



Safe Routes  
to School  
**National  
Partnership**

# School District Policies Promoting Safe Routes to School through Policy



One important way to strengthen your Safe Routes to School program is by passing a Safe Routes to School district policy.

A district policy demonstrates your school board's backing for Safe Routes to School, creates a permanent institutional commitment, establishes consistent roles and expectations within the district, and can eliminate obstacles to Safe Routes to School activities and efforts. Districts can pass simple policies that set out a basic commitment to Safe Routes to School as a means of supporting student health and achievement, or can pass in-depth policies that detail a range of actions, roles, and principles creating an overall structure strongly supportive of active travel to school.

## **The Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook**

The [Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook](#) is an interactive tool designed to help school board members, administrators, families of students, and community members create and implement comprehensive district policies that support walking, bicycling, and Safe Routes to School programs. The workbook walks users through a series of choices, allowing the selection of specific policy options as well as stronger and weaker versions of policy language. The final product is a customized Safe Routes to School policy, which can be downloaded and adopted. The workbook helps in developing policies that feature solid language, creative approaches, reduced liability, and prioritize walking and bicycling whenever possible. The workbook was written and designed through a collaboration between the Safe Routes to School National Partnership and ChangeLab Solutions.

## What Topics Should a Safe Routes to School District Policy Cover?

Policies can be bare bones or more detailed, and need to reflect what districts are actually willing to commit to. Districts may include Safe Routes to School provisions in their wellness policies, their safety policies, or their transportation policies. Some of the options for what can be addressed in a district policy include:

- **The basics:** At a minimum, a policy should state the district's clear support for the health and academic benefits of Safe Routes to School. In addition, the policy should address any barriers that current formal or informal policies or customs may have created for Safe Routes to School, expressly eliminating any restrictive barriers and prohibiting individual schools from banning or limiting walking and bicycling.
- **Encouragement activities:** Policies can address specific encouragement activities, committing the district to annual bike and walk to school days, and encouraging regular walking school buses, bicycle trains, and classroom walk/bike competitions.
- **Curriculum & skills trainings:** Policies can incorporate Safe Routes to School into science, health, math, and physical education curricula, and can provide for walking and biking skills and comprehensive mobility skills as required school activities.
- **Equity:** Equity needs can also be addressed through school policies, which can detail the importance of addressing the different challenges on the streets for girls and non-binary students, and the need to adapt activities to include students with disabilities and students who are English language learners.
- **Task forces:** Safe Routes to School programs are most successful when there are strong task forces at the community level that include district personnel, staff from the city or county planning, transportation, and public works departments, local nonprofits and community groups, families and residents, and public health professionals. District policies can commit to supporting such task forces by providing staffing and administrative support, as well as encouraging school based Safe Routes to School committees.

- **Remote drop offs:** Policies can establish the district's support for remote drop off programs, in which school buses and families drop students a little ways from school campuses. Remote drop offs allow students to get physical activity as they walk the remainder of the way to school, and also decrease frustrations and dangers caused by traffic congestion during school arrival times.
- **School siting policies:** School locations have an enormous impact on whether students can easily walk and bicycle to school, as well as whether students are able to attain a walkable, diverse, high quality educational experience. It is crucial that school districts establish overarching principles and policies to govern decision-making around new school sites and school closures, as well as school renovations, site design, and student attendance. Because only large districts engage in regular decision making around opening and closing schools, without strong policies, school boards often engage in ad hoc decision making. Such decision making may make sense in the short term, but does not consider the big picture. Policies can require that districts compare the long term costs of school siting decisions, for the district itself and for the community as a whole, and consider the benefits of schools located near residential populations for student health, family engagement, and overall cost benefit comparisons.

### School Siting Policies

For students to be able to walk or bike to school, or to use student recreational facilities outside of school hours, it is essential that schools be located relatively near to where students live. School siting decisions include decisions about opening new schools, closing existing schools, or even investing in the rehabilitation of older or dilapidated schools. Local school districts are in charge of school siting and design decisions. ChangeLab Solutions has a set of [model school siting policies](#) for school districts that can help districts ensure that their school siting decisions support the academic success, health, and general well-being of students and communities. The policies address the need for long term coordinated planning, procedures for school site planning and decision making, site design needs, equity considerations, and more.

## Implementing Safe Routes to School Policies

Once passed, there are a few aspects to implementing Safe Routes to School policies. First, you want to make sure that the policies are well communicated to staff, families, and students. Make sure that key aspects of your Safe Routes to School policy are clearly reflected on your district and school websites, in parent/student handbooks, in enrollment materials for new students, and in materials about student transportation services. These communications should express the school system's support for Safe Routes to School and belief that walking and bicycling are the healthiest means of getting to school and best way to ready students for each day's work of learning.

In addition, Safe Routes to School proponents should be ready to follow up on commitments in district policies, making sure that barriers have been removed and that specific requirements are implemented. Policies do not automatically turn into action, and oftentimes pressure and reminders from families or from district personnel may assist in ensuring that district policies turn into change at the school level.

## Policies Support Health and Funding

The vast majority of schoolchildren in the rural community of Winton, California, lived within a mile of school—but few of them were walking or biking to school because of concern about safety from traffic and crime. Community partnerships led to a range of Safe Routes to School efforts, including helmet fittings, bike rodeos, and walk audits, leading to an increase in students walking and biking. To solidify these gains, local public health staff used the Safe Routes to School National Partnership/ChangeLab Solutions Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook to build their own tailored Safe Routes to School policy. After passing the policy, the district received a state Active Transportation Program grant to address infrastructure needs and strengthen the Safe Routes to School program. The policy provides support for activities like walking school buses as well as walking and biking skills education for students, and also protects students' respiratory health by enacting a no idling policy for buses and cars.

