

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL:

# A Primer for Student Transportation Departments



SAFE ROUTES  
to School  
NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

*Most student transportation departments currently focus on the busing and driving needs of their communities; however, investing time and resources in supporting walking and bicycling can help schools save money, decrease traffic congestion, increase community safety and improve the health of children. Safe Routes to School is a national and international movement to get more students walking and bicycling to school. It can support student transportation departments in advancing walking and bicycling initiatives. To date, more than 13,000 schools and over 5 million children nationally have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to provide an affordable, accessible and simple alternative to busing or the family car. Student transportation departments can advance Safe Routes to School by evaluating their policies concerning all modes of transportation and implement strategies to initiate or support projects and programs that increase active transportation to school.*



## Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost half of all students walked or bicycled to school, and 87 percent of kids who lived within a mile of school walked or bicycled. Today, fewer than 1 in 6 students walk or bicycle to school. These changes have had a significant negative impact on district transportation costs, traffic congestion near schools, and the health and safety of students. Safe Routes to School offers an alternative to these issues by getting more students to walk and bicycle to school and in daily life. It has been quickly gaining momentum at the local, regional, state and national levels. This momentum accelerated in 2005 with the passage of the federal transportation act, [SAFETEA-LU](#), which dedicated \$1.1 billion to Safe Routes to School projects and programs through state departments of transportation.

To date, well over 13,000 schools and over 5 million children nationally have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to provide an affordable, accessible and simple alternative to driving. Communities implementing Safe Route to School have seen a number of improvements including a 44 percent decrease in pedestrian crashes,<sup>1</sup> increases in walking and bicycling rates ranging from 20 to 200 percent,<sup>2</sup> and reduced traffic congestion.<sup>3</sup> In some communities, students that walk or bicycle have even higher levels of concentration.<sup>4</sup> Due to the variety of benefits for school districts, this action brief provides information and strategies for student transportation departments to support Safe Routes to School efforts in their districts.

## Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

In a stifled economy, budget cuts to student transportation departments have manifested as potential reductions of bus routes and stops and/or increases of the student walk boundaries. These changes provide student transportation departments with an excellent opportunity to partner with Safe Routes to School practitioners and become familiar with strategies and best practices for addressing walking and bicycling that can increase safety as more students are required to walk.

The following strategies are opportunities to boost bicycling and walking to school while also addressing busing issues throughout the district. Student transportation departments can have a significant influence by sharing these ideas internally and externally, with the ultimate goal of creating safer, more accessible active transportation options for students.

### *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 proactively work to reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. Student transportation department staff can ensure that bicycling and walking improvements benefit all schools and students, especially those with the greatest needs.

## Strategy: Address School Bus Costs Through Walking and Bicycling

Rising fuel costs, changing demographics and decreased general funding for school districts has led many student transportation departments to cut school busing to compensate financially. Cutting these services without a planned effort to address student safety concerns with regard to walking and bicycling will lead to greater traffic congestion in front of the school, higher parent transportation costs, and decreased safety for those walking and bicycling. Student transportation departments can compensate for the loss of bus service by seizing the opportunity to invest in improving safety for walkers and bicyclists. It is essential that school districts collaborate with all stakeholders to make it safer for children to walk and bicycle, particularly when cuts to school bus services are being proposed.

### *Case Study: Montgomery County Schools, Maryland*

Montgomery County Schools in Maryland have a comprehensive student transportation policy that includes clear policies on bus transportation and walking. The policy sets guidelines on the “no-transport” zone for school bus transportation and for exceptions due to hazardous walking conditions. It also makes the school district responsible for assessing safety of recommended walking zones and school bus stops and encourages school staff to work with parents and students to teach safe walking and bus-riding behaviors.

## Strategy: Allocate Student Transportation Staff Time toward Walking and Bicycling

Dedicate a portion of a student transportation staff's job duties to performing environmental scans of relevant literature, research, programs and policies to help identify best and promising practices in walking and bicycling. This component of the position can focus on developing a procedure to implement programs at the school level; liaise with schools, internal staff and community groups to implement active school travel plans – a team developed document that outlines a community's approach to getting more students walking and bicycling; identifying funding available for Safe Routes to School initiatives and supporting individual schools in participating in Safe Routes to School education and encouragement activities. By attributing this portion of a staff member's duties, the student transportation department can advance their image while increasing safety for all students.

## Strategy: Include Information on Walking and Bicycling to School in Public Transportation Materials

Integrating walking and bicycling safety, programming and routes into existing communication materials is a more comprehensive approach to educating students, parents and the community on all forms of school transportation. Student transportation departments regularly communicate information about bus and family vehicle routes and safety to students, parents and staff. Integrating walking and bicycling safety, programming and routes into these materials provides a more comprehensive approach to educating students, parents and the community on all forms of transportation to school. For example, this can be done by outlining behavioral expectations and highlighting the details of programmatic supports, such as walking school buses, in the student/parent handbooks. Additionally, including Safe Routes to School as an option on student transportation websites, or even integrating pedestrian and bicycle education within bus safety workshops for students.

### *Case Study: Boulder Valley School District, Colorado*

The student transportation department in the Boulder Valley School District dedicated a portion of a staff's time to working on bicycling, walking and carpooling. This small investment enabled the district to develop the TO School Program that provides programming and develops policies for projects that get more students walking, bicycling and carpooling while reducing single-person car trips and some busing. The district found funding to teach bicycle safety in their schools through their BLAST bicycle safety program, put forward a trip tracking incentive program that rewards those that participate with trip tracker dollars, and developed interactive safe walking and bicycling route maps for participating schools.

Additionally, in partnership with the City of Boulder, the Boulder County Transportation Department, police department, parents and county administration, the district received funding for major infrastructure projects that now connect schools to their communities better. This can mitigate the need for "hazard" busing to one school and decreased the number of school buses needed. They have seen a remarkable return on investment and have contributed to the success of two nationally recognized Safe Routes to School programs in Bear Creek and Heatherwood elementary schools. Heatherwood tripled the number of students who walk and bicycle to school by identifying a barrier to walking and bicycling that prompted hazard busing – a high-speed county road that separated the community from the school. The project was prioritized, and subsequently applied for Safe Routes to School funding from the Colorado state department of transportation, which paid for infrastructure improvements that allows the students to now safely cross this high-speed road.

## Strategy: Remove Barriers to Walking and Bicycling by Addressing Hazards

Hazard busing – busing students short distances around identified “hazards” such as high-speed roads or railroad tracks – is often more expensive long-term than addressing the barriers that discourage students from walking or bicycling in the first place. Student transportation departments can work with practitioners and municipalities to focus on identifying barriers and prioritizing solutions to address the hazards that prompted the transportation department to provide hazard busing service, particularly for residential clusters of students who could otherwise walk or bicycle. Often, when working closely on a Safe Routes to School task force with city staff, there are multiple opportunities to discuss and create a plan and identify funding for systematically addressing fixable hazards. This could allow the district to reduce or eliminate busing to that area by mitigating the issues that prompted hazard busing.

## Strategy: Establish Remote Drop Offs

Traffic congestion around and in front of schools can create a chaotic, unsafe environment for students and staff. Many school districts have considered and implemented remote drop-off zones, instructing buses to drop students at a safe location near the school and encouraging students to walk the remaining distance, often with teacher or administrator supervision. Furthermore, schools can advertise the remote drop-offs to parents as an alternative to waiting in traffic ‘queues,’ simultaneously addressing the traffic congestion in front of the schools while allowing students to get a few minutes of physical activity before arriving at school, an important technique for improving student educational performance. Student transportation departments can work closely with involved schools to identify ideal remote drop-off locations, ensure that students and staff are properly educated on how to execute these locations and ask permission slips to be signed for participating students.

### *Case Study: Hazard Busing Mitigation Act, Illinois*

The state of Illinois reimburses schools for hazard busing when children live less than 1.5 miles to school, but the route is determined to be unsafe for children walking and bicycling. Costs for hazard busing have increased 67 percent in seven years, and the number of students enrolled in hazard busing is increasing 1.2 percent per year even while student enrollment is dropping. In 2009, Illinois House Bill 3202, the Hazardous Busing Mitigation Act, allowed school districts to use a portion of their hazard busing reimbursement from the state to repair the hazards, allowing children to walk and bicycle and allowing the school to reduce busing costs.

### *Case Study: Adams 12 School District*

As a part of their ongoing encouragement program, the Adams 12 school district in Colorado organizes remote drop-off days that allow all students to participate in their walking and bicycling encouragement program. Giving opt out forms to all bus riders the day before, the student transportation department designates drop-offs at all participating schools. Teachers and administration wait at the drop-off site and then walk with the students to the school, providing a fun and interactive beginning to their school day.

## Strategy: Participate in the Community's Safe Routes to School Task Force

An easy way for student transportation departments to get involved in Safe Routes to School efforts is to participate in the district or community Safe Routes to School task force. Many communities form a Safe Routes to School task force to identify and prioritize projects that get more students walking and bicycling. Task forces generally are made up of a diverse mix of stakeholders including school board members, staff from the superintendent's office, the student transportation department, risk management, the department of public health, interested community groups, individual schools, students, families, local elected officials and any city or county staff that are responsible for traffic conditions and the built environment near schools. By gathering stakeholders, the task force can unify efforts to create a systematic approach to improving programs, projects and policies to encourage walking and bicycling to school.

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

Walking school buses and bike trains address parental concern 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 are shown to increase walking and bicycling to school by addressing these concerns. Student transportation departments can contribute by serving as a coordinating entity, publishing maps or recommended routes that enable students and parents to walk and bicycle safely while avoiding major intersections or hazards, or, at a minimum, by providing information on organizing and implementing these programs on their website.

### *Case Study: Eureka City Schools, California*

The transportation director for Eureka City Schools decided to get involved with the community Safe Routes to School Task Force shortly after the city received a grant to improve the streets near one of its schools. The transportation director immediately recognized that all members of the task force, including stakeholders from health, safety, public works, the school community, parents groups, traffic engineers, law enforcement and community groups were all invested in the safety of the students, regardless of how they got to and from school. Over time, being a part of this task force has led the transportation department to bolster walking and bicycling to schools by facilitating remote drop-offs with its buses on [Walking Wednesdays](#) – a weekly encouragement event, contributing their intimate knowledge of local conditions to walk audit and recommended route teams, helping coordinate a walking school bus program, and assisting in making school sites more bicycle/skateboard friendly by addressing design considerations. In addition, the student transportation department compiles data for each of its schools by distributing parent surveys at the beginning of the school year in the parent packet. This feedback is compiled and posted to the student transportation department's website for use in ongoing decision-making.



### Strategy: Collect Data on How Students Travel to and from School

A great deal of travel data is 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 concerns near schools and target parental concerns. In order to advance data collection regarding walking and bicycling to school, the student transportation departments can work with schools to conduct the national standard [Safe Routes to School parent survey](#) and annual [student tallies](#) or even observational surveys. The student transportation department can make it a priority to understand how students move from one place to the other, where there are fears, conflicts or crashes, and to identify potential safety improvements. Armed with knowledge of the needs of the school (and local) community, the student transportation department can work with partners more effectively. These could include a [Safe Routes to School team](#) or district task force, and local road authorities, such as a city or county traffic engineer, to focus on high-impact strategies that directly address parent concerns and safety issues.

#### *Case Study: Auburn School District, Washington*

In the Auburn School District in Auburn, Washington, each school has a Safe Walking Committee comprised of parents, community members and school personnel that develop walking maps and make recommendations for needed safety improvements based, in part, on parent survey results. Each school's recommendations are reviewed by a city-wide District Safety Committee that prioritizes the requested safety improvements, with a focus on reducing transportation costs where possible, and works with the city to acquire grant funding as needed to make necessary safety improvements.

### New Strategy: Safe Routes to Bus Stops

In many cases, it will be difficult to include all students in walking and bicycling to school. However, there is still an opportunity to make certain that students who are walking to bus stops have safe and enjoyable trips. While most student transportation departments implement policies through their transportation safety plan to ensure that the bus stop itself is safe in terms of visibility, proximity to speeding vehicles, and access to emergency phones, the Safe Routes to School National Partnership is promoting a new concept. This involves considering the route to the stop for the majority of student users, and then prioritizing improvements based on the safety of that trip and incorporating physical activity. While this strategy is not ideal for all bus stops, Safe Routes to Bus Stops can provide a safe and inviting environment for physical activity before school for those located outside of the two-mile school radius and/or in high density areas.

## Conclusion

While busing students is a safe way for them to get to and from school, there are many opportunities for student transportation departments to reduce costs, decrease traffic congestion around schools and improve safety while working on projects that benefit all forms of student transportation. Having a close relationship with municipal transportation staff, Safe Routes to School community task force members, and Safe Routes to School practitioners can unveil multiple opportunities to better integrate walking, bicycling, busing and driving to create safer, healthier trips for students.

## Resources

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

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

[Local Safe Routes to School Involvement](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

[School Bus Funding: Cuts and Hazard/Courtesy Busing](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2010)

[Selecting School Bus Stop Locations](#)  
(National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2013)

[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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