy.

Accessing State and Federal Funds for Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School is eligible for many federal funding programs, including the Surface Transportation Block Grant, Congestion Mitigation Air Quality, Highway Safety Improvement Program, and Transportation Alternatives Program, as well as others. Many states also have Safe Routes to School “legacy” funds remaining from the dedicated federal funding program under SAFETEA-LU. Visit [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Background and Resources](#) for information about federal funding, including [state-specific fact sheets](#) on the Transportation Alternatives Program – one of the largest sources of federal funding available for Safe Routes to School projects and programs. School districts can be a partner in applying for funding, and in some cases may apply for funding on their own.

In addition to federal funding, some states fund Safe Routes to School projects and programs using their own dollars. Connect with your state's [Safe Routes to School staff](#) to find out about accessing these funds.

Conclusion

Educated decision-makers are well positioned to have positive effects on student safety, physical activity opportunities, community engagement and ultimately, school finances, through walking or rolling to their schools. Knowing the benefits and elements of an effective Safe Routes to School program, board members, superintendents, districts and principals can utilize a series of strategies (such as supportive walking and rolling policies, school travel planning, school siting, walking school buses and bike trains) to ensure that policies and practices support students to take advantage of safe, accessible routes to school to get necessary physical activity before and after their school day.



Additional Resources

- [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Step by Step: How to Start a Walking School Bus at Your School](#)
- [The Wheels on the Bike Go Round & Round](#)
- [Bus Stop and Walk](#)
- [Buses, Boots, and Bicycles: Exploring Collaboration Between Safe Routes to School and School Busing Professionals to Get Children to School Safely and Healthily](#)
- [Building Blocks: A Guide to Starting and Growing a Safe Routes to School Program](#)
- [Building Momentum for Safe Routes to School: A Toolkit for School Districts and City Leaders](#)
- [Smart School Siting: How School Locations Can Make Students Healthier](#)
- [Keep Calm and Carry On to School: Improving Arrival and Dismissal for Walking and Biking](#)