

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN ILLINOIS



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PARTNERSHIP



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Safe Routes to School Programs in Illinois

2019 Statewide Program Assessment Report

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	page 1
Why Does Safe Routes to School Matter for Illinois?.....	page 3
History and Structure of Safe Routes to School in Illinois.....	page 5
Illinois's Policy Environment for Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation....	page 6
Illinois Safe Routes to School Program Landscape.....	page 10
Conclusion.....	page 18



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 Illinois's progress in supporting Safe Routes to School, the Safe Routes Partnership conducted a review of Illinois'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 Illinois 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 Illinois, Safe Routes to School programming is in a weak to moderate position. Some significant programs and efforts are providing strong support for safe walking and biking for students, but overall the state has seen a lack of sustained backing for Safe Routes to School. A recent step to award unused federal Safe Routes to School funding to local programs and Safe Routes to School street infrastructure projects is a positive sign, but needs to be followed by ongoing emphasis and investment in Safe Routes to School by the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) – not only through more funding awards, but also through state technical assistance and developing a state program structure that supports new and ongoing local efforts. In addition, although Illinois has some solid policy support and significant new state funding for safe walking and biking, it also has a lot of room to strengthen and improve its commitment to Complete Streets and active transportation for students and adults.



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 Illinois?

Physical activity is essential for students' health and academic achievement. Yet, the 2.5 million students in Illinois are not getting enough physical activity. Obesity among Illinois youth aged 10-17 is at 16.2 percent.¹ Only 50 percent of Illinois residents meet the recommended levels of physical activity, a decline from previous levels,² and only a quarter of high school students achieve recommended levels of physical activity.³ In addition, the average number of days per week that students have physical education is dropping, down to three days a week in 2018 from a rate at or above four days a week for the several previous years.⁴ Although Safe Routes to School programming can assist with school attendance, 17 percent of Illinois 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.⁵ Low-income students and African-American and American Indian students have rates of chronic absenteeism up to twice as



high as the average. In addition, between 2008 and 2017, 1,323 people were killed by cars while walking in Illinois, and far more people walking or bicycling were injured.⁶ Over the past decade, there has been a 35 percent increase nationally in the number of people killed by drivers while walking.⁷

A core part of the reason that students and adults in Illinois are less healthy and get less physical activity is because Illinois 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.



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

COST SAVINGS

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



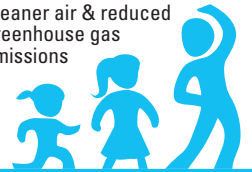
TRAFFIC SAFETY

- 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 Illinois



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.

While Illinois has an acting Safe Routes to School coordinator and just completed a round of Safe Routes to School awards, the program had previously languished for a number of years, and there is significant need for additional financial investments, state leadership, and commitment from IDOT (the state department of transportation) and others. The 2019 Safe Routes to School Funding Cycle was Illinois's first competition awarding Safe Routes to School funding in five years.⁸ IDOT received 168 applications requesting a

total of \$27.8 million, and awarded just over \$5.1 million, less than 20 percent of the requested amount.⁹ Despite the substantial unmet need in Safe Routes to School applications for infrastructure funding, there were insufficient applications for noninfrastructure (program) funding, resulting in leftover funding in that category – likely an indication that additional outreach is necessary to make communities aware of the funding opportunity and rebuild interest and capacity throughout the state.

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

Illinois's Policy Environment for Safe Routes to School and Active Transportation

A crucial part of Illinois'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 Illinois's general policy landscape and commitment to Safe Routes to School and active transportation. Illinois's overall report card score was a 74 out of 200 points, putting it in the Warming Up category, second from the bottom out of the four scoring categories. This score demonstrates that Illinois has taken some meaningful actions toward supporting walking, bicycling, Safe Routes to School, and active communities, and yet has failed to take significant steps that would demonstrate a stronger and more efficacious commitment to enabling Illinoisans to be safe and physically active. Below we describe how Illinois performed on Safe Routes to School-related policy indicators reviewed in the State Report Cards, and note other Illinois policies where relevant.

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

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. 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. Illinois received almost two-thirds of the points available for this section, benefiting from the fact that the state has goals to lower fatalities and increase mode share for walking and biking, as well as the state's 2007 Complete Streets policy, which includes a commitment to building bicycle and pedestrian ways in urban areas. However, the Complete Streets policy only addresses walking and biking, only provides any guarantees in urban areas, and does not apply to actors other than the state or provide much in the way of implementation details or commitments. In addition, the state has not adopted or endorsed modern street design guides providing for safe walking and biking, and does not even have a design guide with guidance on designing separated or protected bike lanes.¹⁰ Illinois passed an interesting and constructive law in 2018 that adds a driving procedure to protect people on bicycles from getting doored (the Dutch Reach) to the Illinois Rules of the Road, as well as adding questions on bicycle safety to the state driver's license exam.¹¹

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, Illinois has transferred more than \$20 million to use for highway and vehicle projects instead of active transportation, about 11 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. As of March 2019, Illinois had only obligated 54 percent of its TAP funding.¹² Although Illinois is performing poorly in its use of federal active transportation funding, it has just passed very strong state active transportation funding. In June 2019, the Illinois legislature passed a new \$33 billion six-year transportation package; among other resources, the legislation includes a very substantial \$50 million for walking and bicycling projects.¹³ While none of this money is available for Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure programs (only street improvements are funded), this is one of the largest state commitments to active transportation funding in the nation, and a very significant step toward better walking and bicycling conditions on the ground.

Illinois also lost points on the report card because it does not engage in a number of practices that have been shown to support Safe Routes to School and equitable allocation of TAP dollars. Illinois does not provide special consideration for high need communities or matching funds to assist such communities in being able to execute TAP projects (although 25 percent of the new state biking and walking funding is directed toward projects in high need communities).¹⁴ Illinois recently provided a standalone Safe Routes to School award competition that funded Safe Routes to School programming using pre TAP dedicated federal funding; if Illinois continues these practices using TAP funding, it will be able to regain points that it lost in 2018.

Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices

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 advance Safe Routes to School initiatives, beyond funding. Illinois has recently filled its state Safe Routes to School coordinator position in an acting role; it is important to have a full time state coordinator to best implement Safe Routes to School. The state has not been providing formal technical or application assistance to local jurisdictions for Safe Routes to School, but perhaps that will improve with new commitment by IDOT to the Safe Routes to School coordinator role. Another positive step for Illinois occurred in 2018, when the legislature passed the Bike Walk Education in Schools Act, requiring public schools serving grades kindergarten through eighth to provide biking and walking safety education.¹⁵

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. Illinois 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 – but it also does not have any positive incentives or requirements for walking, biking or physical activity within its school siting and design guidelines, providing a key opportunity for strengthening state policy to improve Illinoisans' health.



Illinois 2018

WARMING UP



OVERALL SCORE

74 / 200

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

COMPLETE STREETS AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION



Complete Streets Policies	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	0 / 5
	Addresses implementation in state Complete Streets policy	6 / 10
Design for Active Transportation	Adopted/endorsed NACTO guidelines	0 / 10
Active Transportation Planning	Adopted a state pedestrian, bicycle, or active transportation plan	5 / 10
Active Transportation Goals	Adopted goals to lower walking and bicycling fatalities	10 / 10
	Adopted goals to increase walking and bicycling mode share	10 / 10
		<u>40 / 65</u>

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION FUNDING



Active Transportation Funding	Retained Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding without transfers	- 2 / 10
	Awarded TAP projects	10 / 10
	Obligated state-controlled TAP funds	10 / 10
	Provides special consideration for high-need communities	0 / 5
	Provides matching funds for high-need communities	0 / 5
Safe Routes to School Funding	Provides special consideration for Safe Routes to School projects using TAP funds	0 / 5
	Funds Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure projects	0 / 5
	Dedicates state funding for Safe Routes to School	0 / 5
Safe Routes to School Supportive Practices	Has state Safe Routes to School coordinator	2 / 5
	Provides technical or application assistance to Safe Routes to School initiatives	0 / 5
		<u>20 / 65</u>

ACTIVE NEIGHBORHOODS AND SCHOOLS



Shared Use of School Facilities	Adopted state policy supporting shared use of school facilities	6 / 10
	Provides funding/incentives in support of shared use of school facilities	0 / 5
School Siting and Design	Requires large school sites (minimum acreage guideline)	0 / 0
	Supports walking, bicycling & physical activity in school design guidelines	0 / 15
Physical Education	Adopted PE minutes & graduation requirements	0 / 15
Supportive Neighborhoods for Physical Activity	Level of access to recreation & community centers for youth	5 / 5
	Level of access to parks	3 / 5
		<u>14 / 55</u>

STATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PLANNING



	Adopted a state plan with commitments to physical activity	0 / 5
	Dedicates state staff to physical activity	0 / 10
		<u>0 / 15</u>



5 Illinois Safe Routes to School Program Landscape

The 2019 Safe Routes to School Program Census revealed that Illinois has fairly weak Safe Routes to School programming around the state, which is not surprising in light of the years that passed without any disbursement of state or federal funding for Safe Routes to School programs.

Overview

- **Weak Safe Routes to School programming:**

Overall, our analysis revealed fairly low numbers of schools engaging in Safe Routes to School activities and few developed Safe Routes to School programs. Many existing programs have subsisted for some time with little or no funding by concentrating on a few schools and a few activities; while these programs are doing great work with the resources available, they are extremely limited in their ability to improve health and wellbeing meaningfully for many students.

- **Lower-impact activities and few initiatives designed to engage specific groups of students:**

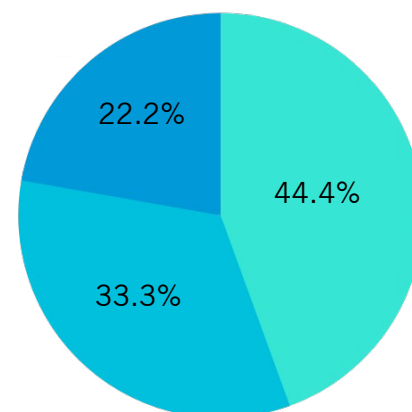
As a general matter, most programs are doing a few lower-intensity activities such as Walk or Bike to School Day, rather than conducting higher-impact daily or weekly activities. A few programs have successfully developed more robust programs by accessing additional

sources of funding. Few programs are conducting any activities focused on students who may be less likely to walk or bicycle, such as girls and students with disabilities. In addition, no programs reported any initiatives focused on specific needs or interests of immigrant or refugee students or students with English as a second language.

- **Weak focus on bicycling:** While bike skills clinics and education were common in Illinois programs, Illinois shows an unusually low ratio of schools participating in Bike to School Day versus Walk and Roll to School Day, and Illinois programs reported no bike trains.

- **Urban/rural nature:** 45 percent of Illinois respondents indicated that their Safe Routes to School program was located in an urban community, 33 percent a suburban one, and 22 percent a rural area.

Urban/Suburban/Rural Breakdown



- Urban 44.4%
- Suburban 33.3%
- Rural 22.2%

Structure of Local Programs

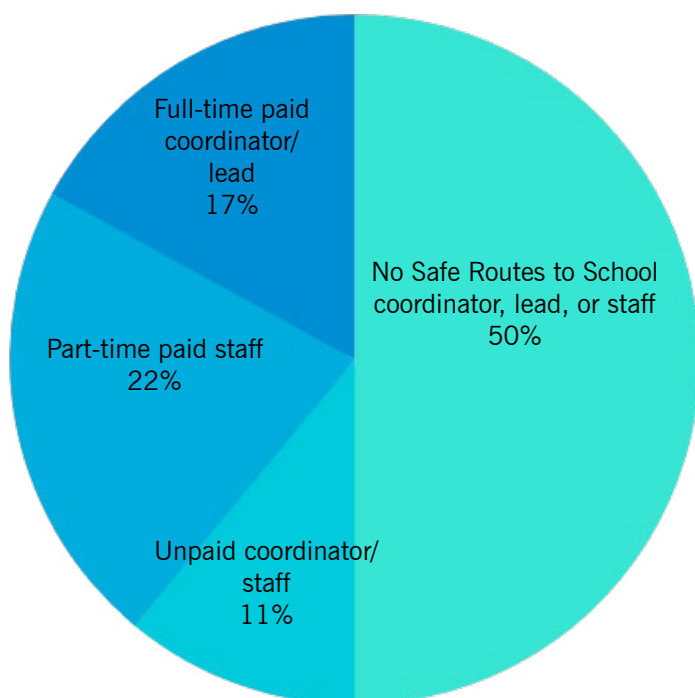
- **Staffing:** Paid staff is one of the most important elements in the comprehensiveness and sustainability of a Safe Routes to School program. However, our Illinois program respondents show poor results on this front. Half of respondents indicated that their program had no coordinator at all; 11 percent indicated that their coordinator worked on a volunteer basis; 22 percent reported a part time coordinator; and only 17 percent reported a full time paid coordinator.
- **Task Force:** 78 percent of local program respondents indicated that their program had an advisory team or task force, a positive sign of the health of a program.
- **Sponsoring agency:** Illinois Safe Routes to School programs were housed in a wide variety of agencies. In our sample, 1/3 were housed at a school or school district, with others in police departments, regional planning agencies, or local public works, transportation, or

planning departments. Although some respondents noted support by nonprofits, no programs were located at nonprofits.

- **Program service area:** Different programs define their service areas differently: some have the same boundaries as a town or a school district, others do not. Of our respondents, 44 percent were citywide; 28 percent were district-wide; 17 percent were at a single school; and 11 percent included parts of more than one town.
- **Funding types:** Most Illinois Safe Routes to School programs lack funding altogether or operate with budgets of \$500 or \$1,000 – enough to purchase supplies, but not enough to cover any staff time or build a strong or comprehensive program. More than half of our respondents said their program had no funding or that they did not know about funding. Several programs received small allocations from school funds

or from local general funds. Only one respondent indicated receiving state or federal funding, which is very unusual for programs around the nation, and is clearly due to the lapse in state Safe Routes to School competitions.

- **Policy:** Municipal and school district Safe Routes to School policies can provide enormous support and assistance to Safe Routes to School programs, formalizing support and prioritization and encouraging institutionalization of Safe Routes to School commitments. Many respondents described local policies addressing Safe Routes to School. Safe Routes to School language was included in a number of communities' comprehensive plans or bicycle and pedestrian plans. Some communities indicated that they had school travel plans, but these generally seemed to be at least 10 years old. Few programs had persuaded school districts to include Safe Routes to School supportive policies in their district policies or wellness policies.



Excerpt From the Town of Normal's Comprehensive Plan

"Enhance Safe Routes to School efforts.

Early Suburban neighborhoods are among the few areas where a significant portion of the households are within a mile of their assigned elementary schools.

3a. Partner with Unit 5 to increase the number of walkers and bikers to Oakdale, Fairview, Colene Hoose, and Sugar Creek Elementary Schools, and Chiddix Middle school. Focus efforts on strategic infrastructure improvements to improve safety for pedestrians and bicycles as well as programming such as Safe Routes to School.

3b. Prioritize trail improvements that improve connections to schools and parks."



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 organization's 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 department of transportation 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.

Program Activities and Details

Active travel increase: 70 percent of local program respondents indicated that they had observed an increase in walking and biking activity. A little under half of respondents indicated that fewer than 10 percent of students currently walk or bike, a similar number reported up to 25 percent walking and biking, and a few reported higher levels.

Program activities: Illinois local Safe Routes to School programs engage in a wide range of activities.

- Walk to School Day and Bike to School Day were the most common activities reported, with 65 percent and 59 percent of programs reporting participation, respectively. According to the National Center for Safe Routes to School, 211 schools participated in Walk to School Day and 83 participated in Bike to School Day for Illinois in the 2018-19 school year.¹⁶ While the national average generally shows 60 to 90 percent higher levels of participation in Walk to School Day versus Bike to School Day, Illinois's Bike to School Day numbers are much lower in comparison, with 2.5 times as many Walk to School events as Bike to School events in 2018-2019.
- Student education and bicycle skills clinics were the next most popular activity, with 53 percent of programs providing one or the other, and the majority of these providing both. About a third of survey respondents conducted student walking and biking safety and skills education in and out of school. Thousands of students throughout the state benefit from these education efforts, which range from a few hours a year to longer trainings.
- Just over 10 percent of respondents reported weekly walk and roll



Active Travel Increase: In Program Coordinators' Words

- “We have been doing Bike to School Days for the past 4 years and Bike Safety Days for the past 2 years. We have begun to see an increase in biking and walking as a result. But, we still have a long way to go, due to infrastructure challenges.”
- “Providing infrastructure improvements has made it easier and safer for students to walk/bike to school. Enforcing traffic regulations and teaching the students safety measures has also helped.”
- “It varies from school to school and year to year, but more students do bicycle in good weather than in the past. We have been doing bike rack counts the last couple of years to collect more data.”
- “With the addition of sidewalks and identifying the route students within the Village limits have taken to mainly walking to school. Plus, it gets them out of the roadways.”
- “The sidewalks around the Elementary School have safe crosswalk crossings now, where before they did not exist. The view of this safety improvement we believe have given parents a much easier peace of mind to promote walking to school.”
- “We have seen a small increase this year as a result of our information sharing and route posting.”

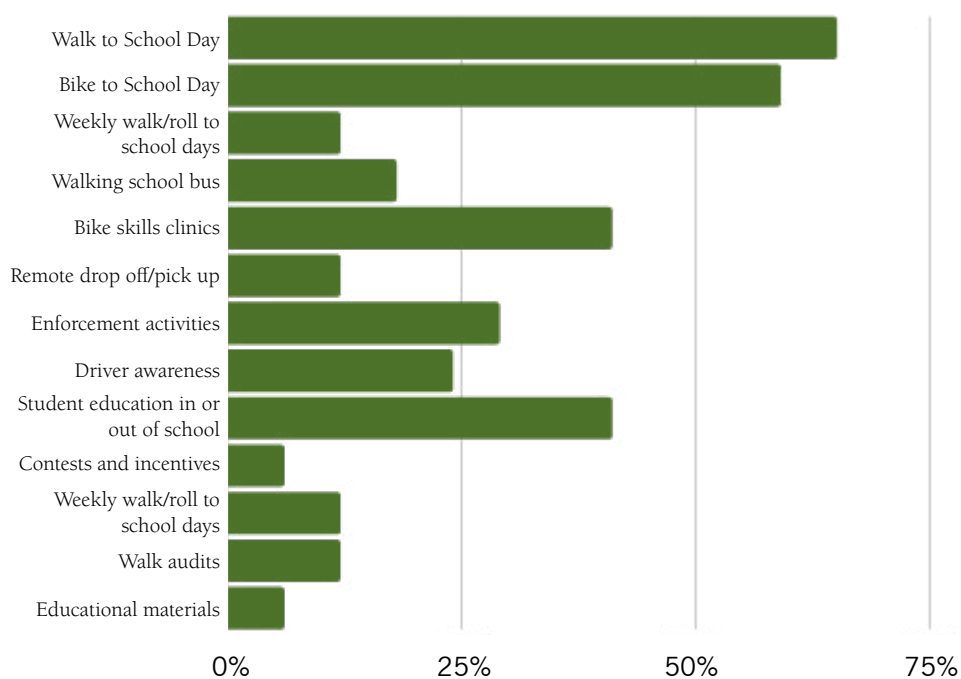
How to Start a Walking School Bus At Your School

In a walking school bus or bike train, a group of kids walk or bicycle to school together accompanied by one or more adults. To learn how to organize and run a walking school bus or bike train, see [Step By Step: How to Start a Walking School Bus at your School](#) and [The Wheels on the Bike Go Round & Round: How to Get a Bike Train Rolling at Your School](#).

to school days, which are a great way to create regular walking and biking habits; no programs reported conducting monthly walk and roll to school days.

- Walking school buses: Regular walking school buses and bike trains are one of the best ways to change travel behavior and create real increases in physical activity for students. Just under 20 percent of program respondents reported conducting walking school buses. The Champaign–Urbana Safe Routes to School Project has walking school buses at one of its schools that run multiple times a week. No Illinois programs reported running bike trains.
- A number of programs used remote drop offs (also known as park and walk in) and safe routes to bus stops, which provide opportunities for

Program Activities By the Numbers
Percent of local programs that conduct specific types of Safe Routes to School program activities.



students to be driven in a car or bus part of the way to school and walk the other portion. Remote drops off were very popular with the rural Safe Routes to School programs.

- Some programs also ran contests and incentives. The City of Martinsville Safe Routes to School program runs a poster contest, with prizes given for the top three winners.
- Activities to support stronger driver safety behaviors, either through enforcement or through driver awareness programs, were found in many programs. Crossing guards were popular among programs with enforcement activities.
- Illinois's programs indicated considerable involvement in infrastructure issues: of those programs that responded to this question, 36 percent conduct walk audits, almost 80 percent

“Our City Council is very supportive of infrastructure improvements that increase pedestrian accessibility around the city. Our future recreation trail map helps identify linkages between schools, parks, businesses, and subdivisions in the city.”

- Jon Oliphant, Washington Safe Routes to School Program, IL

advocate for street improvements, more than half assist in prioritizing street improvements, and only 14 percent said they did not work on infrastructure at all.

Equity Considerations: Safe Routes to School programs have the potential to either create greater equity in our communities, or to exacerbate disparities, depending upon whether investments are prioritized in lower income communities and whether programs are designed and tailored for the needs of different demographic groups. While evaluating the overall health equity impact of Illinois's Safe Routes to School programs was outside the scope of this report, Illinois programs did work with communities with a range of income levels. However, Illinois programs did not seem to have very developed activities or initiatives focusing on specific groups of students.

- Of our program respondents, 36 percent of programs worked with schools that were mostly or all Title I schools (schools serving a substantial number of low-income students). A similar number worked with few or no Title I schools, and a little over a quarter worked with some Title I schools.
- One program indicated that they had some programming aimed at girls; four noted that they had initiatives focused on students with disabilities. These programs seemed to involve outreach and tailoring of activities, but not necessarily additional activities. One program noted: “We share specific transportation and route information with students with unique learning or mobility needs. We customize this information to meet the unique needs of the student.”



“Our bike to school day has to be one of the longest rides in the country -- it's 4.5 miles! We have kids going into their 6th and 7th year of riding this event. They just LOVE IT! When I visit the school for other reasons, kids will yell, "Hello, Bike Lady!" If we could do bike to school day every week, the kids would be thrilled. We have kids as young as 5 and 6 years old riding tiny little bikes with no gears -- we have them start at a point about 1.5 miles from the school and they finish like champs. They are so proud of themselves. The walk to school event is similarly beloved, but it's nowhere near the adventure of a bike ride. For the bike rodeo, we have repeat customers every year. We bring bikes from the local bike co-op for the kids who don't have a bike to ride -- and we give all of the bikes away by the end of the day. We have between 100 and 150 kids ride through the rodeo course every year and we give away even more free helmets (which we fit to their heads). One year we gave out 500 helmets. It was so amazing.”

-Mercy Davison, Normal Safe Routes to School Program

Successes and Challenges

Programs reported a wide array of successes, key lessons learned, and ongoing challenges.

Successes and lessons learned

- Street improvements increase biking and walking and benefit the whole community: “It improves the overall community in terms of ADA compliance, exercise, improved infrastructure, and just overall community pride.”
- Finding ways to engage stakeholders from different agencies in a common goal is important: “A great thing to start a program moving in the right direction is to do a walking survey with City and School staff, together, so each of them can point out why such and such infrastructure project is a safety necessity.”
- The new state Bike Walk Education in Schools Act provides a great opportunity to encourage schools to develop strong education programs.
- Safe Routes to School programming is fun for kids and develops enormous community good will.
- Safe Routes to School activities and relationships build upon each other slowly over time.

Champaign-Urbana Safe Routes to School Project

The Champaign-Urbana Safe Routes to School Project (C-U Safe Routes to School Project) provides a great example of deeper engagement growing out of Walk and Bike to School Day events. After four years of collaboration on annual Walk to School Days by regional agencies, health, city agencies, and school districts, stakeholders decided that a more concerted effort would bring deeper benefits for students and the community. A formal partnership was developed, led by the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District and including the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, CU Public Health District, Urbana and Champaign planning, engineering and law enforcement, Champaign County Bikes, and the Urbana and Champaign School Districts. As a smaller college area, the sister cities of Champaign and Urbana have one of the highest rates of walking to work in the country, which likely contributed to the embrace of Safe Routes to School in the region. The initiative is now 15 years old, and is active in 37 schools in Champaign and Urbana, many of which are Title I (low-income) schools.

The C-U Safe Routes to School Project runs a wide array of activities, including a regular walking school bus at one school, bicycle safety demonstrations for all fourth graders in the Champaign School District, regular bike rodeos and traffic skills classes, and more. The coordinator, Cynthia Hoyle, described the importance of the Safe Routes to School program: “Our programming has helped change the community conversation and expectations. When the Champaign School District wanted to build a new high school on the edge of the community the voters rejected the funding twice at the ballot box and elected a new school board to keep the schools in the central part of the community.” The C-U Safe Routes to School Project received a 2019 Non-Infrastructure grant from the state program. As Hoyle explained, “We can sustain some programming without grant funding, such as bike rodeos, events like Walk & Roll and Bike to School Days, and one school continued its walking school bus program, but other programming requires funding.” The new funding will allow the project to expand and improve its operations, increasing the benefits for children, youth, and the community at large.



Challenges and opportunities identified

Program coordinators identified an array of challenges:

- Perceptions of danger: “Many parents are very concerned about the safety of walking or biking to school, often in cases where safety concerns should be extremely minimal, and they are unaware of the great benefits of biking or walking (a sense of independence, cultivation of decision-making skills, mental and physical health benefits, etc). This is a tough nut to crack.”
- Funding: Lack of funding is a persistent challenge for new programs, programs that are subsisting, and even very successful programs. One program described their ambitious plans, which had to be shelved when they were unsuccessful in obtaining funding. Others emphasized that deeper engagement requires funding.
- School districts are key players but can be difficult to engage: “Municipalities can't be the driving force for SRTS. It really needs to start with the schools themselves, with municipalities providing critical support. This issue just hasn't gotten a lot of traction in our community with schools or parents. I'm sure that the schools have a lot of other things to deal with, and SRTS just hasn't risen to the top of their pile. That said, schools are complex systems with many players, and it's very difficult for a municipality to push programming onto that system.”
- Dangerous street conditions: Programs described dangers including lack of sidewalks and crosswalks near schools, speeding cars, and more. One program explained, “We have no traffic signals to slow down traffic in front of our schools, which is dangerous.”
- District consolidation: There is a strong push in Illinois for school district consolidation, given the high number of districts the state has, many of which have only one school or a few schools.¹⁷ However, school consolidations in rural areas are frequently occurring in ways that create substantial distances from home to school for many students and discourage walking and biking.
- No one size fits all solution: Creating a state program that works for small rural towns and large urban cities is hard, particularly if the goal is to create programs that are transformative and comprehensive.

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.

“We have had great participation for Bike to School Day. Our middle school offers free breakfast to any student that walks or bikes to school. We have fantastic support from our fire and police departments, who come to all schools that they are able to. We teach bike education to all 3rd grades, and have support from our police department, who comes with us to do this. We have now given them resources to develop a 3rd grade education program for PE staff to do themselves. And, we put together an educational plan, by grade level, to teach pedestrian and bike safety for all our schools, since IL passed the law requiring schools to teach this. In addition, our school district has gotten a few grants to build safe walking/biking routes to schools. We have flashing beacons near 2 schools to slow traffic and allow people to cross more safely. We have a fantastic trailer filled with bike rodeo equipment, bike maintenance items and giveaways that we bring to rodeos, farmer's markets and other city events.”

- Joanne Spitz, Coordinator, Batavia Safe Routes to School Program

6 Conclusion: Reflections and Recommendations

Years without any state Safe Routes to School competitions or other state Safe Routes to School program support or activity have left Illinois with few Safe Routes to School programs throughout the state. Illinois has a handful of strong Safe Routes to School programs, and a variety of other programs and initiatives that engage in limited events and activities. IDOT's recent Safe Routes to School competition and renewed attention to staffing a state Safe Routes to School coordinator have brought a much needed infusion of funding and attention to local programs. However, the fact that there were not enough applications for the Safe Routes to School non-infrastructure program funding demonstrates that more community outreach was required and also likely indicates a lack of readiness among local communities.

IDOT needs to rebuild its state Safe Routes to School program and its relationships with and support of local programs. Specific steps include conducting vigorous outreach, working closely with low-income communities to overcome barriers to accessing funding, providing state grant assistance and general program technical assistance, and designing and structuring a state Safe Routes to School program that works for rural and urban areas, one that creates an easy entry point for interested communities that do not have existing Safe Routes to School activities, while also providing support for the development of strong and comprehensive programs that generate substantial safety and health benefits for students.



Recommendations

- Develop strong and reliable state Safe Routes to School program at IDOT, including:
 - Assign a permanent Safe Routes to School state coordinator and keep role staffed in the future.
 - Ensure consistent funding of local Safe Routes to School programs, with no more than two years between competitions, with goal of finishing SAFETEA-LU funds, using TAP money, and adding additional state money if possible as interest builds.
 - Explore a Safe Routes to School program minigrant fund as a low barrier to entry method to provide Safe Routes to School funding to interested communities.
 - Develop a strong state Safe Routes to School technical assistance presence, either through contracting with a nonprofit partner or by devoting sufficient IDOT staff time; include application assistance as well as program development assistance.
 - Create a communications encouragement strategy that encourages local and state officials to celebrate Walk and Bike to School Days and other regular event.
 - Create a strong equity orientation in the state Safe Routes to School program through approaches such as strong outreach; providing prioritization for low-income communities in awarding Safe Routes to School program funds; working at the state level to develop resources, materials, activities, and relationships to assist local Safe Routes to School programs in tailoring initiatives for specific demographic groups; encouraging applications from communities with chronic disease or walking and biking injury disparities; etc.
 - Support creation of state model policies, resources, and curricula for implementation of the Bike Walk Education in Schools Act (HB 4799).
- Ensure that new state active transportation funding moves into communities rapidly and is used to support new connections throughout communities and to schools.
- Adopt a state pedestrian plan or multimodal plan to ensure systematic investment and prioritization of walking and its integration with other modes of travel; include Safe Routes to School considerations and prioritization.
- Pass a strong and comprehensive state Complete Streets policy.
- For Transportation Alternatives Program funds:
 - Ensure that all TAP funds are used for active transportation purposes.
 - Prioritize high-needs communities in TAP awards.
 - Provide matching funds for TAP awards in low-income communities.
- Adopt state school siting guidance (recommendations, requirements, and/or incentives) that support smart school siting, such as support for siting schools in walkable and bikeable locations; school design that supports outdoor play as well as walking and biking; and colocation of school sites with parks and other relevant destinations.
- In light of state focus on consolidation of school districts, ensure that smart school siting considerations are incorporated into any policies adopted in order to minimize distance that students must travel from home to school and support student health and efficient use of resources; encourage a full cost accounting approach to projected savings through consolidation to ensure that transportation costs for districts and families are included in calculations.
- Determine financing mechanisms at local level to fund Safe Routes to School coordinators and local activities.
- Encourage passage of local Safe Routes to School policies and resolutions with specific commitments, including equity actions, by school boards and local jurisdictions.
- Conduct regular state evaluations of levels of walking and biking to school as well as differences in participation and safety among demographic groups; commit resources to maximize equitable benefits.

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