SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL:

A Primer for Local Elected Officials

SAFE ROUTES to School
NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Local elected officials throughout the country have successfully adopted policies and practices that support and encourage walking and bicycling, and have realized improvements in safety, health, transportation, student educational performance and even the economy. This action brief is designed to provide local elected officials and their staff with an understanding of the benefits of Safe Routes to School and policy opportunities to improve walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.

Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost half of all students walked or bicycled to school, and most lived within a mile of their schools. Today, fewer than 1 in 6 students walk or bicycle to school. The decrease in walking and bicycling can have a long-term, negative impact on today's youth including important local issues such as health, education, safety and the environment. Safe Routes to School, a fast-growing national and international movement to increase physical activity, improve health, reduce traffic congestion and address air quality by getting more students walking and bicycling to school and in daily life, has been 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 (Safe Accountable Flexible Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users), which dedicated $1.1 billion to Safe Routes to School and opened the door for innovative Safe Routes to School programs throughout the country. 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.

In 2012, the passage of a new federal transportation law, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21), decreased funds for Safe Routes to School and combined it into one funding pot with other bicycling and walking projects. Decisions on use of these funds are made by the state department of transportation and large metropolitan planning organizations. Given the increased competition for these limited resources, communities have an opportunity to bolster and sustain local Safe Routes to School efforts by creating or re-allocating additional local funding streams, adopting supportive local policies and enacting advisory coalitions or committees.

Community Level Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School

The following strategies are excellent opportunities to boost bicycling and walking and Safe Routes to School as fully funded transportation priorities at the local level. Local elected officials can take leadership in promoting these ideas internally and externally to create safer, more accessible active transportation options for all users through funding and policies that support walking and bicycling:

Strategy: Allocate Funding for a Local Safe Routes to School Program

In order to create funding sources not reliant on federal and state funding decisions, localities can follow the lead of the federal program and invest a relatively small amount of transportation dollars in walking and bicycling to school projects. These communities address the long-term issues of safety, traffic congestion and air quality, as well as the health needs of their residents, by dedicating funding to improving conditions through a local Safe Routes to School program.

Case Study: Fort Collins, CO

In 2009, Fort Collins had 11 serious or fatal crashes involving bicycles and pedestrians. City Council members, City staff and the community began a push to create safer streets for all users. To improve bicycle safety, the City Council asked Transportation Planning staff to prepare a Bicycle Safety Education Plan. The plan, available at www.fcgov.com/transportationplanning, was adopted in March 2011. The City Council, using the Keep Fort Collins Great sales tax funds, has allocated $50,000 annually to implement the plan.

Strategy: Include Accommodations for Walking and Bicycling in Planning Documents

Every day, communities are involved in developing, finalizing and implementing plans that significantly affect the future of walking and bicycling in the community. These plans include bicycle and pedestrian master plans, general/comprehensive plans, capital improvement plans, regional transportation plans and more. The resulting work of these collaborations is an overall blueprint which prioritizes projects, designates the way land can be used and, in many cases, assigns funding for transportation. Local elected officials have the influence to make sure projects that allow children to safely walk and bicycle to school and other destinations are a priority of these planning processes.

Case Study: Los Angeles, California

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership, working in collaboration with several local organizations, worked to encourage the city of Los Angeles to consider a strategic Safe Routes to School plan for their 700 plus schools. One of the first steps in making this happen was to educate the City's Transportation Committee on the need, who was receptive to the concept and helped move it forward. As a result, the Safe Routes to School plan was then included as a component of the City's adopted Bicycle Master Plan. In April 2011, the City of Los Angeles allocated $1.2 million in local sales tax dollars to fund the creation of its strategic Safe Routes to School plan.

Strategy: Use a Local Complete Streets Approach

As communities consider allocating funding for Safe Routes to School projects, it is ideal to ensure that future road construction or rehabilitation is inclusive of walking and bicycling by taking a local Complete Streets approach. A Complete Streets approach ensures that every project recognizes the accommodation of all modes and users — including automobiles, transit, bicyclists, pedestrians, children, older adults and people with disabilities — when new projects are being built or renovations are being made. It can be more cost-effective to build these accommodations in during a project rather than retrofitting the road afterwards.

Case Study: Madison, Wisconsin

Madison, Wisconsin is the recipient of a Gold Bicycle Friendly Community rating from the League of American Bicyclists. While walking and bicycling has long been an ingrained part of the community's local government culture, advocates began to see the need for cementing that belief with a Complete Streets approach. In 2006, when it came time to update the Regional Transportation Plan 2030, the city council included a Complete Streets approach under the main "Goals and Objectives" section. This plan was adopted; now, when new streets are constructed or old streets are renovated across the region, new sidewalks, bike lanes, paths and safe places for pedestrians and bicyclists to cross are routinely considered.

Strategy: Use Fine-Based Mechanisms for Bicycling and Walking Safety

There are many opportunities to improve traffic safety for walking and bicycling, especially near schools, and at the same time raise funds for Safe Routes to School safety projects. One consideration is that states can allocate, or re-allocate, funding received from traffic violations. This funding can be raised by either increasing the fines in school zones or re-allocating an already increased fine to create a safer environment for those that are endangered by traffic safety violations in these areas.

Case Study: Portland, Oregon

In July 2003, the Portland, Oregon City Council tasked a stakeholder group with developing a traffic safety strategy and financial plan in order to implement the City's Traffic Calming Master Plan. Simultaneously the public was demanding traffic safety solutions to speeding and pedestrian and bicycle safety issues. The stakeholder group developed a financial plan that called for a $10-20 state-approved surcharge for all moving violations that the city council eventually approved. One-third of the funds generated from the fine went to traffic enforcement; one-third to traffic engineering; and one-third to traffic safety education.

Strategy: Reduce Speeds

If a pedestrian is struck by a car traveling 40 mph, there is an 85 percent chance of death, while pedestrians struck by cars travelling 20 mph have a five percent chance of dying. The World Health Organization has identified speed control as one of the interventions that would reduce the number of traffic casualties. Communities interested in increasing safety through reducing speeds can: 1) reduce the speed limits, 2) increase the size of the school and residential zones in which they are required, and 3) ensure law enforcement prioritizes enforcement of speed limits.

Case Study: Springfield, Missouri

Speed limit monitoring by the Traffic Engineering Division showed that 75 percent of the drivers in Springfield were exceeding posted speed limits by at least 10 mph. With these faster speeds came a significant safety risk for students. Shortly thereafter, the City Council passed an ordinance reducing speed limits on all local streets. In addition, a ¼-cent capital improvement sales tax has been used to construct more than 50 miles of sidewalks near schools over the past 20 years and city engineers now regularly study school zones to identify safety challenges to children and make improvements.

Strategy: Support Crossing Guards

Without safe places to walk and bicycle and safe ways to cross busy thoroughfares, parents will not ultimately make the decision to allow their children to walk or bicycle. In order to ensure that an adequate number of well-trained crossing guards are made available to schools, supporting a comprehensive crossing guard approach is necessary. It should include criteria for funding, equipping, training, and locating crossing guards as one step towards improving safety and encouraging more walking and bicycling in the community.

Case Study: Washington, DC

In 2008, after the launch of the DC Safe Routes to School pilot program, there was increasing public demand for crossing guards. The leaders of Washington, DC's crossing guard program asked the Safe Routes to School DC network to assist them in determining the best placement of crossing guards throughout the city. The network worked closely with the DC Department of Transportation to overhaul the city's crossing guard location placement policy to ensure that crossing guards were placed at busy intersections where large numbers of children needed assistance safely crossing the street. By revamping the existing city policy, the DC network contributed to the safety of DC students and addressed parent concerns about traffic safety, thereby setting up the DC Safe Routes to School program for greater success.

Additional Regional Strategies and Approaches:

Strategy: Know How Your Community Travels

A great deal of travel data are collected by states, regions, counties and municipalities. It is important to make it a local priority to improve data collection in order to understand how people move from one place to the other, where there are conflicts or crashes and how many dollars the community allocates toward street-scale improvements benefiting each mode. Armed with accurate knowledge of the needs of the community, local elected officials can work with their staff to meet these transportation needs.

Strategy: Maintain Full-Time Safe Routes to School and Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinators

Local public works departments need dedicated staff to carry out Safe Routes to School priorities. Bicycle and pedestrian and Safe Routes to School programs and projects benefit from full-time staff who manage projects, provide resources and training to districts and schools, monitor progress and ensure that federal and state funds are quickly and fully expended.

Strategy: Support Lower-Income Communities

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 funds reach lower-income schools and communities to help improve traffic safety and reduce injuries. Local elected officials should ensure that bicycling and walking improvements benefit all schools and neighborhoods and in many cases, should consider prioritizing improvement in lower-income areas to address disparities in health and the built environment.

Conclusion

Getting children walking and bicycling to school safely is a good way for local elected officials to improve livability, safety and health, save lives and boost their economies. Fortunately, Safe Routes to School is an ideal way to achieve these goals. Local elected officials can utilize different approaches to making sure that this popular and effective program is prioritized and funded, and that supportive policies help to get projects and programs on the ground.

Resources

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

Safe Routes to School Local Policy Guide
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)

Local Safe Routes to School Involvement
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

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

Best Practices for Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committees
(Advocacy Advance, 2012)

Complete Streets Local Policy Workbook
(Smart Growth America, 2012)

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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