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Introduction to Safe Routes to School

Over the past two decades, Safe Routes to School projects and programs have grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and rolling to school has attracted great interest from leaders and decision-makers at the local, regional, state, and federal levels.

As such, Safe Routes to School practitioners have been expanding their efforts to encompass policy, systems, and environmental changes in their work. While there is federal, and sometimes state, support for Safe Routes to School, projects and programs are implemented at the local level – in neighborhoods and with schools. The student transportation department is one ally that can help advance efforts to support transportation options for students that include walking and rolling.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer to Understanding the Role of the Student Transportation Department



Student transportation departments typically focus on car and bus travel, but they can work for the benefit of students walking and rolling as well. Understanding the responsibilities of student transportation departments can help Safe Routes to School efforts become more successful. Most school districts have a student transportation department, also known as a pupil transportation department or office, to ensure that every student has the ability to safely travel to and from school. In the 1960s, most students who lived close to school walked or biked, but now most students in the United States get to school via a school bus or a family car, so student transportation departments primarily focus on school bus routes and traffic concerns related to car drop-off areas.

Because of this shift in focus, walking and rolling options can be overlooked. However, Safe Routes to School can help the departments identify ways to safely get children actively commuting to school. Student transportation departments and Safe Routes to School can work together to help schools save money, decrease traffic, increase community safety, and improve the health of children.

Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of the Student Transportation Department

The primary role of a student transportation department is to create operating procedures that provide safe and efficient ways of getting students to and from school. Most student transportation departments spend the majority of their staff time and resources focused on busing. This focus is often driven by state requirements for districts to provide and operate buses.



In addition to understanding the policies that dictate student transportation, it is also important to research how the district funds the student transportation department. Funding is often attached to the number of buses required and routes run, which can, in turn, affect the size of the department's staff. A majority of states provide financial support to school districts for transportation, typically covering around 70-80 percent of the district's busing costs.

A challenge for student transportation departments is rising fuel costs, which has led many transportation departments to consolidate or eliminate their routes and stops. This can lead to the creation of an expanded "walk zone" – the area within a determined distance from the school where busing is not provided. Far too often, "walk zone" becomes a misnomer; when stops are eliminated or routes changed, more caregivers ultimately drive their children to school. This causes an increase in traffic congestion and safety concerns along with more potential for conflicts. In an effort to avoid this outcome, Safe Routes to School practitioners should use this opportunity to discuss the inclusion of walking and rolling initiatives. These are not only good models to mitigate costs and logistics of busing, but also have positive effects on the safety and health of children.

Student transportation departments are often responsible for making decisions concerning (but not limited to):

- > Staffing positions related to transportation (bus drivers, crossing guards, and safety patrols).
- > Setting school bus routes and schedules, location of bus stops, and policies dictating eligibility for busing.
- > Working with local partners to set up trainings for volunteers that will assist in student safety patrol, such as youth that are trained to monitor safety on buses, at crosswalks, and sometimes at identified drop off/pick up areas.
- > Providing supervision of loading and unloading areas at or near the school and ongoing evaluation of route pick-up and drop-off locations for safety. This includes devising a system to separate buses from pedestrians, bicyclists, and the car drop off area.
- > Providing safe access to entryways on school property for students that walk or roll to school.

When working with student transportation departments, Safe Routes to School practitioners should keep in mind that the departments have to deal with pressures from families and caregivers, school administrators, busing companies, and state and federal mandates.

The best way to ensure that decisions made by the department will not adversely affect walking and rolling opportunities is to educate each stakeholder involved on the numerous ways that active transportation can be seamlessly integrated into each child's commute. Utilize the steps below to gather information, combine it with some of the outlined talking points, and familiarize yourself with the strategies that are included in the companion document, "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Student Transportation Departments](#)."

What You Can Do

As with most successful work, success is predicated on knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Use the following tips as a starting point for engaging the district's student transportation department.

LEARN

- Talk to student transportation department staff and conduct research to learn about the district's past involvement in walking and rolling efforts, if any.
- Talk with a school board member or review any policies and laws that dictate the actions of the student transportation department.
- Check with individual schools to learn about their policies and how those impact the student transportation department.
- Research how the student transportation department receives funding and how it responds to increased or decreased demand for busing or funding changes.
- Identify existing committees, coalitions, and other initiatives that focus on walking and rolling to school at individual schools and throughout the district, if any.
- Determine staff or appointed committees that liaise with school board members on transportation decisions.

REVIEW

- Become familiar with the school or school district's written transportation and other Safe Routes to School related policies, if any.
- Review the student transportation department's website to better understand its stated priorities and find opportunities for synergy.
- Utilizing all the information learned and reviewed, put together a strong case for Safe Routes to School that will resonate with the student transportation department. Prepare to connect and participate.

CONNECT

- Develop a working relationship with the student transportation department; educate on key talking points that are relevant to stated priorities, position, and authority.
- Connect with previously identified coalitions, committees and other initiatives to bring them into the discussion with student transportation department staff.
- Invite the student transportation department staff to join the district or community-wide Safe Routes to School task force (if one exists) or to attend a school team meeting so that they might see more opportunities for collaboration.
- Don't stop at the student transportation department staff! Connect with the district superintendent and supervisor of facilities maintenance to get buy-in at all levels for improved conditions for walking and rolling.

PARTICIPATE

- Inform student transportation department directors and their staff about the priorities and benefits of bicycling, walking, and Safe Routes to School. Participate in relevant committees, coalition meetings, and bicycle and pedestrian or Safe Routes to School advisory councils.
- Regularly check in with student transportation department staff, who work closely with the department director, to serve as experts, and resources on developing walking and rolling to school programs and projects.
- Ask the student transportation department to publicize walking and rolling initiatives on their websites as a viable alternative to taking the bus or the family car.
- Invite student transportation department staff to participate in Safe Routes to School events and include them in the planning process, such as "Remote Drop-Off" programs.
- Be persistent, but professional and understanding. Student transportation departments are often focused on how to safely move students from one place to another using buses – it may take some time to warm up to 'new' ideas about student transportation, such as walking or rolling.

Align Talking Points with the Stated Priorities of Student Transportation Departments

In addition to providing the student transportation department and its staff with the companion, "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Student Transportation Departments](#)" action brief, and reviewing the strategies outlined within the document, customize talking points by considering the following common priorities of student transportation departments and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities. After choosing impactful talking points, supplement those with photos and real-life situations that outline the hazards students face while walking or rolling, or successful Safe Routes to School projects in other cities that include collaboration with student transportation departments.

Increased Walking and Rolling

Studies have shown an increase in walking and rolling to school through Safe Routes to School projects and programs.

- > A study of 801 schools in Washington DC, Florida, Texas, and Oregon showed an average 25 percent increase in walking and rolling to school over a five-year period associated with education and encouragement programs, and an average 18 percent increase associated with infrastructure improvements. This means that a school that combines infrastructure improvements with education and encouragement programs is likely to see increases in walking or biking of up to 43 percent.¹
- > A study of 53 schools in four states (FL, MS, WA, and WI) found that schools with Safe Routes to School funded projects increased walking and rolling to school by 37 percent.²



Safety

Safe Routes to School addresses traffic dangers and improves safety for students as well as other community members.

- > A New York City study found a 44 percent decline in pedestrian injury in areas with Safe Routes to School projects, compared to no change in locations without. The costs savings associated with injury reduction would achieve an overall net societal benefit of \$230 million over a projected 50-year period.³
- > A study of 47 schools in California found that Safe Routes to School infrastructure improvements resulted in a 75 percent reduction in collisions involving people walking and rolling of all ages.⁴

Transportation Costs

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

- > Transportation is the second-highest household expense in the United States. In 2019, Americans spent an average of \$10,742 to purchase, fuel, and insure their vehicles.⁵
- > In 2016, an average of 13 percent of household expenditures went to transportation. However, for people with incomes in the bottom 20% of the U.S., one-third of their expenditures went to transportation costs. People making less money are hardest hit by a lack of affordable transportation options.⁶
- > Safe Routes to School programs can significantly reduce the cost of bussing for school systems. American school districts currently spend \$100 million to \$500 million annually to bus children for just one or two miles due to hazardous conditions. Improving walking conditions near schools could reduce this cost substantially, by decreasing the need for school bus service for students who live close enough to walk or bike to and from school.⁷
- > Approximately 55 percent of children are bused to school, and we spend \$21.5 billion nationally each year on school bus transportation, an average of \$854 per child transported per year.⁸
- > Safer options for commuting to school can save people from the emotional and financial cost of injuries and fatalities. In New York City, the total cost of implementing SRTS was just over \$10 million, but it produced estimated cost reductions of \$221 million by reducing costs associated with injury, lifelong disability, and death.⁹

Health

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

- > Walking and rolling to daily destinations, like school, provide an opportunity for physical activity outside of school time, augmenting physical education in school. Walking one mile to and from school each day is two-thirds of the recommended sixty minutes of physical activity a day. Children who walk to school have higher levels of physical activity throughout the day.^{10,11}
- > Safe Routes to School is one of the most effective evidence-based children's health strategies in the chronic disease realm. As one of only a handful of approaches that the CDC has selected as cost-effective measures that have a health impact in five years (known as HI-5 interventions).^{12,13}



Education

Lack of transportation options can be a barrier to getting to school on time or at all, especially for students in communities where there is no option other than to walk or bike to school. Student health has been linked to academic performance. Walking or rolling to school can help ensure students arrive ready to learn.

- > Based on a CDC evaluation of 145 informants from 184 walking school bus programs from 2017 to 2018, every additional walking school bus trip per was related to a 23 percent increase in the odds of experiencing a reduction in tardiness.¹⁴
- > One study found that after walking on a treadmill for 20 minutes, children responded to test questions with greater accuracy and had more brain activity than children who had been sitting.¹⁵



Environment

neighborhoods are becoming increasingly clogged by traffic. By boosting the number of students walking and rolling, Safe Routes to School projects and programs reduce traffic congestion and benefit the environment.

- > School travel by private family vehicle for students grades K through 12 accounted for 10 percent of all automobile trips made during the morning peak period (7:00am to 9:00am) in 2017 and 1.5 percent of the total annual trips made by family vehicle in the U.S.^{16,17}
- > If more children walked or rolled to school, it would reduce the number of cars near the school at pick-up and drop-off times, making it safer for active travelers and reducing congestion.¹⁸
- > Safe Routes to School programs can improve air quality by reducing vehicle trips and miles traveled. Over the last 25 years, among children ages 5 to 14, there has been a 74 percent increase in asthma cases.¹⁹ In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.²⁰
- > Children exposed to traffic pollution are more likely to have asthma, permanent lung deficits, and a higher risk of heart and lung problems as adults.²¹





Conclusion

Safe Routes to School is a logical partner for student transportation departments. Since both groups are interested in children arriving and leaving schools safely, there are many opportunities to link to existing projects and programs to bolster walking and rolling to school. Safe Routes to School practitioners can advance this relationship toward a shared cause by carefully considering the student transportation department's responsibilities, reviewing the talking points and potential department strategies to bolster walking and rolling, and utilizing the suggestions in the above "What You Can Do" section to develop relationships with student transportation department staff and achieve mutual goals.

Additional Resources

- > [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- > [Buses, Boots and Bicycles: Exploring Collaboration Between Safe Routes to School and School Busing Professionals to Get Children to School Safely and Healthily](#)
- > [Buses, Boots, and Bicycles: Getting Safe Routes to School and Student Transportation Departments to Work Together](#)
- > [Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#)
- > [Safe Routes to School Policy Resources](#)



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