



# Safe Routes

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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. 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 Governors and State Agency Leaders



*There are many opportunities for governors and state agency leaders to improve walking and rolling conditions in their states through allocation of funding streams or adoption of supportive policies. This action brief is designed to provide the Safe Routes to School practitioner with the basic tools to understand the role of governors and state agency leaders and recognize how to further educate them on opportunities to support walking and rolling at the state level. A companion document, "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Governors and State Agency Leaders](#)," focuses on informing these decision-makers on the benefits of Safe Routes to School while sharing best practices in state level decisions, programs, and funding that result in more people walking and rolling to school and in daily life. State transportation agencies are tasked with distributing a large portion of federal funds that can support Safe Routes to School in local communities. There is an opportunity to engage governors and their state agencies not just around the allocation of these funds, but also in a larger discussion around additional programs, funding mechanisms, and policies, that can be leveraged to improve conditions for walking and rolling throughout the state.*



## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of Governors and State Agency Leaders

Governors and the appointed or elected leaders that head their respective departments (Transportation, Education, Health, Environment, etc.) are extremely busy managing their various priorities. Before engaging in a conversation around Safe Routes to School, it is wise to understand the influence these leaders are capable of exerting and what they have identified as important goals for the state. First, keep in mind that governors themselves do not dictate local issues, judicial issues, or federal issues. Therefore, the Safe Routes to School practitioner working to educate state leaders should ensure that problems and their solutions are scaled to the state level and include actionable items by state leaders. Understand that governors are approached by many stakeholders with differing views. Any issue brought to a governor likely has opposing groups (such as those that do not support, or that compete with, walking and bicycling facilities and funding). It is valuable to understand the viewpoints of opposing groups and to be prepared to address any talking points they may have.

Priorities of governors span a broad spectrum and are often specific to their state, but common priorities are the state's fiscal status, job creation, education, safety, transportation and health. Each governor has their own publicly stated priorities and decision-making record which should reflect or predict their stance on investments in walking and rolling. Governors have staff members, each with a specialty, including transportation, land use and health. These staffers are highly influential to the governor and are often your primary conduit. Practitioners should not worry about not personally interacting with the governor since working directly with the governor's staff is a common option for educating them on Safe Routes to School.

Additionally, governors have the opportunity to initiate advisory or local project selection committees and coalitions to address specific issues such as health, environment, walking and rolling, and Safe Routes to School.

## Understanding the Capacity and Limitations of State Agency Leaders

Ultimately, state agency leaders must balance the competing interests of their governor, their boards and commissions, their own staff, and of course, pressure from the public. An educated practitioner will consider the current capacity and limitations of their state leaders in advancing Safe Routes to School.

While traditionally funding for Safe Routes to School had been funneled through the state Department of Transportation, other departments may also have an interest or role in walking and rolling to school, including the Departments of Education, Health or Environment. Each of these departments has the ability to affect policies, systems, and environmental changes that support walking and rolling to school.

State agencies are mostly constrained by politics, gubernatorial or board directives, state law, federal law, funding, and associated guidance. For instance, the Federal Highway Administration releases guidance for each new federal transportation law that state governments must adhere to. Additionally, many of these agencies work in silos with rare opportunity for meaningful interaction with other agencies.

## What You Can Do

As with most successful work, your success is predicated on your knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Start with these tips for achieving supportive state bicycle, pedestrian, and Safe Routes to School policies:

### LEARN

- Talk to experts and conduct research to learn about your state's record on bicycle and pedestrian projects and programs.
- Subscribe to the governor and state agency media updates and announcements.
- Find out about existing state boards, governor-appointed or state agency committees, coalitions, and other initiatives that can influence Safe Routes to School, Complete Streets, health, and related concerns.
- Understand which committees, staff, or state leaders are involved in the process of developing projects, plans and programs, or making decisions.
- Identify the staff or appointed committees that advise the governor in the realm of transportation, land use, and health or any other relevant sector.
- Attend meetings at the appropriate agency or review the regularly published minutes that affect project funding.

### REVIEW

- Familiarize yourself with the state statutes, guiding principles, and other policies and parameters of state leadership.
- Research your governor's stated priorities and record of decisions, often listed on the state website.
- Review documents that are publicly available and posted online such as the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP), State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP), and other relevant plans and project lists.
- Review documents that are publicly available with regard to state board, committee, and coalition planning documents and reports. These groups often make preliminary decisions on projects and programs before they are brought to state agency leaders.

### CONNECT

- Develop a relationship with the identified governor's advisory staff and educate them on key talking points that are relevant to your governor's stated priorities.
- Connect with coalitions and their leaders and begin discussions on collaboration on similar goals.
- Reach out to organizations whose mission aligns with the outcomes of Safe Routes to School.
- Talk to your state bicycle and pedestrian coordinator, Safe Routes to School coordinator, state surgeon general, other health department leaders, and other relevant state agency staff.

### PARTICIPATE

- Inform state leaders about the priorities 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.
- Schedule meetings with staff members who work closely with the governor and state agency leaders as well as with members of advisory and selection committees. They can keep you up to date on issues or even become vocal educators and supporters for Safe Routes to School and related issues during key meetings, planning processes, and decisions.
- Invite the governor and/or agency leaders to community bicycling and walking events and include them in the planning of such events. Offering public acknowledgement of their support can go a long way in encouraging an official to attend the event.
- Be persistent. Navigating and influencing the state's internal processes can feel overwhelming, but don't give up.

## Align Talking Points with the Stated Priorities of Governors and State Agency Leaders

In addition to providing your governor and their staff with the companion "[Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Governors and State Agency Leaders](#)," customize your talking points by considering the following common priorities of a state government and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities.

### 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.<sup>1</sup>
- > 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.<sup>2</sup>

### 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.<sup>3</sup>
- > 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.<sup>4</sup>
- > Increasing the number of people using the streets, better lighting, and better street design can increase individual sense of safety as well as decrease actual criminal activity. Data shows that the safer that people feel in their neighborhood, the more time they spend walking.<sup>5</sup>





## Economy

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.<sup>6</sup>
- > 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.<sup>7</sup>
- > 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.<sup>8</sup>

## 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.<sup>9,10</sup>
- > People who live in places that support walking, bicycling, and public transportation get more physical activity and are less likely to be overweight than those who live in automobile-oriented communities.<sup>11</sup>
- > People with access to more and better-quality sidewalks are more likely to walk and meet physical activity recommendations.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, people with access to bicycle lanes and paths are more likely to bicycle and meet physical activity recommendations.<sup>13</sup>
- > 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).<sup>14, 15</sup>



## 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.<sup>16</sup>
- > 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.<sup>17</sup>



## 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.<sup>18, 19</sup>
- > 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.<sup>20</sup>
- > 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.<sup>21</sup> In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.<sup>22</sup>
- > 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.<sup>23</sup>





## Conclusion

Encouraging children to walk and roll to school safely should be an important goal for governors and state agency leaders looking to improve livability and safety and boost local economies. Fortunately, Safe Routes to School can and does meet many overarching goals that are significant to most, if not all, states. State leaders can help to move these priorities forward by ensuring that Safe Routes to School funds are allocated and obligated, and that supportive policies and dedicated state funding are created.

## Additional Resources

- > [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- > [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](#)
- > [Making Strides: State Report Cards on Support for Walking, Bicycling, and Active Kids and Communities](#)
- > [State Implementation of the Transportation Alternatives Program](#)
- > [Policies to Support Safe Routes to School](#)



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