



Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP

Active Paths for Equity & Health

www.SafeRoutesPartnership.org

Most student transportation departments currently focus on the busing and driving needs of their communities; however, investing time and resources in supporting walking and rolling can help schools save money, decrease traffic congestion, increase community safety, and improve the health of children. Safe Routes to School is a national and international movement to get more students walking and rolling to school. It can support student transportation departments in advancing walking and rolling initiatives. To date, more than 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, accessible and simple alternative to busing or the family car. Student transportation departments can advance Safe Routes to School by evaluating their policies concerning all modes of transportation and implement strategies to initiate or support projects and programs that increase active transportation to school.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Student Transportation Departments



Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost half of all students walked or rolled to school, and 87 percent of kids who lived within a mile of school walked or rolled. Today, only about 11 percent of students walk or roll to school. These changes have had a significant negative impact on district transportation costs, traffic congestion near schools, and the health and safety of students. Safe Routes to School offers an alternative to these issues by getting more students to walk and roll to school and in daily life. 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.

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.

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, accessible and simple alternative to driving. Communities implementing Safe Route to School have seen a number of improvements including a [44 percent decrease in pedestrian crashes](#), increases in walking and rolling rates ranging from [20 to 200 percent](#), and [reduced traffic congestion](#). Due to the variety of benefits for school districts, this action brief provides information and strategies for student transportation departments to support Safe Routes to School efforts in their districts.



The 6s 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.

Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

Budget cuts to student transportation departments have manifested as potential reductions of bus routes or increases in the student walk boundaries. These changes provide student transportation departments with an excellent opportunity to partner with Safe Routes to School practitioners and become familiar with strategies and best practices for addressing walking and rolling that can increase safety as students need more transportation options.

The following strategies are opportunities to boost walking and rolling to school while also addressing transportation issues throughout the district. Student transportation departments can have a significant influence by sharing these ideas internally and externally, with the ultimate goal of creating safer, more accessible active transportation options for students.



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 initiatives proactively work to reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. Student transportation department staff can ensure that bicycling and rolling improvements benefit all schools and students, especially those with the greatest needs.



Strategy: Address School Bus Costs Through Walking and Rolling

Rising fuel costs, changing demographics, and decreased general funding for school districts has led many student transportation departments to cut school busing. Cutting these services without a planned effort to address student safety concerns with regard to walking and rolling will lead to greater traffic congestion in front of the school, higher parent transportation costs, and decreased safety for those walking and rolling. Student transportation departments can compensate for the loss of bus service by seizing the opportunity to invest in improving safety for students walking and rolling. It is essential that school districts collaborate with all stakeholders to make it safer for children to walk and roll, particularly when cuts to school bus services are being proposed.

Strategy: Allocate Student Transportation Staff Time toward Walking and Rolling

Dedicate a portion of a student transportation staff's job duties to performing environmental scans of relevant literature, research, programs and policies to help identify best and promising practices in walking and rolling. This component of the position can focus on developing a procedure to implement programs at the school level; liaise with schools, internal staff, and community groups to implement active school travel plans – a team-developed document that outlines a community's approach to getting more students walking and rolling; identifying funding available for Safe Routes to School initiatives and supporting individual schools in participating in Safe Routes to School education and encouragement activities. By attributing this portion of a staff member's duties, the student transportation department can advance their image while increasing safety for all students.

Montgomery County Schools Set Clear Policies

Montgomery County Schools in Maryland have a comprehensive student transportation policy that includes clear policies on bus transportation and walking. The policy sets guidelines on the “no-transport” zone for school bus transportation and for exceptions due to hazardous walking conditions. It also makes the school district responsible for assessing safety of recommended walking zones and school bus stops and encourages school staff to work with caregivers and students to teach safe walking and bus-riding behaviors.





Strategy: Include Information on Walking and Rolling to School in Transportation Materials

Student transportation departments regularly communicate information about bus and family vehicle routes and safety to students, caregivers, and staff. Integrating walking and rolling safety, programming, and routes into these materials provides a more comprehensive approach to educating students, caregivers and the community on all forms of transportation to school. For example, this can be done by outlining behavioral expectations and highlighting the details of programmatic supports, such as walking school buses, in the student/parent handbooks. Additionally, include Safe Routes to School as an option on student transportation websites, or integrate pedestrian and bicycle education within bus safety workshops for students.

Boulder Valley School District Invests in Safe Routes to School

The student transportation department in the Boulder Valley School District dedicated a portion of a staff's time to working on walking, rolling, and carpooling. This small investment enabled the district to develop the Safe Routes to School Program that provides programming and develops policies for projects that get more students walking, rolling, and carpooling while reducing single-person car trips and some busing. The district found funding to teach bicycle safety in their schools through their BLAST bicycle safety program, put forward a trip tracking incentive program that rewards those that participate with trip tracker dollars, and developed interactive safe walking and bicycling route maps for participating schools.

Additionally, in partnership with the City of Boulder, the Boulder County Transportation Department, police department, caregivers, and county administration, the district received funding for major infrastructure projects that now connect schools to their communities better. This mitigated needs for “hazard” busing and decreased the number of school buses needed. They have seen a remarkable return on investment and have contributed to the success of two nationally recognized Safe Routes to School programs in Bear Creek and Heatherwood elementary schools. Heatherwood tripled the number of students who walk and roll to school by identifying a barrier to walking and rolling that prompted hazard busing – a high-speed county road that separated the community from the school. The project was prioritized, and subsequently applied for Safe Routes to School funding from the Colorado Department of Transportation, which paid for infrastructure improvements that allows the students to now safely cross this high-speed road.



Strategy: Remove Barriers to Walking and Rolling by Addressing Hazards

Hazard busing – busing students short distances around identified “hazards” such as high-speed roads or railroad tracks – is often more expensive long-term than addressing the barriers that discourage students from walking or rolling in the first place. Student transportation departments can work with practitioners and municipalities to focus on identifying barriers and prioritizing solutions to address the hazards that prompted the transportation department to provide hazard busing service, particularly for residential clusters of students who could otherwise walk or roll. Often, when working closely on a Safe Routes to School task force with city staff, there are multiple opportunities to discuss and create a plan and identify funding for systematically addressing fixable hazards. This could allow the district to reduce or eliminate busing to that area by mitigating the issues that prompted hazard busing.

Durango School District Partners to Support Bicycling

The City of Durango, Colorado demonstrated that a little bit of money can go a long way. Durango School District reached out to the city’s Safe Routes to School program about acquiring six bike racks in order to encourage more biking among students. Lack of bike racks wasn’t just a concern for the school district, but for the whole city. The Rotary Club completed an independent survey that showed insufficient bike racks to be a major barrier to biking. The City applied for an Active Living grant from Colorado Department of Health and Environment to fund bike rack installations around town. They were awarded a \$4,189 grant that included funds for six new bike racks at Durango high school, ten bike racks for local parks, and 12 bike racks for Rotary Club of Durango Daybreak’s bike rack program. Students at Durango High School, who were used to locking their bikes to fences and trees, now enjoy a secure space to keep their bikes safe during the school day.

Strategy: Establish Remote Drop Offs

Traffic congestion around and in front of schools can create a chaotic, unsafe environment for students and staff. Many school districts have considered and implemented remote drop-off zones, instructing buses to drop students at a safe location near the school and encouraging students to walk the remaining distance, often with teacher or administrator supervision. Furthermore, schools can advertise the remote drop-offs to caregivers as an alternative to waiting in traffic 'queues,' simultaneously addressing the traffic congestion in front of the schools while allowing students to get a few minutes of physical activity before arriving at school, an important technique for improving student educational performance. Student transportation departments can work closely with involved schools to identify ideal remote drop-off locations, ensure that students and staff are properly educated on how to execute these locations and ask permission slips to be signed for participating students.

Adams 12 School District Organizes Remote Drop-off Days

As a part of their ongoing encouragement program, the Adams 12 School District in Colorado organizes remote drop-off days that allow all students to participate in their walking and rolling encouragement program. Giving opt out forms to all bus riders the day before, the student transportation department designates drop-offs at all participating schools. Teachers and administration wait at the drop-off site and then walk with the students to the school, providing a fun and interactive beginning to their school day.



Strategy: Participate in the Community's Safe Routes to School Task Force

An easy way for student transportation departments to get involved in Safe Routes to School efforts is to participate in the district or community Safe Routes to School task force. Many communities form a Safe Routes to School task force to identify and prioritize projects that get more students walking and rolling. Task forces generally are made up of a diverse mix of stakeholders including school board members, staff from the superintendent's office, the student transportation department, risk management, the department of public health, interested community groups, individual schools, students, families, local elected officials, and any city or county staff that are responsible for traffic conditions and the built environment near schools. By gathering stakeholders, the task force can unify efforts to create a systematic approach to improving programs, projects and policies to encourage walking and rolling to school.



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

Walking school buses and bike trains address parental concern 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. Walking school buses and bike trains are shown to increase walking and rolling to school by addressing these concerns. Student transportation departments can contribute by serving as a coordinating entity, publishing maps or recommended routes that enable students and caregivers to walk and roll safely while avoiding major intersections or hazards, or, at a minimum, by providing information on organizing and implementing these programs on their website. 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.

Mecklenburg County Prioritizes Partnerships

Safe Routes to School works best when everyone works together. Mecklenburg County Safe Routes to School prioritizes partnerships as a key part of their program. Their Safe Routes to School coordinator sits on a Safe School Zones committee with representatives from the Charlotte Department of Transportation and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District. Together, they tackle school safety travel concerns by sharing community feedback and developing actionable solutions. Their coordinated efforts keep projects moving in a timely manner and increases partner accountability. When lines of communication remain open and everyone does their part, Safe Routes programs can thrive!



Strategy: Collect Data on how Students Travel to and from School

A great deal of travel data is 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 concerns near schools and target parental concerns. In order to advance data collection regarding walking and rolling to school, the student transportation departments can work with schools to conduct caregiver surveys, student tallies, or even observational surveys. The student transportation department can make it a priority to understand how students move from one place to the other, where there are fears, conflicts or crashes, and to identify potential safety improvements. Armed with the knowledge of the needs of the school (and local) community, the student transportation department can work with partners more effectively. These could include a [Safe Routes to School team](#) or district task force, and local road authorities, such as a city or county traffic engineer, to focus on high-impact strategies that directly address parent concerns and safety issues.

Strategy: Safe Routes to Bus Stops

It can be difficult to include all students in walking and rolling to school. However, there is still an opportunity to make certain that students who are walking to bus stops have safe and enjoyable trips. While most student transportation departments implement policies through their transportation safety plan to ensure that the bus stop itself is safe in terms of visibility, proximity to speeding vehicles, and access to emergency phones, consider the routes to the stop and prioritize improvements based on the safety of that trip and incorporating physical activity. While this strategy is not ideal for all bus stops, Safe Routes to Bus Stops can provide a safe and inviting environment for physical activity before school for those located outside of the two-mile school radius and/or in high density areas.

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

While busing students is a safe way for them to get to and from school, there are many opportunities for student transportation departments to reduce costs, decrease traffic congestion around schools and improve safety while working on projects that benefit all forms of student transportation. Having a close relationship with municipal transportation staff, Safe Routes to School community task force members, and Safe Routes to School practitioners can unveil multiple opportunities to better integrate walking, rolling, busing and driving to create safer, healthier trips for students.

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](#)

