

# SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN NEW YORK



Photo: Bike New York

## 2019 Statewide Program Assessment Report





## Acknowledgments

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# **Safe Routes to School Programs in New York**

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Photo: Bike New York

## 1 Introduction

Studies show that Safe Routes to School programs are one of the most effective tools to help schoolchildren get vital physical activity and build healthy life habits. To help assess New York's progress in supporting Safe Routes to School, the Safe Routes Partnership conducted a review of New York's programs, policies, funding, and practices related to Safe Routes to School. This report provides an overview of the state of Safe Routes to School programming in New York and sets out a high-level assessment of challenges, innovations, and opportunities for Safe Routes to School programs in the state.

Our assessment found that in the state of New York, Safe Routes to School programming is in a weak to moderate position. While there are some local programs that provide fairly robust safety education opportunities for students, programming to address Safe Routes to School on a more comprehensive way is lacking. Since the changes to federal funding for Safe Routes to School, there appears to be a lack of interest or coordinated efforts to sustain Safe Routes to School programming. This provides opportunities for new partnerships and strategies to reengage and reinvigorate Safe Routes to School efforts throughout the state.



Photo: Healthi Kids Rochester

## Project Summary

This report was developed as part of the national Safe Routes to School Program Census Project, funded by the Center for Disease Prevention and Control's Department of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, and conducted by the Safe Routes Partnership in partnership with YMCA of the USA. Safe Routes to School programs are not funded or regulated through a centralized process, and may be volunteer-run or supported by local, regional, state, or federal funds. That means there is no easy way to know how many programs there are in the United States, where they are, or how many children and communities they are benefiting. Without this information, it is difficult to track trends and progress in the Safe Routes to School movement, or to provide targeted support and resources to local communities.

Recognizing the challenges for research and program promotion caused by the lack of a comprehensive inventory of Safe Routes to School programs, the Safe Routes Partnership implemented the Safe Routes to School Program Census Project. The Safe Routes Partnership developed and piloted a survey instrument to capture key data, and collected survey data on a national basis in spring 2019. The purpose of this survey was to identify as many Safe Routes to School programs as possible in the United States. By compiling this information, the Safe Routes Partnership was able to develop a better understanding of Safe Routes to School programs, identify areas that need additional support, and provide better resources and information related to Safe Routes to School. Through the Safe Routes to School Program Census Project, the Safe Routes Partnership gathered detailed information about the number of Safe Routes to School programs around the nation, their longevity, the types of programming they have, the costs of running these programs, the source of their funding, and the key challenges they face.



## 2 Why Does Safe Routes to School Matter for New York?

Physical activity is essential for students' health and academic achievement. Yet, the 2.6 million students in New York are not getting enough physical activity. Obesity among New York youth aged 10-17 is at 15.3 percent.<sup>1</sup> Around 47 percent of New York residents are getting the recommended levels of physical activity, a decline from previous levels,<sup>2</sup> and only a 23 percent of high school students achieve recommended levels of physical activity.<sup>3</sup>

A core part of the reason that students and adults in New York are less healthy and get less physical activity is because New York communities are not designed for walking and biking. Safe Routes to School is a movement that aims to enable students to get regular physical activity, by making it safer and easier to walk and bike to school. Safe Routes to School street improvements address problems like broken or missing sidewalks, faded crosswalks, and lack of safe bike lanes. Safe Routes to School programs get more



students walking and biking by providing skills and safety education and creating encouragement activities that get kids moving together.

In addition, approximately 15 percent of New York elementary and middle school students and 23 percent of high school students are chronically absent from school, missing at least 10 percent of school days per year. Once students begin to miss school at this level, they move into a higher risk group for academic and other problems.<sup>4</sup> Low-income students and African-American, Latino, American Indian, and multi-racial students have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than the average. Safe Routes to School programming can assist with school attendance.



# Benefits of Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School improves sidewalks and street crossings and creates safe, convenient, and fun opportunities for children to bicycle and walk to and from school. The CDC has recognized Safe Routes to School as one of a handful of programs that are cost-effective and show significant population health impacts within five years. [saferoutespartnership.org](http://saferoutespartnership.org)

## COST SAVINGS

- Household savings from reduced gas & car use
- Education budget savings through reduced student busing costs



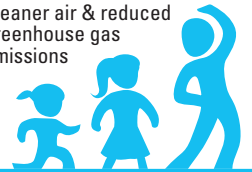
## TRAFFIC SAFETY

- Reduced traffic injuries & dangers for students and community members at arrival & dismissal through street improvements near schools
- More chances to learn & practice road safety for students



## CLIMATE BENEFITS AND CLEANER AIR

- Fewer student asthma attacks due to less driving & reduced air pollution results
- Cleaner air & reduced greenhouse gas emissions



## SAFETY FROM CRIME

- Increased safety from crime & violence due to more people on the streets, good lighting & better street design
- Less harassment, bullying, or violence when students walk or bike together or with adults



## COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

- Stronger student friendships & relationships through walking & biking together
- Positive social connections for families & neighbors



## HEALTHIER STUDENTS

- Better health & stronger bones, muscles & joints through more walking & biking
- Reduced risk of chronic disease, diabetes, & obesity



## SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION FIXES

- Solutions to reduced or non-existent bus service through Safe Routes to School
- Reduced traffic congestion at pick-up/drop-off times



## BETTER ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- Better focus, improved concentration & less distraction for students who are active before school
- Fewer absences and less tardiness when students walk or bike in groups



SCHOOL

### 3 History and Structure of Safe Routes to School in New York

The Safe Routes to School movement was launched in the United States at a national level in 2005. Alarmed by the tripling of childhood obesity levels, communities across the United States recognized the connection with a precipitous drop in rates of students walking and bicycling to school. These rates had decreased from 49 percent to less than 15 percent over a 30-year period, while rates of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases grew.

In response, Congress authorized the first federally funded Safe Routes to School program. From 2005 to 2012, Safe Routes to School initiatives were funded through a standalone federal Safe Routes to School program and each state had a Safe Routes to School coordinator tasked with supporting local- and state-level Safe Routes to School initiatives. In 2012, the standalone program was merged with several other programs into the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), and the requirement for a state coordinator was eliminated.

Since 2012, state departments of transportation have received TAP federal funds and have awarded money by selecting projects through a competitive process open to local governments and school systems. At the local level, Safe Routes to School practitioners run education and encouragement programs with families and schools and push for strong municipal and district policies to support safe walking and bicycling. Cities and counties often take the lead on making Safe Routes to School infrastructure improvements near schools.



Photo: Healthi Kids Rochester

In New York, the state retained a state Safe Routes to School coordinator position at the DOT, but added other non-Safe Routes to School responsibilities to the coordinator position. The DOT continues to provide TAP funding to local jurisdictions for both infrastructure projects and non-infrastructure (education and encouragement) programs. However, there are few projects being identified as Safe Routes to School projects, even if they do benefit students and school communities. Additionally, the DOT sees very few applications for non-infrastructure programs — the vast majority of the local jurisdictions use funding from the DOT for infrastructure projects only. Instead, Safe Routes to School programs are largely run and supported with local-level or non-transportation funds. An example of funding support for Safe Routes to School comes from the New York State Department of Health as part of physical activity strategies through its Creating Healthy Schools and Communities.

TAP is one of the largest sources of funding for Safe Routes to School programs in the US. By not applying for TAP dollars, local Safe Routes to School programs are missing out on significant amounts of funding, and the Safe Routes to School movement as a whole in New York is missing out on creating sustainable and coordinated efforts.

The first federally funded Safe Routes to School program was created in 2005, and has since undergone several legislative and policy transformations. In 2012, Congress created the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) by merging together three previous programs that funded active transportation. In 2015, Congress authorized TAP for an additional five years, through 2020.



## 4

## New York's Policy Environment for Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation

A crucial part of New York's ability to create an environment that is safe and supportive for students walking and bicycling to school is the state policy environment. The Safe Routes Partnership's *Making Strides: 2018 State Report Cards on Support for Walking, Biking, and Active Kids and Communities* provide a strong overview of New York's general policy landscape and commitment to Safe Routes to School and active transportation.

New York's overall report card score was a 123 out of 200 points, putting it in the Making Strides category, second from the top out of the four scoring categories. This score demonstrates that New York has established multiple policies and initiatives that are moving the state in the right direction in terms of support for walking, bicycling, Safe Routes to School, and active communities, but may still be missing some key strategies. Below we describe how New York performed on Safe Routes to School-related policy indicators reviewed in the State Report Cards, and note other New York policies where relevant.

### A. Complete Streets and Active Transportation Policies, Planning, and Design

The Complete Streets indicator in the State Report Cards looks at whether the state is taking appropriate action to support a safe and robust walking and biking network, with particular emphasis on the quality of the state's Complete Streets policy. A Complete Streets policy is a policy that sets out a state's commitment to routinely design, build, and operate all streets to enable safe use by everyone, regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation. New York received over two thirds of the points available for this section. The state has adopted goals to lower walking and bicycling fatalities and increase the percentage of people who walk and bicycle. In addition, New York has state level plans for active transportation. However, New York has not adopted modern street design guidance. And while New York adopted a fairly strong Complete Streets Act in 2011, it only includes general language about implementation and does not identify clear steps or actions.

### B. Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation Funding

The Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation Funding indicators look at how much money a state is making available to local jurisdictions for projects and programs that support safe walking and bicycling, and how the state is prioritizing high-need communities and Safe Routes to School projects. This includes federal funds that the state is charged with administering as well as state funding.

Out of the limited and inadequate pool of TAP funding available for walking and biking infrastructure and Safe Routes to School programs, New York has transferred more than \$37 million to use for highway and vehicle projects instead of active transportation, 20 percent of its TAP funding. As of March 2019, New York had only obligated 36 percent of its TAP funding. TAP is one of the largest sources of funding for local Safe Routes to School initiatives, and retaining and spending TAP funding is crucial to the long-term health and sustainability of programs.

In addition, New York does not engage in practices that have been shown to support Safe Routes to School and equitable allocation of TAP dollars. New York does not provide special consideration for high need communities, but some matching dollars are available for low-income communities that covers three-quarters of the required match for TAP. New York also does not provide special consideration for Safe Routes to School projects in the TAP competitions. Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure (education and encouragement) programs are eligible for TAP funding in New York. However, school districts and nonprofit organizations are not eligible applicants, and must partner with or be sponsored by an eligible agency, most often the local city or town.

The Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices indicators look at what state DOTs are providing in terms of support and technical assistance to schools and local governments to further Safe Routes to School initiatives, beyond funding. New York provides some support to Safe Routes to School initiatives, but the support is not widely used. New York has a Safe Routes to School coordinator within the DOT, however non-Safe Routes to School responsibilities have been added to the position. In addition, the state provides application workshops or assistance to potential Safe Routes to School applicants.

## C. School Siting and Design

The School Siting and Design indicators look at state policies and guidance regarding where schools are located, and if and how they are designed to support students safely walking and bicycling to school. New York does not have large school site minimum acreage recommendations or requirements that can be detrimental to creating opportunities for kids to walk and bicycle to school. New York received points for requiring minimum outdoor play space and physical activity space for school sites, but it does not have any positive incentives or requirements for walking or biking within its school siting and design guidelines, providing a key opportunity for strengthening state policy to improve student health.



Photo: Healthi Kids Rochester



# New York 2018

MAKING STRIDES



OVERALL SCORE

123 / 200

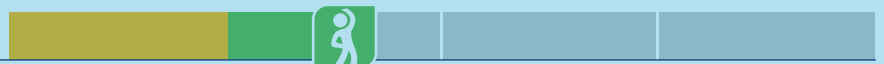
Scoring Key: LACING UP WARMING UP MAKING STRIDES BUILDING SPEED 100%

## COMPLETE STREETS AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION



<b>Complete Streets Policies</b>	Adopted state Complete Streets policy(ies)	4 / 5
	Adopted strong core state Complete Streets commitment	5 / 5
	Addresses additional jurisdictions in state Complete Streets policy	5 / 5
	Addresses implementation in state Complete Streets policy	6 / 10
<b>Design for Active Transportation</b>	Adopted/endorsed NACTO guidelines	0 / 10
<b>Active Transportation Planning</b>	Adopted a state pedestrian, bicycle, or active transportation plan	10 / 10
<b>Active Transportation Goals</b>	Adopted goals to lower walking and bicycling fatalities	10 / 10
	Adopted goals to increase walking and bicycling mode share	10 / 10
		<b>50 / 65</b>

## SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FUNDING



<b>Active Transportation Funding</b>	Retained Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding without transfers	- 4 / 10
	Awarded TAP projects	10 / 10
	Obligated state-controlled TAP funds	4 / 10
	Provides special consideration for high-need communities	0 / 5
	Provides matching funds for high-need communities	5 / 5
<b>Safe Routes to School Funding</b>	Provides special consideration for Safe Routes to School projects using TAP funds	0 / 5
	Funds Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure projects	5 / 5
	Dedicates state funding for Safe Routes to School	0 / 5
<b>Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices</b>	Has state Safe Routes to School coordinator	4 / 5
	Provides technical or application assistance to Safe Routes to School initiatives	2 / 5
		<b>26 / 65</b>

## ACTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS AND SCHOOLS



<b>Shared Use of School Facilities</b>	Adopted state policy supporting shared use of school facilities	6 / 10
	Provides funding/incentives in support of shared use of school facilities	5 / 5
<b>School Siting and Design</b>	Requires large school sites (minimum acreage guideline)	0 / 0
	Supports walking, bicycling & physical activity in school design guidelines	3 / 15
<b>Physical Education</b>	Adopted PE minutes & graduation requirements	10 / 15
<b>Supportive Neighborhoods for Physical Activity</b>	Level of access to recreation & community centers for youth	5 / 5
	Level of access to parks	3 / 5
		<b>32 / 55</b>

## STATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PLANNING



	Adopted a state plan with commitments to physical activity	5 / 5
	Dedicates state staff to physical activity	10 / 10
		<b>15 / 15</b>

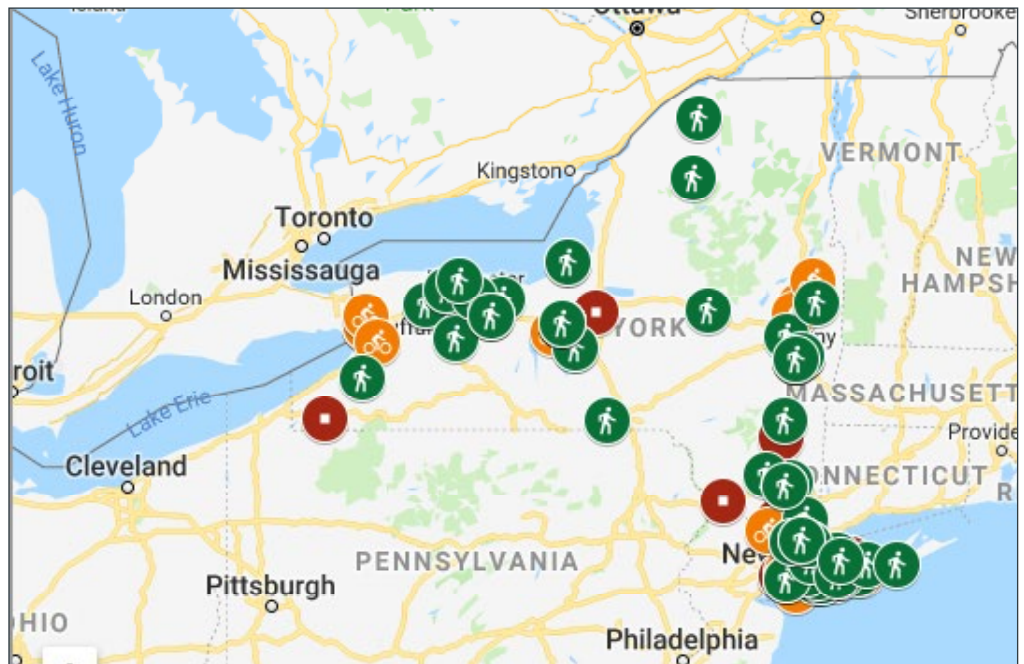


## 5 New York Safe Routes to School Program Landscape

This section gives an overview of local Safe Routes to School programs and related activities currently happening in New York based on survey responses, information from program websites, and national activity tracking.

### Structure of Local Programs

- Program leads.** Program leads and partners vary from program to program. Survey respondents identified program leads that include health departments and nonprofit or community organizations. Safe Routes to School efforts in New York City are a combination of activities lead by the NYC Department of Transportation, Department of Education, NYC Parks, with portions of the work contracted to Bike New York.
- Staffing.** Of the survey received, most programs indicated they had paid coordinators or staff.
- Program service area.** Surveys indicated some programs cover a single school district or single city/town, but other programs are working in larger regions such as entire counties or multiple counties.
- Current rates of walking and biking.** The number of students currently walking or bicycling to school varies. In more suburban areas, fewer students walk, and in more urban areas some programs reported over half of their students walk or bike.



The red markers indicate local programs that responded to the survey in 2019. The yellow bicycle icons indicate schools that registered for Bike to School Day in May 2019. The green people markers indicate schools that registered for Walk to School Day in October 2018.

### The 6 E's of Safe Routes to School

Comprehensive Safe Routes to School initiatives have been shown to be more effective at increasing physical activity and reducing injuries. The key components of a comprehensive, integrated approach are summarized by the Six E's of Safe Routes to School: education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement, evaluation, and equity.



### Program Highlight: Chautauqua Children's Safety Education Village

Chautauqua Children's Safety Education Village provides both in-classroom traffic safety education as well as skills practice on simulated roads in their 3-acre Village. Kids have the opportunity to drive miniature cars or ride bikes throughout the Village as they demonstrate their knowledge of street signs, hand signals, allowing pedestrians to cross, and safe behaviors near railroad tracks. The program is the only of its kind in its region and serves an estimated 4,000 students who come from school districts in Chautauqua County as well as western New York state and northeastern Pennsylvania. Students visit the Village as part of school field trips or special events and out-of-school time activities including summer safety classes. While the Village has received federal Safe Routes to School funding in the past, they currently rely on sponsorships, donations, small user fees, and funding from the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee.

• **Program activities.** While almost none of the survey respondents identified their programs as being comprehensive Safe Routes to School programs, most provide some level of both education and encouragement programming. Activities conducted by programs in New York include:

- o Walk to School Day and Bike to School Day. In 2018, 73 schools in New York registered for Walk to School Day. This number has fluctuated over the years, but has increased from 61 schools in 2014. In 2019, 46 schools participated in Bike to School Day, an increase from 34 schools in 2014.<sup>5</sup>
- o Monthly walk or roll to school days which encourage and celebrate students walking or biking to school on reoccurring special days.
- o Contests and incentives such as the Town of Smithtown's Safe Routes to School program's walking contests for distance, charms for frequency of walks, and other small prizes.
- o Walking school buses. This includes both monthly walking schools buses and walking school buses that run three or more days a week.

- o Student education in and/or outside of school. This includes a variety of pedestrian and bicycle safety educational activities such as New York City's videos and in-class education as well as AAA's Student Safety Patrol program educates students to assist with improving traffic safety and encouraging safe behaviors by their peers. Currently, there are Student Safety Patrol programs in nearly 500 schools in New York state with over, 9,000 student patrol members.<sup>6</sup>
- o Bike skills clinics/bike rodeos. This includes on-bike experience provided by Chautauqua Children's Safety Education Village and on-bike skills programs and bicycle field trips provided by Bike New York.
- o Remote Drop Off/Park and Walk In/Safe Routes to Bus Stops which provide opportunities for students to be driven in a car or bus part of the way to school and walk the remaining portion.
- o Driver awareness programs that raise awareness around schools and support safety for students walking and bicycling.

- o Walk audits which help identify barriers to walking and bicycling, unsafe behaviors, and potential improvements.

### Program Highlight: Anna S. Kuhl Elementary School Walking School Bus Events

At Anna S. Kuhl Elementary School in Port Jervis, a walking school bus helps 50 students walk to school on special designated days each year. The walking school bus event is completely volunteer run with school staff, parents, and the Port Jervis City Police Department assisting. A local business provides food for a healthy breakfast once the walking school bus reaches the school.

- **Student demographics.** Most of the survey respondents indicated their programs serve primarily racial/ethnic minority groups including Black/African American, Latinx/Hispanic, and Asian American/Pacific Islander students.
- **Targeted outreach.** Of the programs who indicated the conduct targeted outreach to specific student populations, most said they conducted targeted outreach to students with disabilities. Some programs said they target outreach to girls and/or nonbinary students. For example, Bike New York has tried to engage more girls through the Girl Scouts and Power Play NYC.
- **Funding.** Safe Routes to School program funding in New York is diverse. Unlike in other states where TAP is a predominate source of funding for Safe Routes to School programs, few programs in New York have TAP funding. Instead, survey responses indicated they use health funding through the state Department of Health, funding from the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, local funds including school funds, and foundations.



## Program Highlight: Bike New York Youth Programs

Bike New York provides in-school and off-campus bicycle safety education and skills practice throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Their programs are primarily housed in NYC Parks, with afterschool and summer youth programming. Activities also include weekend youth ride clubs, on-campus bike safety assemblies, and training, curriculum, and support for a 7th grade on-bike skills program partnered with the NYC Department of Education. A program highlight is a bicycling field trip program where Bike New York holds two-hour sessions for middle and high school students where they learn everything from how to choose the right size bike to practicing their handling skills. The program started in 2011 and has served approximately 22,500 students. Funding is primarily self-generated through events, sponsorships of events, and membership fees. The program has also received funding from the Department of Education to provide services like the bicycling field trips to schools.

## Program Assessment Methodology

Information about Safe Routes to School programs in each state was primarily collected through an online survey conducted from March through May 2019. The survey instrument can be reviewed [here](#). Surveys were collected through a combination of purposive sampling and a snowball approach. The survey link was disseminated nationally to people and organizations potentially affiliated with Safe Routes to School initiatives through a wide range of direct and indirect outreach including: emails from the Safe Routes Partnership, the Safe Routes Partnership and partner organizations' newsletters, direct contact by state departments of transportation and health, webpage postings, and social media. Respondents were encouraged to forward the survey to peers or other interested parties. Additional information about existing Safe Routes to School programs as well as state practices and support was gathered through conversations with state staff. Following initial data collection using the survey tool, the Safe Routes Partnership conducted follow up with individual program contacts as needed to clarify or obtain additional information. Data were compiled and analyzed to identify trends, program commonalities and differences, and to assess program characteristics. Although the programs surveyed are not scientifically representative, this report includes an analysis of collected data in order to provide a broad brush overview of trends in the state.

## 6 Conclusion: Reflections and Recommendations

Through the survey and conversations with organizations engaged in working to improve health and safety, the Safe Routes Partnership found that local programming to address Safe Routes to School on a more comprehensive way is lacking in New York. Most programs do not identify as being Safe Routes to School programs, and only conduct activities addressing one or two of the six E's.

### Recommendations

Opportunities to further support and strengthen the local Safe Routes to School programs in New York, and ensure sustainability of the programs in years to come include:

- Promoting partnerships or creating structures for more non-infrastructure program providers to receive TAP funding. Currently there appears to be a mismatch with school districts and non-governmental organizations that are leading or are interested in leading Safe Routes to School programming, but are not eligible applicants on their own. New York's TAP program requires these groups to partner with or have an eligible project sponsor – most likely the local city, town, village, or county. Most TAP applications from these municipalities are only for infrastructure. Working to build awareness and encourage partnerships can help build better funding applications and bring more dollars to local non-infrastructure programs.
- Support from the state DOT and other transportation partners in navigating the funding process. Currently the state DOT's regional coordinators provide technical assistance to funded projects. However, many Safe Routes to School related-efforts in New York, outside of New York City, appear to be operated by non-transportation staff and at a small scale. These programs could benefit from assistance with understanding the funding process and how to successfully partner and apply for money.
- Incentivizing or requiring infrastructure projects funded by TAP to include a non-infrastructure component. The DOT's TAP guidelines currently states it encourages TAP applicants to combine infrastructure projects with non-infrastructure programs. Providing specific incentives such as additional points on TAP applications or dollar set aside for non-infrastructure components would further encourage municipalities to apply for funding for Safe Routes to School education and encouragement activities, not just infrastructure projects.
- Limiting transfers of TAP funding and increasing obligation of TAP funding. New York has transferred more than \$37 million, or 20 percent, of its TAP funding and has only obligated 36 percent of its TAP funding. TAP is one of the largest sources of funding for local Safe Routes to School initiatives, and retaining and spending TAP funding is crucial to the long-term health and sustainability of programs.
- Including considerations for walking and bicycling within state school siting and design guidelines. New York does not have any positive incentives or requirements for walking or biking within its school siting and design guidelines, providing a key opportunity for strengthening state policy to improve student health.

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