



www.SafeRoutesPartnership.org

Governors and state agency leaders throughout the country have successfully adopted policies and practices that support and encourage walking and rolling, and have seen improvements in safety, health, transportation, student educational performance, and the economy. This action brief is designed to provide the governor or state agency leader 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 Governors and State Agency Leaders



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 the school they attended. Today, only 11 percent of students walk or roll to school. The decrease in walking and rolling can have a long term, negative impact on the livability of an area, affecting important issues such as health, education, land use, safety, and the environment. Safe Routes to School is 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. 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, accessible, and convenient 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.

Under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Safe Routes to School projects are eligible for federal funding through different transportation programs, including the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP). While this funding stream can be allocated for continued Safe Routes to School projects and programs, governors and state agency leaders can bolster Safe Routes to School by creating or reallocating additional funding streams, enacting advisory coalitions or committees, adopting supportive policies, and providing guidance and assistance to cities, counties, and schools as they implement Safe Routes to School in their local communities.



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 bicycling safer, and more comfortable and convenient.

ENCOURAGEMENT – Generating enthusiasm and increased walking and bicycling 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 bicycling, 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.



State Level Policies and Funding

The following strategies are excellent opportunities to boost walking, rolling, and Safe Routes to School as fully funded transportation priorities of the state. These strategies are not intended to be a comprehensive list, but can provide a glimpse into some of the potential for improving the state's transportation systems, funding, and policies.

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

While federal funding is available for Safe Routes to School, some states have taken the initiative to fund their own stand-alone state Safe Routes to School program. By following the lead of the federal program and investing a relatively small amount of transportation dollars in walking and rolling to school projects, these states continue to address the long-term issues of safety, traffic congestion, and air quality as well as the health needs of their residents.

Strategy: Statewide Complete Streets Policy

As states consider allocating funding for Safe Routes to School projects, it is ideal to ensure that future road construction or rehabilitation doesn't hinder walking and rolling by instituting a statewide [Complete Streets policy](#). Complete Streets policies ensure that every project accommodates 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. Adopting a statewide Complete Streets policy sets the standard for municipalities within the state and ensures that state roads accommodate all users when practical.

Case Study: Colorado

In October 2017, the Colorado Department of Transportation's (CDOT) Transportation Commission adopted an updated [statewide Complete Streets policy](#). The policy is the result of hard work by the state's bicycle and pedestrian planner, other CDOT staff, and participating stakeholders from state departments, local governments, and the public, in a process that refined the language used in the policy. The policy is currently under implementation as key stakeholders work to ensure that “the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians shall be included in the planning, design, and operation of transportation facilities, as a matter of routine.”



Strategy: Fund the 20 Percent Match Required for TAP

Communities applying for TAP funds for Safe Routes to School funding are required to provide 20 percent of the funds for the project. This can have a stifling effect on the number of applications submitted, but also limits the applications from under-resourced lower-income schools and communities. States that would like to bolster Safe Routes to School can provide funding for the required 20 percent match, removing a major hurdle to interested communities lacking the funding.

Case Study: Ohio

The Ohio Department of Transportation recognized the challenge that under-resourced communities might face in meeting the requirement of a 20 percent match for Safe Routes to School grant applications. To address this issue, the department committed to maintaining a 100 percent funded Safe Routes to School program using flexible toll revenue funds. The application process allows applicants to request a percentage of state funds between 80 and 100 percent, encouraging communities that can leverage additional local funds to do so, while providing a fully funded grant for under-resourced communities to improve walking and rolling to school in Ohio.



Strategy: Traffic Safety Training Programs

It is critically important to train children and youth on how to safely walk, roll, and behave around buses and automobile traffic – it can save lives! Investment in a comprehensive traffic safety curriculum in the classroom is an investment in a lifetime skill and pastime for students. After all, everyone is a pedestrian at some point in their day, and these skills make for better drivers in the future, too. Many states have taken on this challenge by integrating and funding traffic safety courses in and after school, or funding the creation of state-approved curriculum that can be administered in PE, health or other classes, and programs.

Case Study: Florida

The Florida Traffic and Bicycle Safety Education Program, based at the University of Florida, provides training for physical education teachers and other interested parties on how to administer traffic safety courses in the classroom. The Florida Department of Transportation funds this project through their human resource development funds, which pay for the trainers, travel and expenses incurred. In exchange for this small investment, schools across Florida are staffed with thoroughly trained teachers and armed with a robust curriculum to teach walking and rolling safety skills and knowledge to the younger generations.

Strategy: School Siting Policy

When thinking long term about the ability of children and families to safely walk and roll to schools, it is essential that schools are located within a reasonable distance. The location of the school dramatically affects a student's ability to walk or roll there. Unfortunately, many state departments of education have increased school minimum acreage requirements, using long-outdated school siting principles, prompting many schools to be built or moved to the outskirts of neighborhoods – and even out of towns - where larger parcels of land may be more readily available. But the long-term costs of transportation such as busing, congestion, new infrastructure (e.g., sewage, electricity, new roadways, ongoing maintenance), and other costs absorbed by the municipality aren't considered. Per the [Environmental Protection Agency's resources on school siting](#), states can address school siting issues by improving coordination across state programs, creating staffing, and financial resources to address the issue, increasing state participation in public meetings, and providing easy access to state information on school siting.

Case Study: Washington

In 2002, the Department of Ecology in Washington State began a review process that identified the potential environmental impacts made from government decisions. This process is initiated when, among a number of other things, a permit is applied to construct a project. The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) then requires that the environmental impacts of a project such as constructing a new school are reviewed, identified, and evaluated. This process allows the applicant, often another government agency, to fully understand the environmental impacts of the project in tandem with the technical, economic, or other information, and then to adjust the project criteria to avoid negative impacts such as excessive traffic congestion and air quality costs to a poorly located school.

Prioritizing Support for Lower-Income Neighborhoods

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.



Strategy: Maintain Full-Time Safe Routes to School Coordinators

State funding programs need dedicated staff to carry them out. Safe Routes to School programs and projects benefit from full-time staff who manage application cycles, provide resources and training to applicants, monitor progress, and ensure that funds are expended within federal and state guidelines and without delay.

Strategy: Provide Safe Routes to School Planning Grants or Mini Grants

Financial and administrative hurdles often discourage communities, especially small, rural, and low-income communities, from accessing funding from state DOTs. Many communities encounter a barrier to applying for funds when they must engage in unfunded planning or engineering work before the application. Planning grants help communities methodically identify needs and develop projects for future funding pursuits. In addition, many Safe Routes to School programs begin as volunteer efforts or as small pilot initiatives. By providing mini grants that do not require a large application effort or complex administrative efforts, states can help launch Safe Routes to School programs in more communities.

Strategy: Provide Safe Routes to School Resource Center or Technical Assistance that Supports Strong Local Safe Routes to School Programs

Some states provide more extensive assistance to schools or school systems to help them initiate Safe Routes to School programs and improve their practices and approaches. States have done this in various ways including workshops and trainings, directly helping local programs, developing toolkits, guides, and materials, or running a statewide resource center. This type of assistance is particularly important for low-income communities and others with limited capacity and local resources.

As part of or in addition to a Safe Routes to School resource center, states can facilitate education regarding Safe Routes to School through curricula, trainings, or related resources. Education is one of the core components of Safe Routes to School initiatives. States can support educational programming inside and outside of classrooms by developing curricula, lesson plans, and other materials. Curricula can be tailored to state educational standards.

Strategy: Adopt a State Safe Routes to School Plan or Incorporate Safe Routes to School into a State Active Transportation Plan

Create a statewide plan for Safe Routes to School, either through a standalone plan or as a component of a statewide active transportation planning effort. Creating a statewide planning foundation allows state agencies and regional and local partners to coordinate on supporting prioritized projects, policies, and programs. Project prioritization within plans helps ensure that improvements target enhancements in access opportunities. The plans also provide guidance for local jurisdictions to develop their own strategies for Safe Routes to School.



Strategy: Support Equitable Safe Routes to School Programming

The benefits of walking and rolling to school, and of Safe Routes to School programs, are not equitably distributed among students of different genders, races, nationalities, or abilities. Girls are less likely to walk and roll than boys; students of color walk at higher rates, but also experience traffic injuries and fatalities at higher rates; students with disabilities are often inadvertently excluded from Safe Routes to School programming, despite strong opportunities for physical activity and social benefits.^{1,2,3} States can play a strong role in encouraging and incentivizing local programs to tailor programs and practices to appeal to each demographic group. Provide funding, publications, or other support dedicated to enabling local programs to engage one or more specific demographic groups, such as low-income students, students of color, English learner students, students in rural communities, students with disabilities, or girls, and non-binary students.

Strategy: Bring Experts and Communities Together to Inform State Decisions

If a governor or state agency plans to make decisions regarding rolling, walking, or Safe Routes to School it is ideal to enlist technical expertise and community perspectives through advisory groups such as a Bicycle and Pedestrian or Safe Routes to School Advisory Committee or Council.



Conclusion

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

Additional Resources

- [Making Strides: State Report Cards on Support for Walking, Bicycling, and Active Kids and Communities](#)
- [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Federal Funding for Safe Routes to School: Evolution Through Four Transportation Bills](#)
- [Investing in Walking, Biking, and Safe Routes to School: A Win for the Bottom Line](#)
- [Investing in Health, Safety, and Mobility: A Report on State Funding for Walking, Bicycling, and Safe Routes to School](#)



References

1. Zimmerman, S., M. Lieberman, K. Kramer, and B. Sadler, "At the Intersection of Active Transportation and Equity: Joining Forces to Make Communities Healthier and Fairer," 2015, <https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/resources/report/intersection-active-transportation-equity>.
2. Safe Routes Partnership, "Equity in Safe Routes to School," <https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/safe-routes-school/101/equity>.
3. Safe Routes Partnership, "Engaging Students with Disabilities in Safe Routes to School," 2018, <https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/resources/fact-sheet/engaging-students-disabilities-safe-routes>.