

# A Primer to Understanding the Role of School Boards and Principals



*School boards and principals are the gatekeepers to schools; their investment and relationships with stakeholders are essential to the success of Safe Routes to School. Charged with advancing the academic achievement of students, schools boards and principals are faced with myriad challenges including meeting standardized test results, dealing with shrinking budgets, supporting over-extended teachers and maintaining facilities. At the same time, school boards and principals can have a strong 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 parental concerns to improve safety, increase physical activity and get more students walking and bicycling to school. Safe Routes to School practitioners can be most effective by recognizing the priorities of school boards and principals and by better understanding how those priorities align with the benefits of Safe Routes to School.*

## Introduction to Safe Routes to School

During the past 15 years, the Safe Routes to School movement in the United States has grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and bicycling to school is attracting more and more 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. With declining federal transportation dollars dedicated to bicycling and walking and the uncertainty of state budgets, it is even more important to ensure that stable funding streams and supportive policies are pursued locally to safeguard long-term support for walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.

## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of the School Board Members

There are more than 14,000 school boards operating throughout the United States whose primary function is to address the educational needs of their students. The make-up of each district varies in size, socioeconomic status and urbanization; a district's school board could be equally as diverse. These factors are integral to the make-up of the school board and are important to understand before engaging with school boards. School boards can be appointed or elected and work to set the direction for the district, make or approve funding decisions, provide support for the implementation of policies and hold the system accountable to these policies, all while engaging and representing the

## SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL: A Primer to Understanding the Role of School Boards and Principals

community. In order to support and enhance academic achievement, school boards often prioritize teacher quality, school finance, testing and reporting, student safety, parent community involvement, upkeep of school facilities and providing a safe school culture. Because of the varied priorities of school boards and the relative inattention to active transportation and its benefits, practitioners must understand how Safe Routes to School programs and projects can align with the stated priorities of the school board. When making decisions about the content of programs in the school, school boards try to incorporate the community's view of what skills students should have, which can and should include walking and bicycling safety, an important life skill. With such decision-making power, the school board is poised to pass policies that can affect all of the schools under their purview. Since schools have the most continuous and intensive contact with children, districts are in an ideal position to influence the health and behavior of their students. Therefore, it is vital to focus talking points on benefits such as the proven links between physical activity<sup>1</sup>, academic achievement<sup>2</sup>, overall concentration<sup>3</sup> and classroom behavior<sup>4</sup>.

### Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of the Principals

School principals are notorious for their ability to constantly multitask, morphing from one role to another as they deal with the ever-changing needs of their students, staff and facilities. Principals can wear a number of hats including being the school leader, student disciplinarian, teacher evaluator, policy reviewer, program developer, teacher hirer and trainer, parent and community liaison and chief delegator. As with school boards, this demanding role is focused on supporting and improving academic achievement in students. Principals can be faced with the challenges of fewer resources, under-qualified teachers, poverty and behavior issues, all while assuring that instruction is aligned with state academic content standards, maintaining the site facilities, ensuring instruction is designed for student success and developing partnerships with parents and the



community. Successful schools address these challenges by creating a positive culture that promotes learning and engages students and adults.

Safe Routes to School practitioners are wise to respect the many competing priorities of principals by being aware of the limited time most principals have to offer and minimizing the amount of work requested from principals and their staff. Instead, it is useful to principals to demonstrate how Safe Routes to School can contribute to a positive school culture, stronger community, safer arrival and dismissal and, of course, positively influence academic outcomes and classroom behavioral issues. Finally, acknowledging that their time is valuable and working to connect with whomever will be the liaison to the project is recommended.

### What You Can Do

As with most successful work, success is predicated on knowledge of the processes and people involved. Use the following tips as a starting point for engaging school boards and principals (*continued on page 3*):

# SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL: A Primer to Understanding the Role of School Boards and Principals

## LEARN

- » Talk to district employees and conduct research to learn about your district's past involvement in walking and bicycling efforts, if any.
- » Talk with a school board member or review any policies and laws that dictate the behavior of the school district.
- » Talk with a school board member or administrator to understand the actual distribution of authority between the district and schools – this varies depending on the state and district.
- » Check with individual schools to learn about their school policies and how they support or prevent walking and bicycling to school.
- » Find out about existing task forces, school teams and initiatives that focus on walking and bicycling to school at individual schools and throughout the district.
- » Identify the staff or appointed committees that liaise with school board members or the school principal on transportation decisions and operations.

## REVIEW

- » Become familiar with the school or school district's written transportation, health, safety, wellness and other Safe Route to School related policies.
- » Read the accompanying Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards and Principals to better understand the strategies and initiatives that school boards and principals can support to increase walking and bicycling.
- » Learn the "Five E's" of Safe Routes to School to understand how a well-rounded policy or program addresses Engineering, Evaluation, Enforcement, Education and Encouragement.
- » Utilizing all the information you have learned and reviewed, construct a strong case for Safe Routes to School that will resonate with educational leaders.
- » Prepare to connect and participate.

## CONNECT

- » Develop a working relationship with the school board and/or principal; educate them on key talking points that are relevant to their stated priorities, position and authority.
- » Invite a school board member or principal to join the district or community-wide Safe Routes to School task force or to attend a school team meeting to offer more opportunities for collaboration.
- » Attend school board meetings to understand the challenges that the district faces and to inform them about the priorities, practices and benefits of bicycling, walking and Safe Routes to School.

## PARTICIPATE

- » Encourage both school boards and principals to seek funding opportunities to enhance walking and bicycling through programs and infrastructure projects.
- » Schedule a Safe Routes to School training for school board members and principals to serve as an expert on walking and bicycling to school programs and projects.
- » Ask the school board and principals if they can publicize walking and bicycling initiatives as a viable alternative to taking the bus or the family car on their websites, newsletters and parent back-to-school packets and/or other take-homes.
- » Invite school board members and principals to participate in Safe Routes to School events and include them in the planning, implementation, and evaluation process.
- » Offer public acknowledgement of school board member and principals' support and utilize opportunities to demonstrate the positive outcomes of their work.
- » Be persistent, professional and understanding. School boards and principals are extremely busy and have multiple priorities.

## Align Talking Points with the Stated Priorities of School Boards and Principals

In addition to providing school board members and principals with the companion *Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards and Principals* action brief and reviewing the strategies outlined within that document, you can customize your talking points by encouraging school boards and principals to consider common priorities and how their priorities align with Safe Routes to School priorities. Priorities may include improved academic performance and increased student safety. After choosing impactful talking points, supplement those with stories, photos and real-life situations to identify the hazards students face while walking or bicycling, and highlight Safe Routes to School successes that have involved collaboration with school boards or principals.

### Student Academic Performance

- Multiple studies show that physical activity has a positive impact on academic achievement in both young children<sup>5</sup> and adolescents<sup>6</sup>, regardless of other factors such as age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and prior achievement scores.
- A 2012 Danish study of 20,000 students showed that children who actively commute to school perform measurably better on tasks demanding concentration<sup>7</sup> once at school than do children who do not actively commute to school.
- After adjusting for socioeconomic status and gender, the percent of eighth graders at academic risk (report usually getting C's, D's or F's) is significantly higher for those with insufficient exercise (35 percent at risk) versus those who get sufficient exercise (22 percent).<sup>8</sup>

### Increasing Safety through Walking and Bicycling

- A California study showed that schools that received infrastructure improvements through the Safe Routes to School program yielded walking and bicycling

increases that were often in the range of 20 percent to 200 percent.<sup>9</sup>

- A 2012 study of Safe Routes to School projects in New York City found that census tracts with Safe Routes to School interventions saw a 44 percent decline in school-aged pedestrian injury during school travel hours while locations without Safe Routes to School interventions stayed the same.<sup>10</sup>
- A safety analysis by the California Department of Transportation estimated that the Safe Routes to School program decreased childhood bicycle and pedestrian collision rates by up to 49 percent.<sup>11</sup>
- A motorist is less likely to collide with a person walking and bicycling if more people walk or bicycle. In a study conducted through several U.S. and European cities, pedestrians in communities where walking was two times greater were 33 percent less likely to be involved in a crash.<sup>12</sup>

### School Transportation Costs

- In 2004-05, the most recent year for which statistics are compiled, 55.3 percent of the 45,625,458 children enrolled in public K-12 schools were bused to school at public expense.<sup>13</sup>
- The United States spends \$17.5 billion per year on school bus transportation at an average cost of \$692 per student transported.<sup>14</sup>
- Eliminating one bus route, based on average per-pupil expense and the average number of children per bus, saves the school district an estimated \$37,000 per school year.<sup>15</sup>

### Traffic Congestion and Air Quality

- In 1969, 48 percent of students walked or biked to school while only 12 percent took a family vehicle; by 2009, only 13 percent of children walked or biked to school and 45 percent took a family vehicle.<sup>16</sup>
- As much as 10 to 14 percent of morning traffic is generated by parents driving their children to school.<sup>17</sup>

## SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL:

# A Primer to Understanding the Role of School Boards and Principals

- Approximately one-third of U.S. public schools are located in “air pollution danger zones,”<sup>18</sup> putting students at risk of having asthma and/or reduced lung function.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

School boards and principals are essential partners in Safe Routes to School. Safe Routes to School practitioners can engage and inform education leaders by carefully considering the roles and responsibilities of school boards and principals, reviewing the key talking points, utilizing the suggestions in the “What You Can Do” section to develop relationships with staff and to achieve goals, and becoming familiar with the potential strategies to bolster walking and bicycling in the accompanying *Safe Routes to School: A Primer for School Boards and Principals*.

## Resources

What is Safe Routes to School?: Quick Facts  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)

Getting Students Active through Safe Routes 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, 2012)

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)

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.

This publication was made possible by grant number 5U38HM000459-04 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), through funding from CDC’s National Center for Environmental Health’s Healthy Community Design Initiative. Funding was administered through a contract with the American Public Health Association. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the American Public Health Association.