

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN MICHIGAN





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Safe Routes to School Programs in Michigan

2019 Statewide Program Assessment Report

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1 Introduction

Studies show that Safe Routes to School programs are one of the most effective tools to help schoolchildren get vital physical activity and build healthy life habits. To help assess Michigan's progress in supporting Safe Routes to School, the Safe Routes Partnership conducted a review of Michigan's programs, policies, funding, and practices related to Safe Routes to School. This report provides an overview of the state of Safe Routes to School programming in Michigan and sets out a high-level assessment of challenges, innovations, and opportunities for Safe Routes to School programs in the state.

Our assessment found that in the state of Michigan, Safe Routes to School programming is in a moderate to strong position. The state has a strong state program, with a full time Safe Routes to School coordinator and a strong nonprofit partner. The state program provides scaffolding for communities that are new to Safe Routes to School, ensures that infrastructure applications are informed by community planning efforts, and supports programming with multiyear funding and resources. But a more intense level of commitment will be required to create schools and neighborhoods that are safe and welcoming for active travel to school and beyond. Providing dedicated state Safe Routes to School funding would enable deeper levels of support for more schools and communities. Local funding would increase the sustainability of local Safe Routes to School programming efforts. Other opportunities include more state funding for walking and biking generally, greater prioritization of low-income communities, progressive street design guidelines, health-oriented state school siting policies, and investments in programming and infrastructure that will lead to a deeper transformation of Michigan's car orientation, yielding healthier state residents.



Project Summary

This report was developed as part of the national Safe Routes to School Program Census Project, funded by the Center for Disease Prevention and Control's Department of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, and conducted by the Safe Routes Partnership in partnership with YMCA of the USA. Safe Routes to School programs are not funded or regulated through a centralized process, and may be volunteer-run or supported by local, regional, state, or federal funds. That means there is no easy way to know how many programs there are in the United States, where they are, or how many children and communities they are benefiting. Without this information, it is difficult to track trends and progress in the Safe Routes to School movement, or to provide targeted support and resources to local communities.

Recognizing the challenges for research and program promotion caused by the lack of a comprehensive inventory of Safe Routes to School programs, the Safe Routes Partnership implemented the Safe Routes to School Program Census Project. The Safe Routes Partnership developed and piloted a survey instrument to capture key data, and collected survey data on a national basis in spring 2019. The purpose of this survey was to identify as many Safe Routes to School programs as possible in the United States. By compiling this information, the Safe Routes Partnership was able to develop a better understanding of Safe Routes to School programs, identify areas that need additional support, and provide better resources and information related to Safe Routes to School. Through the Safe Routes to School Program Census Project, the Safe Routes Partnership gathered detailed information about the number of Safe Routes to School programs around the nation, their longevity, the types of programming they have, the costs of running these programs, the source of their funding, and the key challenges they face.



2 Why Does Safe Routes to School Matter for Michigan?

Physical activity is essential for students' health and academic achievement. But the 1.9 million school-age children in Michigan aren't getting enough. For Michigan adolescents, only 23 percent achieve the recommended amount of physical activity (a minimum of 60 minutes per day).¹ In addition, 27 percent of adults in Michigan are almost completely physically inactive, reporting no non-work-related physical activity at all for at least a month.²

The obesity rate for high school students is 17 percent and the overweight rate is just below that.³ For adults, the obesity rate is 32 percent and the overweight rate is 35 percent, leaving only 33 percent of Michigan adults in the healthy weight range.⁴ Michigan is ranked 8th of all states in the country for high rates of heart disease⁵ and 11 percent of adults have diagnosed diabetes,⁶ both of which are correlated with physical inactivity and obesity. In addition, Michigan has the 16th highest pedestrian fatality rate and 13th highest bicycling fatality rate of all



the states, showing a strong need for safer conditions for active transportation.⁷

A core part of the reason that students and adults in Michigan are less healthy and get less physical activity is because Michigan communities are not designed for walking and biking. Safe Routes to School is a movement that aims to enable students to get regular physical activity, by making it safer and easier to walk and bike to school. Safe Routes to School street improvements address problems like broken or missing sidewalks, faded crosswalks, and lack of safe bike lanes. Safe Routes to School programs get more students walking and biking by providing skills and safety education and creating encouragement activities that get kids moving together.



Benefits of Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School improves sidewalks and street crossings and creates safe, convenient, and fun opportunities for children to bicycle and walk to and from school. The CDC has recognized Safe Routes to School as one of a handful of programs that are cost-effective and show significant population health impacts within five years. saferoutespartnership.org

COST SAVINGS

- Household savings from reduced gas & car use
- Education budget savings through reduced student busing costs



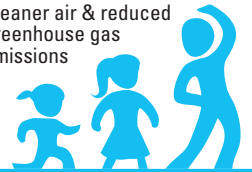
TRAFFIC SAFETY

- Reduced traffic injuries & dangers for students and community members at arrival & dismissal through street improvements near schools
- More chances to learn & practice road safety for students



CLIMATE BENEFITS AND CLEANER AIR

- Fewer student asthma attacks due to less driving & reduced air pollution results
- Cleaner air & reduced greenhouse gas emissions



SAFETY FROM CRIME

- Increased safety from crime & violence due to more people on the streets, good lighting & better street design
- Less harassment, bullying, or violence when students walk or bike together or with adults



COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

- Stronger student friendships & relationships through walking & biking together
- Positive social connections for families & neighbors



HEALTHIER STUDENTS

- Better health & stronger bones, muscles & joints through more walking & biking
- Reduced risk of chronic disease, diabetes, & obesity



SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION FIXES

- Solutions to reduced or non-existent bus service through Safe Routes to School
- Reduced traffic congestion at pick-up/drop-off times



BETTER ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- Better focus, improved concentration & less distraction for students who are active before school
- Fewer absences and less tardiness when students walk or bike in groups



SCHOOL

3 History and Structure of Safe Routes to School in Michigan



The Safe Routes to School movement was launched in the United States at a national level in 2005. Alarmed by the tripling of childhood obesity levels, communities across the United States recognized the connection with a precipitous drop in rates of students walking and bicycling to school. These rates had decreased from 49 percent to less than 15 percent over a 30-year period, while rates of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases grew.

In response, Congress authorized the first federally funded Safe Routes to School program. From 2005 to 2012, Safe Routes to School initiatives were funded through a standalone federal Safe Routes to School program and each state had a Safe Routes to School coordinator tasked with supporting local- and state-level Safe Routes to School initiatives. In 2012, the standalone program was merged with several other programs into the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), and the requirement for a state coordinator was eliminated.

Since 2012, state departments of transportation have received TAP federal funds and have awarded money by selecting projects through a competitive process open to local governments and school systems. Larger metropolitan planning organizations, a type of regional transportation planning agency, also receive TAP funds to distribute. At the local level, Safe Routes to School practitioners run education and encouragement programs with families and schools and push for strong municipal and district policies to support safe walking and bicycling. Cities and counties often take the lead on making Safe Routes to School infrastructure improvements near schools.

Michigan has a strong state Safe Routes to School program. Michigan began exploring Safe Routes to School before the first national program was initiated, through a pilot program begun in 2003. The Michigan Department of Transportation's (MDOT) Safe Routes to School coordinator, Bryan Armstrong, has two decades of experience working

on walking and bicycling issues at MDOT, and has run the state Safe Routes to School program for more than ten years, providing stability and expertise. The state Safe Routes to School program includes an infrastructure grant program (the Major Grant program), a noninfrastructure grant program (the Mini Grant program), technical assistance and program support, and some state programming activities and incentives. The Major Grant and Mini Grant programs are both funded by TAP money. TAP usually requires that the local recipient of the funds provide a match of up to 20 percent of the funding, but MDOT covers the required match through use of toll credits. By covering the match, MDOT reduces the financial burden on local communities, which can be prohibitive for lower income communities.

The Major Grant program is a competitive grant program with grants of up to \$200,000 per school. A planning grant is first required, with rigorous engagement and audit requirements.

The first federally funded Safe Routes to School program was created in 2005, and has since undergone several legislative and policy transformations. In 2012, Congress created the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) by merging together three previous programs that funded active transportation. In 2015, Congress authorized TAP for an additional five years, through 2020.

Major Grant infrastructure dollars are accompanied by non-infrastructure funds of up to \$8,000, required in order to ensure that funding is supporting comprehensive initiatives that supplement street improvements with programming and culture change opportunities. Thirty schools are currently receiving Major Grants.

MDOT subcontracts with a nonprofit organization called the Michigan Fitness Foundation, which has played a leadership role in Safe Routes to School efforts in Michigan since such efforts began. Michigan Fitness Foundation oversees the Mini Grant program and provides Safe Routes to School technical assistance and support for local Safe Routes to School programs. The Mini Grant program is currently supporting efforts at 52 schools. The Mini Grant program provides a structured approach that allows interested local communities to easily initiate Safe Routes to School program activities, funding up to \$5,000 per year per school or \$25,000 per school district or other fiduciary. Programs may receive funding for multiple years.

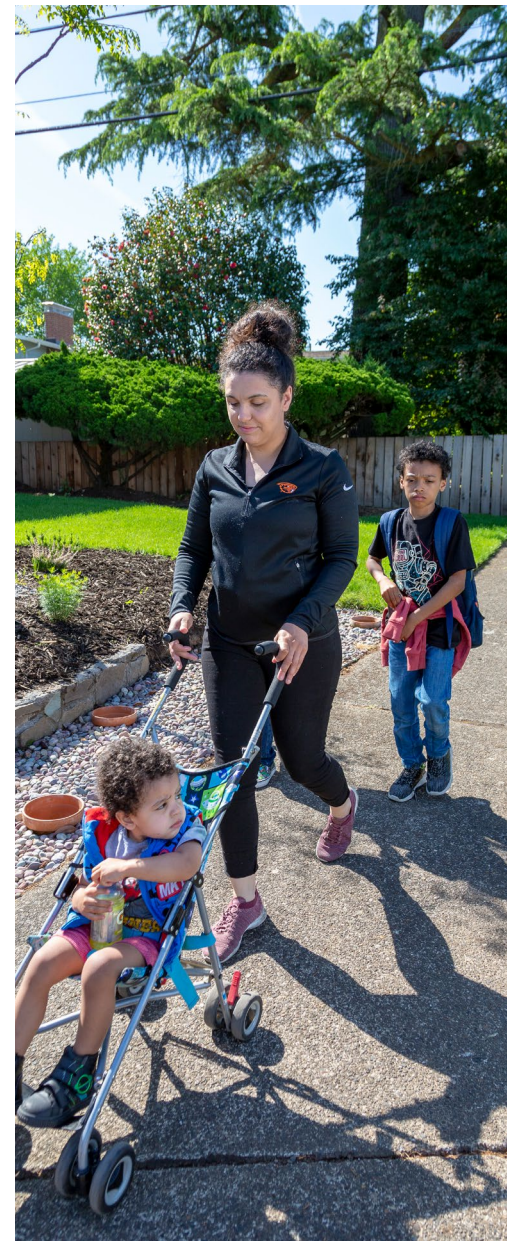
The state program also provides an array of types of technical assistance – planning and application assistance, workshops, webinars, case studies, a handbook,

templates, and more.⁸ In addition, there are a number of events and activities that are coordinated by the state program, including walk and bike to school days, as well as a youth planning curriculum.

A strong focus of the state support for Safe Routes to School programs has been figuring out how to work with districts, rather than simply individual schools, in programming. As Armstrong explains, “People get more engaged with a district approach; the community is less excited when the district is not involved, because the program seems more like a one off that will not be sustained.”

The MDOT program has proactively worked with a number of very low-income communities in the state since very early in the program initiation, in order to understand and address barriers to implementation that exist in these areas. Bolstered by state support, local efforts have successfully led to ongoing Safe Routes to School initiatives in many of these communities.

In addition to the statewide work, regional metropolitan planning organizations such as the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments and the Genesee County Metropolitan Planning Commission provide some support for Safe Routes to School efforts



in their regions.

“Michigan Fitness Foundation’s administration of the Michigan Safe Routes to School program has been invaluable. The collaborative model for local, school-focused planning processes is designed to allow local agencies and organizations to become knowledgeable about Safe Routes to School principles and practices. Working closely with schools and communities across the state, Michigan Fitness Foundation trains local leaders, provides guidance to local teams, holds their hands during the Safe Routes to School planning and grant application processes, and helps them move through obstacles to create strong, cooperative local Safe Routes to School programs. Michigan Fitness Foundation develops resources and trainings at a statewide level to make it easy for local communities to bring Safe Routes to School into community operations. Michigan Fitness Foundation’s partnership with MDOT provides schools and communities with the support they need to make Safe Routes to School an integral part of Michigan communities.”

-Bryan Armstrong, Safe Routes to School Program Manager, Michigan Department of Transportation

4

Michigan's Policy Environment for Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation

A crucial part of Michigan's ability to create an environment that is safe and supportive for students walking and bicycling to school is the state policy environment. The Safe Routes Partnership's [Making Strides: 2018 State Report Cards on Support for Walking, Biking, and Active Kids and Communities](#) provide a strong overview of Michigan's general policy landscape and commitment to Safe Routes to School and active transportation. Michigan's overall report card score was a 127 out of 200 points, putting it in the Making Strides category, second from the top of the four scoring categories. This score demonstrates that Michigan has taken some very significant actions toward supporting walking, bicycling, Safe Routes to School, and active communities, but still has some important steps remaining toward creating a state policy environment that supports a safe and physically active Michigan. Below we describe how Michigan performed on Safe Routes to School-related policy indicators reviewed in the State Report Cards, and note other Michigan policies where relevant.

A. Complete Streets and Active Transportation Policies, Planning, and Design

A Complete Streets policy is a policy that sets out a state's commitment to routinely design, build, and operate all streets to enable safe use by everyone, regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation. The Complete Streets indicator in the State Report Cards looks at whether the state is taking appropriate action to support a safe and robust walking and biking network, with particular emphasis on the quality of the state's Complete Streets policy. Michigan received just over two-thirds of the points available for this section, benefiting from the fact that the state has goals to lower fatalities and increase mode share for walking and biking, and receiving most of the available points for the state's Complete Streets law and departmental policy. However, the state has not adopted a state bicycle or pedestrian plan, without which it is difficult to provide any comprehensive guidance or prioritization for walking and biking. In addition, the state has not adopted or endorsed modern street design guides providing for safe walking and biking. However, Michigan has taken the important step of ensuring design guidance providing for separated or protected bike lanes.¹⁰

B. Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation Funding

The Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation Funding indicators look at how much money a state is making available to local jurisdictions for projects and programs that support safe walking and bicycling, and how the state is prioritizing high-need communities and Safe Routes to School projects. This includes federal funds that the state is charged with administering (Transportation Alternatives Program/TAP funding) as well as state funding.

Michigan is doing an excellent job of responsibly stewarding its TAP funds. Unlike some states, which have siphoned away some of this limited funding available in support of walking and bicycling, Michigan has not transferred any TAP funding away from biking and walking. In addition, as of March 2019, Michigan had obligated 77 percent of its TAP funding and received top marks for its award and obligation rates, ensuring that TAP funding moves through the system to make a difference on the ground.¹¹ Although Michigan does not prioritize high-need communities in its TAP awards, it does provide matching funds for TAP Safe Routes to School projects, making it less prohibitive for lower-income communities to afford these efforts. Although Michigan uses state toll credits to provide the required match, it does not provide standalone additional state funding for Safe Routes to School. Michigan also prioritizes Safe Routes to School applicants in its TAP competition, and crucially, Michigan provides TAP funding for Safe Routes to School programs, not just for infrastructure.

Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices

The Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices indicators look at what state DOTs are providing in terms of support and technical assistance to schools and local governments to further advance Safe Routes to School initiatives, beyond funding.

Michigan is doing well on these factors. Michigan has retained its state Safe Routes to School coordinator position as a full time position, ensuring that the coordinator is not pulled away from Safe Routes to School by non-Safe Routes to School duties added to the position. In addition, the state provides formal technical or application assistance to local jurisdictions for Safe Routes to School, contracting with the Michigan Fitness Foundation to ensure that local programs get high quality assistance and resources to help them to develop strong programs and implement effective activities.

C. School Siting and Design

The School Siting and Design indicators look at state policies and guidance regarding where schools are located, and if and how they are designed to support students safely walking and bicycling to school.

Michigan does not have large school site minimum acreage recommendations or requirements that can be detrimental to creating opportunities for kids to walk and bicycle to school – but it also does not have any positive incentives or requirements for walking, biking or physical activity within its school siting and design guidelines, providing a key opportunity for strengthening state policy to improve Michiganians' health.



Michigan 2018

MAKING STRIDES



OVERALL SCORE

127 / 200

Scoring Key: LACING UP WARMING UP MAKING STRIDES BUILDING SPEED 100%

COMPLETE STREETS AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION



Complete Streets Policies	Adopted state Complete Streets policy(ies)	5 / 5
	Adopted strong core state Complete Streets commitment	3 / 5
	Addresses additional jurisdictions in state Complete Streets policy	5 / 5
	Addresses implementation in state Complete Streets policy	10 / 10
Design for Active Transportation	Adopted/endorsed NACTO guidelines	0 / 10
Active Transportation Planning	Adopted a state pedestrian, bicycle, or active transportation plan	0 / 10
Active Transportation Goals	Adopted goals to lower walking and bicycling fatalities	10 / 10
	Adopted goals to increase walking and bicycling mode share	10 / 10
		43 / 65

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FUNDING



Active Transportation Funding	Retained Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding without transfers	10 / 10
	Awarded TAP projects	10 / 10
	Obligated state-controlled TAP funds	10 / 10
	Provides special consideration for high-need communities	0 / 5
	Provides matching funds for high-need communities	5 / 5
Safe Routes to School Funding	Provides special consideration for Safe Routes to School projects using TAP funds	3 / 5
	Funds Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure projects	5 / 5
	Dedicates state funding for Safe Routes to School	0 / 5
Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices	Has state Safe Routes to School coordinator	5 / 5
	Provides technical or application assistance to Safe Routes to School initiatives	5 / 5
		53 / 65

ACTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS AND SCHOOLS



Shared Use of School Facilities	Adopted state policy supporting shared use of school facilities	6 / 10
	Provides funding/incentives in support of shared use of school facilities	5 / 5
School Siting and Design	Requires large school sites (minimum acreage guideline)	0 / 0
	Supports walking, bicycling & physical activity in school design guidelines	0 / 15
Physical Education	Adopted PE minutes & graduation requirements	3 / 15
Supportive Neighborhoods for Physical Activity	Level of access to recreation & community centers for youth	1 / 5
	Level of access to parks	1 / 5
		16 / 55

STATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PLANNING



	Adopted a state plan with commitments to physical activity	5 / 5
	Dedicates state staff to physical activity	10 / 10
		15 / 15



5 Michigan Safe Routes to School Program Landscape

The 2019 Safe Routes to School Program Census revealed that Michigan has strong state and local programs, but that additional resources and commitment at a state, regional, and local level would support more programs with more comprehensive activities, greater reach, and more sustainability.

Overview

- **Strong programs:** Michigan's Safe Routes to School directory has approximately 1,000 schools that have registered over the past ten years. Registration is a prerequisite for obtaining infrastructure or non-infrastructure funding for Safe Routes to School and provides a good measure of interest in Safe Routes to School. Michigan has strong programs in most of its largest urban areas, and has nurtured programs at the district level. At the same time, it has many smaller programs and activities in its rural and suburban areas.
- **High-impact activities:** Most of Michigan's local Safe Routes to School programs are conducting activities such as weekly walk and roll to school days or walking school buses. These frequent, sustained activities create

real changes in behavior, establish healthy habits, and increase physical activity in a meaningful way. The degree of high-impact activities is in contrast to what is seen in many other states, where programming is more focused on single day events, and demonstrates the strength of Michigan's programs.

- **Urban/rural nature:** Although Safe Routes to School is often thought of as a program that thrives in denser urban environments, 40 percent of survey respondents in Michigan classified their program's community as rural, 33 percent as suburban, and 27 percent as urban.

"Traverse City's Safe Routes to School program has gone from one school in 2014 to 22 in 2019."

Transportation Bonanza: Michigan Association of Planning

The Michigan Association of Planning runs a yearly Transportation Bonanza summit, which is cohosted by Michigan Safe Routes to School, MDOT, and others. The conference educates planners, engineers, city officials, and multi-modal advocates from all over the state of Michigan about Safe Routes to School and connections between health and transportation. Now in its eleventh year, the conference has increased support for and expertise regarding Safe Routes to School at the local level across the state, creating fertile ground for Safe Routes to School programming and street infrastructure improvements.

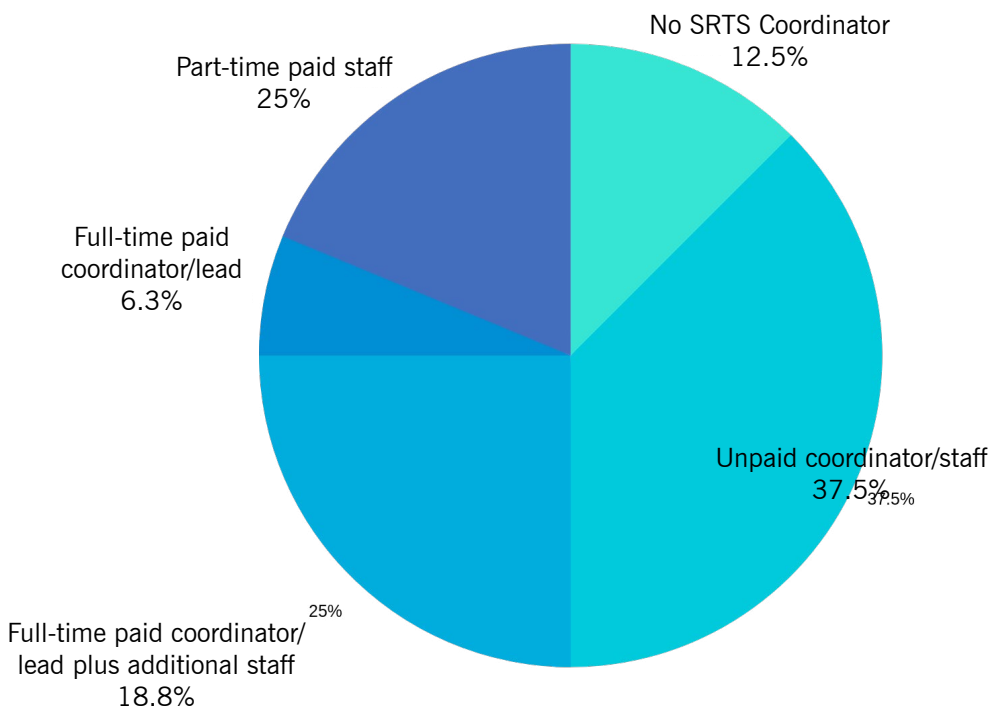
Structure of Local Programs

- **Staffing:** Paid staff is one of the most important elements in the comprehensiveness and sustainability of a Safe Routes to School program. Of our local program respondents, 25 percent had a full-time coordinator or full-time coordinator plus additional staff. 50 percent had no coordinator or had unpaid staffing, and the final 25 percent had part-time staffing.
- **Task Force:** 77 percent of local program respondents had a task force or advisory team, a positive sign of the strength of a program. Those programs that did not have a task force were generally operating a program at only a single school or operating a smaller program in a rural area.
- **Sponsoring agency:** In Michigan, 80 percent of survey respondents indicated that their local Safe Routes to School programs were located in school districts or schools, and 20 percent noted that their programs were housed in nonprofits.

- **Geographic scope of program/program service area:** Different programs define their service areas differently, with some having the same boundaries as a town or school district. Of our respondents, 20 percent were located at a single school; 47 percent were district-wide; 33 percent were city-wide, and 13 percent were larger than a single city or district. The large number of district-based programs may be a reflection of the state program’s focus on nurturing programs at the district level, as well as the fact that most programs were housed within the school system.
- **Funding types:** The size and source of Safe Routes to School program budgets in Michigan vary widely, from no budget at all, to several hundred thousand for infrastructure and non-infrastructure components. Many programs receive transportation funding through the state Safe Routes to School Major and Mini Grant programs, but programs that strive to have a full-time coordinator or

other significant staffing must seek additional funding. Other sources of funding tapped by Michigan programs includes foundations, school funds, health department grants, and donations from community members and local businesses.

- **Policy:** Municipal and school district Safe Routes to School policies can provide enormous support and assistance to Safe Routes to School programs, formalizing support and prioritization and encouraging institutionalization of Safe Routes to School commitments. About half of the responding programs indicated that their community had some type of policy supporting Safe Routes to School, whether language in their comprehensive plan, in their school district wellness policy, or elsewhere. However, additional research shows that this may overstate the number of such policies; to the extent that these policies have been formally adopted, they often provide only brief mention or general support for Safe Routes to School, demonstrating that there is considerable room for more policy support for Safe Routes to School at the local and district levels. A policy success was reported by one program, which successfully advocated to change a school policy prohibiting biking, and even got the school to provide bike racks.



The 6 E's of Safe Routes to School

Comprehensive Safe Routes to School initiatives have been shown to be more effective at increasing physical activity and reducing injuries. The key components of a comprehensive, integrated approach are summarized by the Six E's of Safe Routes to School: education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement, evaluation, and equity.



Program Assessment Methodology

Information about Safe Routes to School programs in each state was primarily collected through an online survey conducted from March through May 2019. The survey instrument can be reviewed [here](#). Surveys were collected through a combination of purposive sampling and a snowball approach. The survey link was disseminated nationally to people and organizations potentially affiliated with Safe Routes to School initiatives through a wide range of direct and indirect outreach including: emails from the Safe Routes Partnership, the Safe Routes Partnership and partner organization's newsletters, direct contact by state departments of transportation and health, webpage postings, and social media. Respondents were encouraged to forward the survey to peers or other interested parties. Additional information about existing Safe Routes to School programs as well as state practices and support was gathered through conversations with state department of transportation staff. Following initial data collection using the survey tool, the Safe Routes Partnership conducted follow up with individual program contacts as needed to clarify or obtain additional information. Data were compiled and analyzed to identify trends, program commonalities and differences, and to assess program characteristics. Although the programs surveyed are not scientifically representative, this report includes an analysis of collected data in order to provide a broad brush overview of trends in the state.



Program Activities and Details

Active travel increase: 80 percent of respondents reported increases in biking and walking in response to their program. Two-thirds of respondents indicated that fewer than 10 percent of students currently walk or bike, a quarter reported up to 25 percent walking and biking, and a few reported higher levels.

Program activities: Michigan local Safe Routes to School programs engage in a wide range of activities.

- Walk to School Day was the most common activity reported, with over 90 percent of local respondents participating. 57 percent of respondents participated in Bike to School Day. According to the National Center for Safe Routes to School, 260 schools participated in Walk to School Day and 256 participated in Bike to School Day for Michigan in the 2018-19 school year.¹² These numbers put Michigan into the top five states nationally for Walk and Bike to School Day participation. In addition,

Active Travel Increase: In Program Coordinators' Words

- "We have seen small increases in walking and biking within short distances of all of major grant campuses."
- "We have seen a 3 percent increase across all schools since 2015."
- "At some of our schools due to walk/bike routes and installation of pedestrian safety crossing we have been able to increase walkers/bikers but we still see a high use of single vehicle drop off and pick ups."
- "We see a bump in numbers following any scheduled walking/biking event."
- "I have had an increase since I started as the walking school bus coordinator in just two years."
- "Manchester went from 7 percent to around 40 percent; Chelsea from 7 percent to 14 percent."

while most states show considerably higher rates of participation in Walk to School Day than Bike to School Day, Michigan's are very close, demonstrating unusually strong interest and engagement in biking.

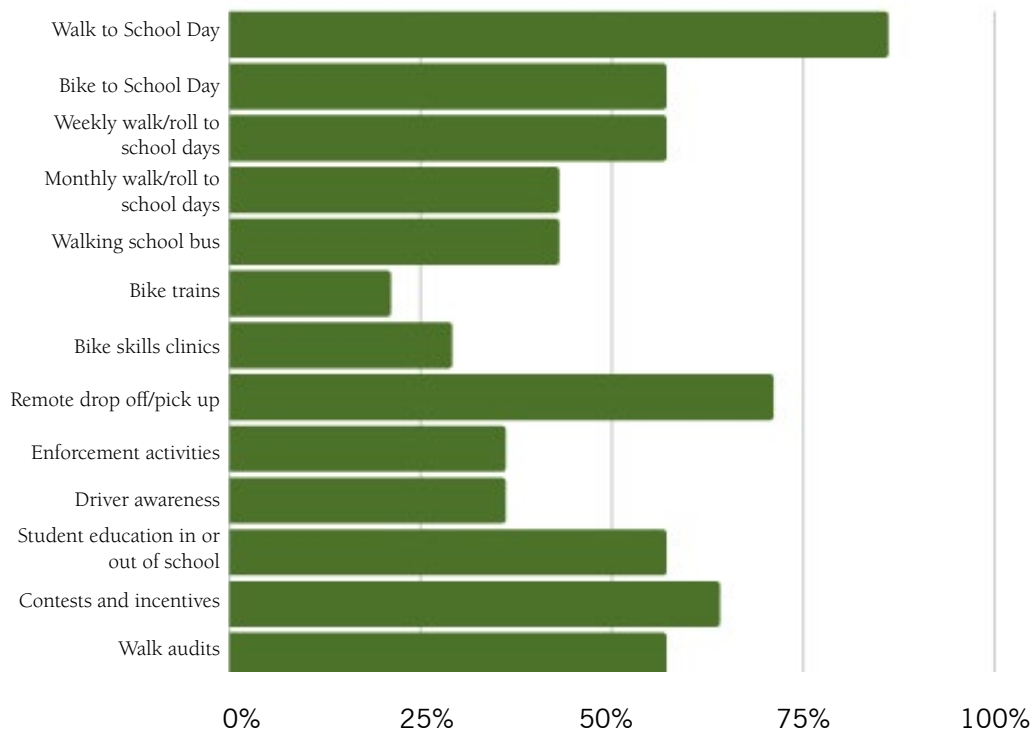
- Weekly and monthly walk or roll to school days were very popular with local Michigan Safe Routes to School programs: 57 percent of respondents conducted weekly walk to school

days, and 43 percent conducted monthly days. These days create more school-wide change and momentum than a yearly day, encouraging and celebrating students walking or biking to school with regular events. Altogether, 70 percent of program survey respondents held regular walking or biking events, either walking school buses or weekly or monthly walk and roll to school days.



Program Activities By the Numbers

Percent of local programs that conduct specific types of Safe Routes to School program activities.



- Walking school buses and bike trains: 43 percent of program respondents held regular walking school buses and 21 percent held regular bike trains. The walking school buses were mostly weekly, with a few programs hosting them more or less frequently. The bike trains were mostly monthly, with a few weekly ones. Regular walking school buses and bike trains are one of the best ways to change travel behavior and create real increases in physical activity for students, so this level of engagement in Michigan is very positive.
- Remote drop offs (also known as park and walk in) and safe routes to bus stops, which provide opportunities for students to be driven in a car or bus part of the way to school and walk the other portion, are popular in Michigan, which makes sense in light of the number of rural programs. 71

percent of programs included these elements.

- Contests and incentives were also popular, with 64 percent of programs engaging in these types of activities. Incentives ranged from small tokens, coupons, or certificates for ice cream, to more involved opportunities in which students tracked walking, biking, and carpooling trips and then were eligible for various prizes.
- Many programs conducted student walking and biking safety and skills education in and out of school. Close to 60 percent of programs reported general education activities, and almost 30 percent hosted bike skills clinics (known as bike rodeos). Thousands of students throughout the state benefit from these education efforts, which range from a few hours a year to 15-hour trainings.

- Activities to support stronger driver safety behaviors, either through enforcement or through driver awareness programs, were found in many programs as well. For example, Ann Arbor's Safe Routes to School program includes crossing guards, student safety patrols, and coordination with law enforcement.
- Michigan's Safe Routes to School programs were generally also involved with infrastructure improvements in some way: almost 70 percent participate in walk audits, which help identify barriers to walking and bicycling, unsafe behaviors, and potential improvements; 85 percent advocate for street improvements; and more than half assist with prioritizing street improvements.

How to Start a Walking School Bus At Your School

In a walking school bus or bike train, a group of kids walk or bicycle to school together accompanied by one or more adults. To learn how to organize and run a walking school bus or bike train, see [Step By Step: How to Start a Walking School Bus at your School](#) and [The Wheels on the Bike Go Round & Round: How to Get a Bike Train Rolling at Your School](#).



Equity considerations: Safe Routes to School programs have the potential to either create greater equity in our communities, or to exacerbate disparities, depending upon factors such as whether investments are prioritized in lower income communities and whether programs are designed and tailored for the needs of different demographic groups. While evaluating the overall health equity impact of Michigan's Safe Routes to School programs was outside the scope of this report, many of Michigan's programs do have a substantial equity focus, reflected both in vigorous efforts to build and carry out programs based in low-income communities, and in program activities and outreach focused on specific populations.

- Of our survey respondents, about 45 percent of programs worked with schools that were mostly or all Title I schools (schools serving a substantial number of low-income students). 23 percent of programs worked with some Title I schools, and 30 percent worked with few or no Title I schools.

Programs in economically challenged urban areas like Detroit and Flint have a strong equity orientation, with a strong focus on the safety and well-being of African-American students and low-income students.

- The Crim Fitness Foundation's Flint Safe Routes to School program provides extensive equity and inclusion training to all of their Safe Routes to School volunteers, who are managed by the Crim Fitness Foundation's dedicated Safe Routes to School coordinator. The program has a variety of youth engagement and empowerment elements.
- About half of the local programs engage in some sort of targeted outreach to encourage participation by specific groups. The most common focus group was students with disabilities, followed by immigrants/non English speakers. 15 percent of respondents conducted outreach or programming specific to girls. Of programs that did special outreach, more than half targeted more than one specific group. The state

technical assistance provided by the Michigan Fitness Foundation includes a particular focus on developing programs for students with disabilities, including specific infrastructure ideas, providing resources and encouragement for local programs with that focus. The Ann Arbor Safe Routes to School program reports: "We ensure all SRTS activities are translated into one of the five common languages that we support across the district and that there are events that include our students with disabilities."

- In the Traverse City area, nonprofit Norte has developed a number of focused bicycling initiatives to engage different groups of children and youth. Norte has a bicycling program for kids with disabilities. The program operates a 4-week in-school program, a 6-week out-of-school program, and a weekly summertime meet up. Norte also has regular girl-focused bicycling events, responding to a large gender gap in bicycling.



Detroit Safe Routes to School Program

The Detroit Public Schools Community District is the largest school district in Michigan, serving 50,000 students in more than 100 schools. As a postindustrial rust belt city, Detroit and its schools have experienced any number of ongoing challenges, but the Safe Routes to School program is one of many ways that the community works together to support students. Detroit's Safe Routes to School program began in 2013, and has evolved over the years, building a system that promotes health and safety for Detroit's students on their journey to school. Program partners include the school district administration, district police department, Detroit Public Schools Foundation, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (the regional metropolitan planning organization), and a number of additional partners. In addition, Detroit Safe Routes to School Program Coordinator, ReGina Hardy, praises the support provided by the Detroit Public Schools Foundation, Michigan Fitness Foundation, and Michigan Department of Transportation.

"They've helped us realize the potential of our program, and it's been phenomenal working with them," said Hardy.

The Detroit Safe Routes to School program combines a variety of education and encouragement related activities with a methodical and data-driven approach to investing in street improvements near schools. Efforts such as walking school buses, adult corner captains looking out for students, safety patrols, and more have focused on making sure that students are protected from barriers that may affect their walk to school. Classroom walking and biking safety education helps to give students the skills they need to safely walk and bicycle. Many K-8 schools receive workshops every year that cover topics like traffic safety, helmet fittings, and bike repairs; the program does additional education at the classroom level upon request. Art and writing contests also encourage more walking and bicycling. To expand the reach and effectiveness of the work, targeted outreach takes place for specific student groups, including students with disabilities and students from various backgrounds. Walking and bicycling to school in Detroit have increased because of the improved feeling of safety that the program provides to students and parents, creating new benefits for health and safety.

Hardy has nurtured the program since its beginnings and sees the essential role it plays.

"This started out as a program to bring attention to the safety of students biking and walking to schools, but it has turned into something more. It has become an initiative that garners support for the schools from the whole community – businesses, individuals, and everyone," said Hardy. "The spirit of the city has gone through some trials and tribulations, but this work lets our resiliency shine out. This initiative has helped Detroiters come together to make things better for our kids."

Successes and Challenges

Programs reported a wide array of inspiring successes, challenges, and key lessons that have been incorporated into ongoing program operations.

Successes and lessons learned

- Engaging school district support and leadership for programs is crucial for sustainability and for successful implementation throughout the district.
- Policy change can be crucial. One program reported that they had not only successfully changed school policy changed to allow biking, but even convinced the school to provide bike racks to encourage students to ride.
- Having an advocate in a decisionmaking position is important. As one program reported, “Our success did not come until the city manager became an ally.”
- Creating strong partnerships with other agencies and stakeholders is key to success.

“Our partnership with the City of Ann Arbor is very successful. Law enforcement and traffic engineers work with each school committee on site reviews and offer their expertise on ways to improve the congested drop off and pick up situations at many of our schools. They also work with us to improve crossings and streets by adding bump outs and manage our crossing guards for the district.”

- Liz Margolis of the Ann Arbor Safe Routes to School Program

Challenges and opportunities identified

Program coordinators identified an array of challenges:

- Funding: Obtaining sufficient funding is a significant challenge for program longevity and activities.
- Parents: Changing parent behaviors is a struggle. It is very difficult to ensure that families return survey data.
- Volunteers: It is a constant challenge to find and keep sufficient volunteers.
- Dangerous streets: Dealing with impatient drivers (often parents) creates dangers for students walking and bicycling.
- Fear of crime and violence: Perceptions of lack of safety due to crime and violence discourage walking.
- Distance: Students who go to school far from their homes, including lengthy distances due to charter schools and schools of choice.
- Lengthy process for change: Programs noted that the process for establishing a Safe Routes to School program and creating change in a community takes a long time. Most local programs have a parent champion at the school; but oftentimes the champion is gone by the time the infrastructure gets built, undermining the ability to take advantage of safer streets with programming.

“One of our best features on walking and biking designated days is our World Drumming group and 8th Grade Jazz Ensemble playing for the school outside as students walk or bike up to the building. It is an excellent way to be greeted!”

-Bruce Geffen, Clague Middle School Safe Routes to School Program

“Since the inception of the Safe Routes program at North Hill Elementary we have: (1) had the school district install a new sidewalk and crosswalk on school property, (2) removed vegetation on private property that interfered with sight lines, (3) convinced our city to hire a crossing guard for the neighborhood intersection closest to our school, (4) worked with our city to install new signage and rerouted traffic into the school parking lot to improve pedestrian safety, (5) continue to coordinate traffic enforcement with our police department, (6) promote fall and spring walk/bike to school days, (7) purchased easel signs to provide safety instructions to drivers, and (8) initiated school-wide challenges and provided incentive prizes to encourage our students to walk/ bike to school and carpool.”

- Jessica Opfer, Chair, North Hill Safe Routes Committee

6 Conclusion: Reflections and Recommendations

By creating a state structure for Safe Routes to School programming that supports both new and ongoing efforts, and investing in a deeply expert nonprofit partner, Michigan has been able to nurture and support solid Safe Routes to School programming at the local level around the state. Michigan has strong Safe Routes to School programs in many of its largest cities and also has many Safe Routes to School programs in rural and suburban areas. While Safe Routes to School programs sometimes focus on lower effort activities that are easier to manage but have less impact, Michigan's Safe Routes to School programs are conducting high-impact activities such as weekly walking school buses and walk and roll days, and are combining these efforts with other fun activities, educational efforts, and infrastructure advocacy. Michigan has many Safe Routes to School programs in both low-income and high-income communities, and at the state and local level there is a strong focus on including students with disabilities, as well as engaging students from a variety of groups to experience the benefits of walking and biking to school.

There is also room for considerable growth in Safe Routes to School in Michigan. There are significant population centers in the state that have little to no Safe Routes to School activity. In addition, existing programs have the potential for much higher levels of impact. Although the state program is able to provide low levels of funding for many local Safe Routes to School programs, for real sustainability and comprehensive impact, programs need to be able to hire staff. State funding for Safe Routes to School could provide much more significant support for Safe Routes to School programs and for improved street safety in school zones around the state. In addition, many communities around the country are ensuring the longevity and efficacy of their Safe Routes to School programs by providing guaranteed sources of local funding; Michigan communities would do well to explore this approach. In addition, there are many schools and children who are not benefiting from Safe Routes to School, even in communities with good programs. More funding, more staffing, and stronger commitments from local elected officials and other stakeholders have the potential to significantly improve children's health and safety in Michigan.

Recommendations

- Commit substantial state funding for Safe Routes to School programs and infrastructure.
- Identify local financing mechanisms to fund Safe Routes to School coordinators and local activities.
- Adopt a state bicycle plan, pedestrian plan, or multimodal plan; include Safe Routes to School considerations and prioritization.
- Adopt modern state design guidance providing for safe walking and biking.
- Prioritize high needs communities in Transportation Alternatives Program awards.
- Provide additional resources for Safe Routes to School program activities in low income communities.
- Adopt state school siting guidance (recommendations, requirements, and/or incentives) that support smart school siting, such as support for siting schools in walkable and bikeable locations; school design that supports outdoor play as well as walking and biking; and colocation of school sites with parks and other relevant destinations.
- Encourage passage of local Safe Routes to School policies and resolutions with specific commitments, including on equity actions, by school boards and local jurisdictions.
- Conduct regular state evaluations of levels of walking and biking to school as well as differences in participation and safety among demographic groups; commit resources to maximize equitable benefits.

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