



Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP

Active Paths for Equity & Health

www.SafeRoutesPartnership.org

Local elected officials across the country have successfully adopted policies and practices that support and encourage walking and rolling, and have realized improvements in safety, health, transportation, student educational performance, and even the economy. This action brief is designed to provide local elected officials and their staff with an understanding of the benefits of Safe Routes to School and policy opportunities to improve walking and rolling to school and in daily life.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Local Elected Officials



Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost half of all students walked or rolled to school, and most lived within a mile of their schools. Today, only eleven percent of students walk or roll to school. The decrease in walking and rolling can have a long-term, negative impact on today's youth including important local issues such as health, education, safety, and the environment. Safe Routes to School, a national and international movement to increase physical activity, improve health, reduce traffic congestion, and address air quality by getting more students walking and rolling to school and in daily life, 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 act, [SAFETEA-LU \(Safe Accountable Flexible Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users\)](#), which dedicated \$1.1 billion to Safe Routes to School and opened the door for innovative Safe Routes to School programs throughout the country. To date, well over 17,400 schools and over 6.8 million children nationally have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to provide an affordable and accessible alternative to driving.

The current federal transportation bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, provides funding for Safe Routes to School and other walking and rolling projects. Decisions on use of these funds are made by the state department of transportation and large metropolitan planning organizations. While federal funding is available and some states provide additional resources to support Safe Routes to School, roadway improvements, educational programs, and encouragement activities are developed and implemented at the local level – in neighborhoods and with schools. Communities have an opportunity to bolster and sustain local Safe Routes to School efforts by creating or re-allocating additional local funding streams, adopting supportive local policies, and enacting advisory coalitions or committees.



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 bicycle 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.

Community Level Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

The following strategies are excellent opportunities to boost walking and rolling and Safe Routes to School as fully funded transportation priorities at the local level. Local elected officials can take leadership in promoting these ideas internally and externally to create safer, more accessible active transportation options for all users through funding and policies that support walking and rolling.



Strategy: Allocate Funding for a Local Safe Routes to School Program

In order to create funding sources not reliant on federal and state funding decisions, localities can invest a relatively small amount of transportation dollars in walking and rolling to school projects. These communities address the long-term issues of safety, traffic congestion, and air quality, as well as the health needs of their residents, by dedicating funding to improving conditions through a local Safe Routes to School program.

Prioritizing Support for Lower-Income Neighborhoods and Schools

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 funds reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. Local elected officials should ensure that walking and rolling improvements benefit all schools and neighborhoods and should consider prioritizing improvement in lower-income areas to address disparities in health and the built environment.



Fort Collins, CO Funds Safe Routes to School with Local Sales Tax

In 2009, Fort Collins had 11 serious or fatal crashes involving bicycles and pedestrians. City Council members, City staff, and the community began a push to create safer streets for all users. To improve bicycle safety, the City Council asked Transportation Planning staff to prepare a Bicycle Safety Education Plan, adopted in 2011. This plan set in motion ongoing City support for Safe Routes to School and the continues to allocate a portion of the Keep Fort Collins Great sales tax to support Safe Routes to School staffing and program activities.

Strategy: Include Walking and Rolling in Planning Documents

Every day, communities are involved in developing, finalizing, and implementing plans that significantly affect the future of walking and rolling in the community. These plans include bicycle and pedestrian master plans, general/comprehensive plans, capital improvement plans, regional transportation plans, and more. The resulting work of these collaborations is an overall blueprint which prioritizes projects, designates the way land can be used and, in many cases, assigns funding for transportation. Local elected officials have the influence to make sure projects that allow children to safely walk and roll to school and other destinations are a priority of these planning processes.

Strategy: Maintain Safe Routes to School and Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinators

Local public works departments need dedicated staff to carry out Safe Routes to School priorities. Bicycle and pedestrian and Safe Routes to School programs and projects benefit from dedicated staff who manage projects, provide resources and training to districts and schools, monitor progress, and ensure that federal and state funds are quickly and fully expended.

Portsmouth, Ohio Turns Planning into Program Funding

In order to receive funding for their Safe Routes to School project from the Ohio Department of Transportation, schools in Portsmouth knew they needed to have their project included in a planning document. When Scioto County began developing their plan, Portsmouth, which is also the county seat, was ready to participate. The final plan included a large student travel plan for Portsmouth along with Safe Routes to School recommendations for thirteen districts across the county. In turn, Portsmouth was awarded a \$400,000 Safe Routes to School grant to implement safety improvements.



Strategy: Use a Local Complete Streets Approach

As communities consider allocating funding for Safe Routes to School projects, it is ideal to ensure that future road construction or rehabilitation is inclusive of walking and rolling by taking a local Complete Streets approach. A Complete Streets approach ensures that every project recognizes the accommodation of all modes and users — including automobiles, transit, bicyclists, pedestrians, children, older adults, and people with disabilities — when new projects are being built or renovations are being made. It can be more cost-effective to build these accommodations in during a project rather than retrofitting the road afterwards.

Strategy: Reduce Speeds

If a pedestrian is struck by a car traveling 40 mph, there is an 85 percent chance of death, while pedestrians struck by cars travelling 20 mph have a five percent chance of dying. The World Health Organization has identified speed control as one of the interventions that would reduce the number of traffic casualties. Communities interested in increasing safety through reducing speeds can: 1) reduce the speed limits, 2) increase the size of the school and residential zones in which they are required, and 3) implement traffic calming – physical changes to streets that slow drivers down.

Springfield, Missouri Reduces Speeds

Speed limit monitoring by the Traffic Engineering Division showed that 75 percent of the drivers in Springfield were exceeding posted speed limits by at least 10 mph. With these faster speeds came a significant safety risk for students. Shortly thereafter, the City Council passed an ordinance reducing speed limits on all local streets. In addition, a ¼-cent capital improvement sales tax has been used to construct more than 50 miles of sidewalks near schools over the past 20 years and city engineers now regularly study school zones to identify safety challenges to children and make improvements.

Vancouver, Washington Leads with Complete Streets

Vancouver, Washington adopted a [Complete Streets ordinance](#) in 2017 that includes detailed guidance on implementation, including how Complete Streets will be considered in budgeting, how the ordinance will be applied to private projects, and how outreach and education to schools, community members, and other stakeholders will be conducted. One of the first elements of implementing the Complete Streets policy was to develop a project checklist to assist City staff in scoping and developing of transportation capital projects. The checklist is a tool to ensure that projects are consistent with the Complete Streets policy.



Strategy: Support Crossing Guards

Without safe places to walk and roll and safe ways to cross busy thoroughfares, caregivers will not ultimately make the decision to allow their children to walk or roll. In order to ensure that an adequate number of well-trained crossing guards are made available to schools, supporting a comprehensive crossing guard approach is necessary. It should include criteria for funding, equipping, training, and locating crossing guards as one step towards improving safety and encouraging more walking and rolling in the community.

Strategy: Know How Your Community Travels

A great deal of travel data are collected by states, regions, counties and municipalities. It is important to make it a local priority to improve data collection in order to understand how people move from one place to the other, where there are conflicts or crashes and how many dollars the community allocates toward street- scale improvements benefiting each mode. Armed with accurate knowledge of the needs of the community, local elected officials can work with their staff to meet these transportation needs.



Montgomery County, Maryland Celebrates Walk and Roll to School Day

Montgomery County Walk and Roll to School Day is a community-wide celebration. Elected officials are often on-site to encourage students, families, and staff to walk and roll to school. They also take the opportunity to address safety concerns and share what the County is to make their roads safer for people walking and rolling. Council member support has been integral to sustaining momentum around active transportation infrastructure and education activities. This support is seen in the County's investments in Safe Routes to School including a full-time Safe Routes to School Coordinator and dedicated Safe Routes to School Engineer. Check out how elected officials and County staff are championing Safe Routes to School in this Walk and Roll to School Day [news clip](#).





Town of Center, Colorado Secures Safe Routes to School Funding

For the small town of Center, Colorado, securing Safe Routes to School funding was a multi-year journey. The coalition of school staff, local agency staff, elected officials, and community members began by seeking out small Safe Routes to School grants and implementing non-infrastructure projects. They were able to hire a Safe Routes to School Coordinator and organize education and encouragement events, but they were met with resistance to applying for infrastructure projects. Staff turnover and local politics were an on-going struggle, but school district staff and community members continued advocating. The tide turned once new town officials came into office, including a new Town Manager who supported Safe Routes to School infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects. With new partners on board, the coalition restarted their efforts were awarded non-infrastructure and infrastructure grants from Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT). Grant funding will go towards sidewalk construction, crosswalks, striping, ADA improvements, and continuing education and encouragement programming.

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

Getting children walking and rolling to school safely is a good way for local elected officials to improve livability, safety, and health, save lives and boost their economies. Fortunately, Safe Routes to School is an ideal way to achieve these goals. Local elected officials can utilize different approaches to making sure that this popular and effective program is prioritized and funded, and that supportive policies help to get projects and programs on the ground.

Additional Resources

- [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Integrating Safe Walking and Bicycling to School into Comprehensive Planning](#)
- [Building Momentum for Safe Routes to School: A Toolkit for School Districts and City Leaders](#)
- [Vision Zero and Safe Routes to School: Partners in Safety](#)
- [Federal Funding for Safe Routes to School: Evolution Through Four Transportation Bills](#)
- [Investing in Health: Robust Local Active Transportation Financing for Healthy Communities](#)
- [Investing in Walking, Biking, and Safe Routes to School: A Win for the Bottom Line](#)

