

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

# A Primer for School Boards and Principals



*Safe Routes to School is a popular program that works to get more students walking and bicycling to school and in daily life. School boards and principals can have a significant influence on the way in which students travel to and from school. There are many policies, procedures and projects that can be advanced at the school and district level to address primary concerns, to improve safety, increase physical activity and get more students walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.*



## Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost 50 percent of all students walked or bicycled to school, and 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school walked or bicycled. Today, fewer than 14 percent of students walk or bicycle to school. These changes have contributed to traffic congestion around schools, increased the expense of busing students, decreased safety for students walking and bicycling to and from school and had a significant long term impact on the physical activity of students. The drop in students walking and bicycling to school exactly mirrors the growth of the childhood obesity epidemic since 1969.

Safe Routes to School, a fast-growing national and international movement to increase physical activity, improve health, increase safety and reduce traffic congestion, has been gaining momentum at the local, regional, state and national levels. This 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. By 2013, more than 13,000 schools and more than 5 million children<sup>1</sup> nationwide have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to

provide a fun, safe and accessible way for students to arrive at school. Communities implementing Safe Route to School have seen as much as a 44 percent decrease in pedestrian crashes,<sup>2</sup> increases in walking and bicycling ranging from 20 to 200 percent,<sup>3</sup> higher levels of concentration in the classroom from students<sup>4</sup> and reduced traffic congestion.<sup>5</sup> There are numerous benefits for school districts who invest in encouraging more students to walk and bicycle. This action brief provides background and strategies for school board members and principals to support, or even lead, Safe Routes to School efforts in their districts and schools.

## Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

There are many policies and procedures that keep school districts and their schools operating daily. With a focus on academic achievement, student safety and health, and a strong sense of community, districts and schools can and should consider Safe Routes to School as part of the solution. The following strategies and best practices are opportunities to boost walking and bicycling to school while addressing safety and health issues in schools. School boards and principals can have a significant influence by sharing these ideas internally and externally, and creating safer, more accessible active transportation options for students.

## Strategy: Consider a General “Five E’s” Based Policy

Safe Routes to School programs and projects are most effective when they address the Five E’s: Education, Encouragement, Engineering, Evaluation and Enforcement. School board members that are interested in advancing Safe Routes to School can consider implementing a policy that addresses all aspects of the Five E’s to support and increase walking and bicycling to school safely in the district.

### District Case Study: Mill Valley School District, Marin County, California

Understanding the value of an impactful policy, a board member from Mill Valley School District (MVSD) decided in December of 2011 that it was time to cement Safe Routes to School into district policy. MVSD participated in the first federally funded Safe Routes to School program in 2000. As a part of this program, it had been participating in the Transportation Authority of Marin’s Safe Routes to Schools program, which taught safe bicycling and walking skills, and how to manage large scale encouragement programs, trained crossing guards and regularly evaluate success of the program. The MVSD School Board passed a board policy that proclaims support for Safe Routes to School based on the various benefits of health, safety, student achievement and environmental considerations. The policy identifies key partners, requires exploring funding sources for Safe Routes to School, ensures that the program is matched to the developmental levels of the students, identifies evaluation strategies and requires the superintendent to regularly provide reports to the school board. Additionally, the school board added an administrative policy that more clearly defines how the Five E’s will be addressed to ensure that Safe Routes to School programs and projects throughout the district are effective.

### School Case Study: Old Mill Elementary School, Mill Valley, California

Old Mill Elementary School is located in the Mill Valley School District and is affected by their district policy. Old Mill has been closely involved with Safe Routes to School since its inception. The team at Old Mill worked to make sure that every child had a way to walk and bicycle to school that took 15 minutes or less through their “15 Minutes to School Project.” As part of this goal, the site council created a Safe Routes to School Travel Plan that uses all Five E’s while also addressing barriers and opportunities, including opening up the many steps, lanes and paths from the old railroad days that were overgrown and underused and prioritizing implementation processes and ongoing funding. Since the beginning of this program, Old Mill has been able to reduce single-occupant car trips by as much as 38 percent and has seen more than two-fold increase of walking and bicycling to school from 16 to 39 percent.

### The 5 E’s of Safe Routes to School

**Education:** Teach children about the broad range of transportation choices, instruct them in important lifelong bicycling and walking safety skills and launch driver safety campaigns in the vicinity of schools.

**Encouragement:** Use events and activities to promote walking and bicycling and to generate enthusiasm for the program with students, parents, staff and the surrounding community.

**Engineering:** Create operational and physical improvements to the infrastructure surrounding schools to reduce speeds and potential conflicts with motor vehicle traffic, and establish safer and fully accessible crossings, walkways, trails and bikeways.

**Enforcement:** Partner with local law enforcement to ensure that traffic laws are obeyed in the vicinity of schools (this includes enforcement of speeds, yielding to pedestrians in crosswalks and proper walking and bicycling behaviors) and initiate community enforcement such as crossing guard programs and student safety patrols.

**Evaluation:** Monitor and document outcomes, attitudes and trends through the collection of data before and after the intervention(s).

## Strategy: Encourage Safe Routes to School with a Supportive Walking and Bicycling Policy

Make expectations clear at the district and school level by ensuring that the district has a policy that is supportive of walking and bicycling. Such a policy is an opportunity for school boards and principals to encourage Safe Routes to School by standardizing expectations around walking and bicycling, outlining the benefits for individual schools and ensuring that future principals or superintendents do not prevent students from participating in active transportation. When written well and enforced regularly, these policies can create a standard that encourages safer behavior and increases the number of students getting regular physical activity.

### *Safe Routes to School: An Issue of Equity*

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 reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. School board members and principals should ensure that bicycling and walking improvements, whether infrastructure or program related, benefit all schools, especially those with the greatest needs. The Portland, Oregon citywide Safe Routes to School program, serving the Portland Public School district, created a [comprehensive policy](#) that includes a focus on ensuring that schools in underserved neighborhoods have equal access to resources.

### **District Case Study: Fairfax County School Board, Virginia (Washington, D.C. Area)**

In Fairfax County, Virginia, the school board had a policy that gave principals portal to portal authority and responsibility – meaning they were in control of the students' trip to and from school, regardless their mode of transportation. As such, the principals erred on the side of safety and banned bicycling as a before and after school activity. After concerned parents got involved, the school district formed a Safe Routes to School working group that was comprised of stakeholders from inside and outside the school system and began working on a plan. Ultimately, the school district altered their policy to demonstrate that parents have the freedom to choose how their children get to and from school. Since this policy changed in January 2012 there has been enormous interest in Safe Routes to School events with 40 schools (20 percent of the district) participating in the 2012 International Walk to School Day. Pedestrian and bicycle curriculum will be taught in the classroom, and the school district is auditing current bicycle rack need and will install them at the request of principals.

### **School Case Study: Marshall Road Elementary, Vienna, Virginia**

Marshall Road Elementary School is located very close to Interstate 66 in Vienna, Virginia. As a result, it has a great deal of commuter traffic. In fact so much so, that in 2010, the principal banned bicycling or scootering to school and would not allow them on school grounds due to a fear of safety concerns. Students who wanted to ride bicycles or use a scooter rode to the edge of the school property and hid their bicycles and scooters in the bushes. After the Fairfax County School Board passed a supportive bicycling policy, students started riding to school more. As momentum built, the principal ordered bike racks from the school district (who provided them for free) to create a space for students to park bikes. The school now regularly participates in walking and bicycling encouragement events and runs a monthly bike train composed of 10-15 students. The principal even rode with the bike train to school during the Vienna Bike/Walk Challenge.

## Strategy: Participate in the Safe Routes to School Task Force or School Team

Many communities and schools form a Safe Routes to School task force or school team to identify and prioritize projects that get more students physically active by walking and bicycling. Joining or initiating a task force or school team is an easy, actionable way for school board members and principals to get involved in larger community Safe Routes to School efforts. Community task forces are generally made up of a diverse mix of stakeholders operating at the district level including school board members, staff from the superintendent's office, the student transportation department, risk management professionals, the department of public health, interested community groups, individual schools, students, parents, local elected officials and any city or county staff that are responsible for traffic conditions and the built environment near schools. School teams, on the other hand, are focused at Safe Routes to School at the individual school level and are made up of school and surrounding neighborhood stakeholders, including student transportation staff, principals, PTA leaders, nurses or health assistants, public works staff, students and families. By gathering everyone with a stake in children's safety and health, the task force and school team can unify efforts to create a systematic approach to improving programs, projects and policies to encourage walking and bicycling to school at the district and school level.



### School Board Case Study: Dresden School District, Hanover, New Hampshire

A Dresden school board member in the town of Hanover, New Hampshire got involved with the newly forming Safe Routes to School community task force to put together a plan for the district's schools. The task force was made of a broad swath of stakeholders including school and town officials, bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups, teachers, parents, students, police officers, principals and the school superintendent. They met monthly to collect surveys from schools, analyze data and make planning recommendations through their comprehensive [Safe Routes to School Travel Plan](#) that was finalized in March of 2013. The participation, perspective and buy-in of the school board were important contributions to the success of the task force.

### School Case Study: Roosevelt Middle School, Eugene, Oregon

A school team, organized to address Safe Routes to School needs at Roosevelt Middle School, first began in 2005 as part of the School Wellness Committee. This committee, made up of key stakeholders including parents, staff, community members, city staff and even city officials, has advanced Safe Routes to School by applying for and receiving grants, hiring a coordinator, training their PE teacher in bicycle safety, finding funding to install new bike parking, and using an automatic trip counter (the [Boltage](#) RFID reader) that automatically tracks trips and provides rewards and incentives to participating students. The position has grown from one focused at the single school to a full-time SRTS Program Manager position that works throughout the district.



## Strategy: Know How Students Travel Through Data Collection

A great deal of travel and safety data are 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 bicycling. This information can be used to prioritize improvements to the physical infrastructure, address safety concerns near schools and ultimately evaluate Safe Routes to School efforts. In order to advance data collection regarding walking and bicycling to school, the school districts and principals can work with schools to conduct the national standard [Safe Routes to School parent survey](#) and annual [student tallies](#) or even observational surveys. Improving data collection to understand how students move from one place to the other, to know where there are concerns, conflicts or crashes and identify safety improvements should be made a priority. Armed with knowledge of the needs of the school and local community, the school district and principals can work with partners such as a [Safe Routes to School school team](#) or a community task force and a local road authority, such as a city or county traffic engineer, to focus on high-impact strategies that directly address parental concerns and safety issues to get more students physically active.

### District Case Study: Portland, Oregon

Each of the five school districts in the city of Portland, Oregon, including Portland Public Schools, have an inter-governmental agreement to work with the city to mail parent surveys at the beginning and end of the school year to the homes of students. The surveys are returned to the city and processed for use in their Safe Routes to School planning documents and [reports](#) that outline the mode share and parent perception of student travel at all schools in the district. This information is utilized to plan for future infrastructure and non-infrastructure Safe Routes to School initiatives, effectively manage traffic congestion and safety concerns from parents, and draw a clear picture of how students travel. Data from this comprehensive city-wide Safe Routes to School program show that more than 40 percent of Portland's students are walking and bicycling to school, far above the national average.

### School Case Study: The Dawes School, Chicago, Illinois

The Dawes School has more than 1,000 students, two-thirds of whom walk or bicycle to school. The school's principal is diligent about making sure trips to and from school are safe by closely tracking crime on the routes to the school through the Chicago Police Citizen Law Enforcement Analysis and Reporting (CLEAR) map. The map, which is updated daily, helps the principal and the school's partners in Safe Routes to School work together to identify and address areas of concern in order to make walking and bicycling safer. The CLEAR map showed high levels of gang activity, robberies and graffiti in the area – part of which was associated with the nearby high school – that made walking and bicycling less safe. The principal reached out to the Chicago police department to provide a program that trains parent patrol members and provides ongoing support. The school purchases walkie-talkies and red jackets for parent patrols and contracts off-duty police officers to increase safety on the way to and from school. Additionally, the principal changed the school hours by 30 minutes to ensure that elementary students and high school students were not arriving to school at the same time. This was accomplished by working with the available data to understand how students travelled to and from school and what safety concerns needed to be addressed.

## Strategy: Implement Walking School Buses, Bike Trains and Recommended Routes

Walking school buses and bike trains address parental concerns about personal safety and supervision of students walking or bicycling to school by designating volunteers to lead groups of students to school along predetermined routes. Walking school buses and bike trains have been shown to increase walking and bicycling to school by addressing safety and supervision concerns. A recent study also showed that the walking school bus improves school attendance. School board members and principals can advance walking school buses and bike trains by implementing policies that support the organization and implementation of these programs at the school level. Such policies encourage schools to identify recommended routes, include walking school bus training materials and facilitate connections among parents.



### District Case Study: Seattle Public Schools, Washington

In February of 2012, the Seattle School Board voted unanimously to make Safe Routes to School a component of their transportation strategy. The board adopted new language into their Transportation Service Standards that integrated walking and bicycling into the district student transportation plan. The Safe Routes to School/Biking and Walking Student Wellness Plan continues to support the employment of crossing guards within the K-8 boundaries, to conduct an annual mode choice survey and to identify safe routes for walking school buses at every elementary school in the district.

### School Case Study: Viewlands Elementary, Seattle, Washington

In early 2013, Viewlands Elementary School responded to the Seattle Public Schools policy by bringing interested parents together to discuss walking issues in the area. Concerned about pedestrian safety in this neighborhood due to limited sidewalks and several large intersections, the school had two goals: 1) to educate students to better understand pedestrian safety, and 2) to create a framework with parent-led walking school buses so that students can have a positive experience walking to school. The district transportation department worked with the school to find and design routes that would serve the largest number of families, and to ensure that crossing guards were placed at key locations. The Seattle Department of Transportation awarded the PTA a mini-grant to implement the effort, which allowed FeetFirst, a local nonprofit organization, to provide pedestrian safety education to parents and students. As a result, Viewlands Elementary School is set to launch a well-designed walking school bus program in May 2013.

# A Primer for School Boards and Principals

## Strategy: School Travel Plans and Arrival/Dismissal

Traffic congestion around and in front of schools can create a chaotic, unsafe environment for students and staff. Increasing walking and bicycling to school is a great approach to mitigating these traffic congestion issues and creating a safer environment for everyone. Communities and schools can achieve this by implementing and adopting either a

district-wide or school-level [school travel plan](#). School travel plans include strategies based on observations and evaluations for systematically addressing the Five E's of Safe Routes to School.



### District Case Study: Cincinnati School District, Ohio

As part of a city driven process to create school travel plans for Cincinnati schools, a team of leaders was assembled including school board members and administration and community stakeholders. The team was involved in the development of school travel plans for 48 district schools; because of the district leadership's involvement from the beginning, the team had a concrete understanding of the expectations of the plan. As a result, the school board adopted the [Cincinnati Public Schools District-Wide Travel Plan](#) in June of 2012. The plan outlines roughly 300 infrastructure countermeasures (engineering related changes) and 100 non-infrastructure countermeasures (education, evaluation, enforcement and encouragement related changes) that were identified through the use of a prioritization matrix. The district and their schools are heavily invested in the ongoing implementation and success of this plan to improve safety, reduce congestion and increase physical activity.

### School Case Study: Rees E. Price Academy, Cincinnati, Ohio

During the design of the Cincinnati Public Schools District-Wide Travel plan, individual schools were asked to participate in molding their sections of the travel plan. Even with the district travel plan in place, principals still have autonomy to facilitate their own individual programs. Rees E. Price Academy worked with the Local School Decision Making Committee (LSDMC) and created a subcommittee focused on customizing the travel plan to the academy. The subcommittee worked with the resource coordinator at the school to adopt the district travel plan infrastructure and non-infrastructure countermeasures and include tailored activities including a robust walking school bus program, active participation in district-wide walking and bicycling encouragement events and pedestrian safety education in the classrooms. As a result, the school won an award for its video highlighting its program in a national contest. The comprehensive district-wide policy-driven approach has mobilized the schools within the district with regard to walking and bicycling.

## Strategy: School Location Policies

Decisions about where a school is sited, or in the case of consolidation, which schools are closed, have long-term impacts on travel mode and physical activity options for students. Schools that are sited away from where students live result in increased traffic and associated congestion, air quality and infrastructure costs, reduced opportunities for physical activity and increased busing costs that might not be considered in the initial cost equation for the community. On the other hand, schools that are sited in walkable and bikeable neighborhoods can become a **centerpiece of the community**, allowing opportunities for physical activity, parent volunteerism and community connection, and can save money in construction and other costs. It is vital that school districts deliberate their school siting and consolidations policies and processes to ensure that all of the long-term impacts are taken into consideration.

### District Case Study: Montana Schools, Montana

During the Safe Routes to School National Partnership's 2010-2011 **state network project**, the Montana state network recognized that if schools closed in more densely populated areas and new schools were being sited in less densely populated areas of town, walking and bicycling to school would be less safe and less likely. Concerned about the ill effects of schools that are sited or closed without consideration to walking and bicycling, the Network partnered with the Montana School Boards Association and the Association of School Administrators of Montana to distribute a survey on school facilities planning in order to assess current practices in school siting. The Network then worked with **ChangeLab Solutions** to develop a **model school siting policy**. The policy requires school siting decisions to be made based on several "priority" factors including safe routes to the school, community resources, environmental impacts, as well as racial and income diversity. The Montana School Board Association adopted this as their official model policy shortly after its creation. This policy now provides the opportunity for districts to make more sustainable decisions with regard to siting and closing schools.

### School Case Study: The Village at Indian Hill, Pomona, California

In Pomona, California, much of the city is made up of warehouses or small machine shops. In the 1980s and 1990s, the population of Pomona grew and the school district needed to expand, but lacked facilities and land on which to build. Before searching for a new site, the school district wanted to ensure it could reduce busing and improve grades K-3 student-to-teacher ratios. The school district noticed a once-thriving but now deteriorated mall, the Indian Hill Mall, and chose to revitalize it for school use instead of building on a new, less desirable site. The school now serves almost 2,000 students in grades K-12 in a community-centered school.

Additionally, the redevelopment of the mall helped jump start other neighborhood revitalization efforts. There have been a number of changes in the neighborhood including new housing, rehabilitation of commercial properties, investment in new public infrastructure around the mall, new commercial ventures and an overall decrease in crime. The solution to the school siting problem was to take an otherwise deteriorating neighborhood and a serious school facilities issue and rebuild a vital community centered around the community's school.



## Conclusion

Educated decision-makers are well positioned to have positive effects on student safety, physical activity opportunities, community engagement and ultimately, school finances, through walking or bicycling to their schools. Knowing the benefits and elements of an effective Safe Routes to School program, board members, superintendents, districts and principals can utilize a series of strategies (such as supportive walking and bicycling policies, school travel planning, school siting, walking school buses and bike trains) to ensure that policies and practices support students to take advantage of safe, accessible routes to school to get necessary physical activity before and after their school day.

## Resources

[What is Safe Routes to School?: Quick Facts](#) (Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

[Getting Students Active Through Safe Route to School: Policies and Action Steps for Education Policymakers and Professionals](#) (Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2010)

[School Bicycling and Walking Policies: Addressing Policies that Hinder and Implementing Policies that Help](#) (National Center for Safe Routes to School and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2009)

[Why Should a School District Adopt Policies on Walking and Bicycling?](#) (Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center, Rutgers University, 2010)

[Cincinnati Public Schools District-Wide Travel Plan](#) (Cincinnati Public Schools, 2012)

[Crossing Guard Resources](#) (New Jersey Safe Routes to School, 2013)

[Safe Routes to School: Helping Communities Save Lives and Dollars](#) (Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

[Helping Johnny Walk to School: Policy Recommendations for Removing Barriers to Community Centered Schools](#) (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2008)

[The Walking School Bus: Combining Safety, Fun and the Walk to School](#) (National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2013)

[Evaluation: Data Collection](#) (National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2013)

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership works to promote safe walking and bicycling to and from schools and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America's children, and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities.

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