

Walking and Bicycling in Indian Country: Safe Routes to School in Tribal Communities

Across the country, towns and cities of all sizes are improving community health and safety and reducing negative effects on the environment through programs and policies that increase walking and bicycling for children and adults. Like other communities, tribal communities have much to gain from increasing active transportation. At the same time, they experience particular challenges to implementing infrastructure, programmatic, and policy changes to support active transportation. This informational brief provides an overview of some of the considerations unique to implementing Safe Routes to School in tribal communities, highlights strategies that tribal communities are using to provide support for walking and bicycling to school, and showcases tribal communities that have successfully improved safety for walking and bicycling to school.

Considerations for Implementing Safe Routes to School in Tribal Communities

While many of the strategies for implementing Safe Routes to School and active transportation initiatives in tribal communities are similar to those in other communities, there are some conditions and circumstances that are more specific to tribal communities that influence strategy selection and implementation. These considerations include school governance, responsibility of multiple parties over land and roads, and funding sources.

School Governance

Native children can potentially attend a number of different types of schools: state-funded public schools with large Native student populations; schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which may be day schools or boarding schools; and tribe-funded schools, which function as charter schools. The different types of schools have characteristics that may affect what kinds of Safe Routes to School initiatives would be most effective. Students at boarding schools and tribe-funded schools may travel long distances to school, and so programs may want to focus on strategies to provide opportunities for active transportation and physical activity for all students, such as on-campus walking programs and remote drop-off programs, in which students are driven part way to school and then walk the remainder of the way. For all of these schools, collaboration and coordination with the local agency responsible for the roads and paths along routes to school are important.

What Are Active Transportation and Safe Routes to School?

Active transportation is any means of getting around that is powered by human energy, usually involving walking and bicycling, but also including other non-motorized forms of transportation, such as the use of wheelchairs, roller skates, or skateboards. Active transportation or active travel for children commuting to school is often called “Safe Routes to School.” Safe Routes to School initiatives encourage children to walk or bicycle to and from school, thus supporting a healthy lifestyle. Safe Routes to School initiatives make it safer for children to walk or bicycle to school, and include a wide variety of programs and projects, from building safer street crossings to education programs that teach children how to walk and bicycle safely to school.



Land and Road Jurisdiction

Depending on where the tribal community is located, there may be many different agencies that are responsible for various aspects of roads and land that affect walking and bicycling. Responsibility for roads can take many forms. Although Indian reservations cover significant area, 78 percent of tribal members live outside of a reservation.¹ On reservations, some roads may be owned and maintained by the tribe or private entities, but state or county roads may also cross tribal land. The standards for designing the roads may differ based on who owns and operates them. Because so many agencies may have jurisdiction over interconnected land and roads where improvements are needed, it is important to have strong lines of communication and collaborative efforts.



*Students from Pryor Creek, OK participate in Walking Wednesdays.
Photo courtesy of Doug Moore.*

Funding for Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School projects and programs in tribal communities, as in other communities, are eligible for funding through the federal transportation bill. Under the current transportation bill, federally recognized tribes can apply for funds for walking and bicycling to school improvements on their own or in collaboration with public school districts, local or regional government agencies, and other eligible applicants.

Tribes have additional funding sources to support safe walking and bicycling to school. For example, under the current transportation bill, Tribal Transportation Program Safety Funds are available for federally recognized tribes to address transportation safety issues, which can include safe school travel programs and projects. Other sources of funds are dedicated toward improving health for tribal members, including the Centers for Disease Control and Protection's (CDC's) Comprehensive Approach to Good Health and Wellness in Indian Country grants and Indian Health Service's Injury Prevention Program.

Challenges for Walking and Bicycling to School

Like other communities, tribal communities may face obstacles in providing safe walking and bicycling routes for children or implementing Safe Routes to School programs and projects. While not unique to tribal communities, these are some of challenges that tribal communities often face:

Rural Conditions — Many tribal communities are located in rural areas with long distances between home and school, few sidewalks or bicycle lanes, low lighting, and drivers traveling at high speeds on low traffic roads through sparsely populated areas. Some communities are located in even more remote settings where there are no paved roads and off-road vehicles pose dangers to children walking and bicycling. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership has developed a [series of fact sheets](#) to assist rural communities in improving conditions for active transportation.

Loose Animals and Wildlife — An additional challenge for children walking and biking in rural areas is loose animals and/or wildlife. In areas where properties are unfenced, livestock and other domesticated animals can wander onto roadways and trails and children may feel threatened while on foot or bicycle. Some tribal communities have adopted animal control ordinances to reduce the number of animals that children and their families may encounter on their routes to school.

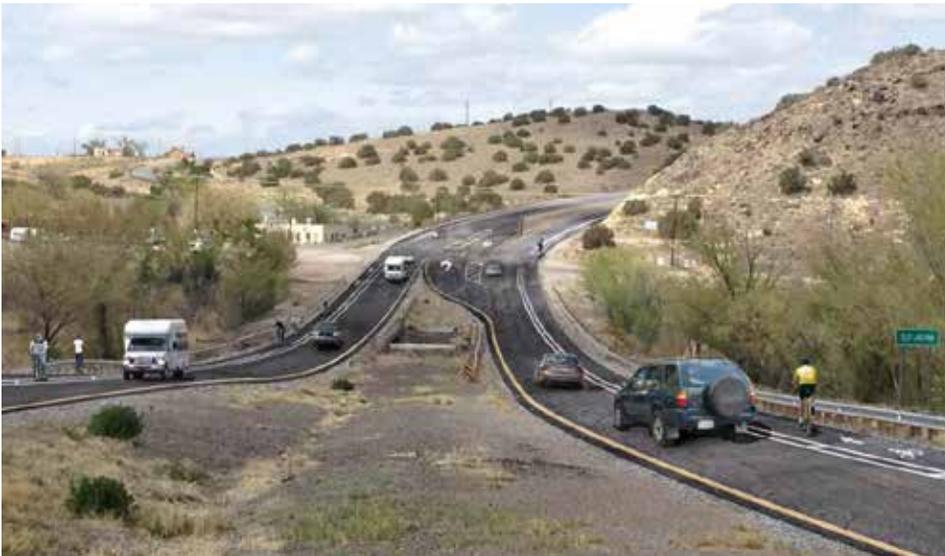
Limited Capacity of Staff — Some tribal communities, and the towns, cities, and schools they partner with, have limited staff available to advocate for improvements, seek funding, administer grants, or run Safe Routes to School programs. As sovereign nations, tribal governments have many responsibilities

and often resources are spread thin over many different needs and priorities. Many tribal communities, including those highlighted in this informational brief, have found collaborating with local partners and leveraging collective resources are key ingredients to overcoming these limitations.

Data Collection and Evaluation — Limited staff capacity and resources can also hinder the data collection, record keeping, and evaluation that can support strong Safe Routes to School initiatives. Data analysis is often needed for grant applications and grant management, as well as to identify and prioritize needs. Many tribal communities rely on paper records and do not have access to GIS and other technologies that help with data collection and maintenance. Groups such as the [National Tribal Geographic Information Support Center](#) and [UC Berkeley's SafeTREC](#) are working to provide tribes with access to basic data electronically. Schools can also use the [National Center for Safe Routes to School's data system](#) to collect, summarize, and analyze student travel tally and parent survey data.

Tribal Communities Implementing Successful Strategies

Tribal communities across the country are successfully implementing strategies to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety and increase walking and bicycling to school. The following examples highlight tribal communities that have worked to support active transportation, including a description of their projects and programs, the challenges that they have faced, and what they have identified as keys to their success.



A "road diet" planned in Pueblo of Laguna will include a new buffered bike lane on a state highway. Simulation courtesy of Pueblo of Laguna.

Pueblo of Laguna, New Mexico

The Pueblo of Laguna used robust community engagement throughout a pedestrian and bicycle planning process to quickly prioritize and construct infrastructure projects, creating safer walking and bicycling for children and adults.² A federally recognized sovereign Indian tribe located in western New Mexico, the Pueblo of Laguna has six rural villages and around 4,000 community members on the reservation.

Efforts to improve conditions for walking and bicycling in Laguna

began with a comprehensive planning process for the six villages led by the Pueblo of Laguna Planning Department. During that process, residents expressed interest in developing walking and biking trails and addressing unsafe conditions for children walking and bicycling to school. The Pueblo's planning department followed up on the comprehensive planning process by successfully pursuing a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) TIGER II grant, which funded the development of a bicycle and pedestrian route plan as well as the engineering design of prioritized routes.

In just a short amount of time, the Pueblo then obtained funding, designed, and constructed a number of projects identified in the plan. For example, the Pueblo constructed a trail that connects to the middle school and other community facilities like the library and fitness center. In addition, FHWA Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) funds are being used to construct a roundabout connecting the elementary and middle schools that will increase safety for those walking, bicycling, and driving. Despite limited staff

resources, the Pueblo's planning department has been very proactive in identifying and pursuing grant funding to pay for planning projects as well as design and construction. The Pueblo has also piggybacked bicycle and pedestrian improvements with other roadway projects whenever possible to stretch the funding that they have.

One of the keys to success in Laguna has been the community involvement that has guided the work. At the onset, the Pueblo established a Community Biking and Walking Advisory Group, with representatives from each village who oversaw the plan development, guided the community involvement process, and continue to oversee the implementation. The project team engaged community members through different avenues, including three mapping workshops and open houses with over 230 participants; focus groups with elders, youth, the Advisory Group, and people with disabilities; field tours with Village leaders and the Advisory Group; and an online and paper survey.

Ronan, Montana

In Ronan, Montana, the Parks and Recreation Department has championed Safe Routes to School efforts and obtained multiple rounds of Safe Routes to School infrastructure and non-infrastructure funding to improve conditions for walking and bicycling to school.³ Ronan is a rural community of approximately 2,000 people within the Flathead Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and has both tribal and non-tribal residents.

Ronan's public school district serves nearly 1,200 students, with one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. With a student population that was 58 percent Native American, and a high rate of childhood obesity, Ronan wanted to promote physical activity and provide students with safe options to get to and from school. A centrally located 15 acre park offered green space for children and families. To increase practical use of the park, city officials had the idea of creating paths that cut through the park for students to bicycle and walk to school.

With the Parks and Recreation Department in the lead, Ronan went on to garner multiple Safe Routes to School grants, steadily improving safety and convenience for students walking and bicycling. In 2007, the initial Safe Routes to School grant allowed the provision of lighting and signage along a bike path and crosswalks through the park. Additionally, the city was able to change the speed limit to 15 mph at a crossing where the bike path crosses two main town corridors. Next, Safe Routes to School grant funding in 2009 was used for encouragement and enforcement, with funds primarily focused on police presence to enforce the speed limit on the state highway near the schools' crosswalks. Subsequent grants have gone to construct pathways that improve safety for students walking and biking to school while improving the connection to tribal housing.

The city's Parks and Recreation Department has headed up the work to pursue Safe Routes to School funding, leverage additional funding for trail system improvements, and coordinate the programming over the years. Because city staff has experience with managing grants similar to the Safe Routes to School funding and is able to provide consistent oversight of projects, they have taken the lead on the Safe Routes to School efforts, while engaging the Tribal Health Department for education and encouragement support. Community wide events to celebrate walking and bicycling are now common in Ronan, and the efforts have generated additional interest in Safe Routes to School throughout the region.

The Five E's

The five E's are key components that make a comprehensive and successful Safe Routes to School program. Many communities include a sixth E, equity. The five E's are:

- Education
- Encouragement
- Engineering
- Enforcement
- Evaluation



Cherokee Nation

In Oklahoma, the Cherokee Nation came to embrace Safe Routes to School through the lens of health, identifying active school travel as a key initiative to support a healthy weight for children and working with local towns on programs and projects that address the Safe Routes to School five E's.⁴ The Cherokee Nation is the largest tribal nation in the United States, with its population of over 115,000 members located primarily in northeast Oklahoma. The tribe is not located on a reservation, but works closely with the cities and towns where its members live in this largely rural and low-income region.

In 2012, the Cherokee Nation received \$1.3 million from the CDC to increase active living as a means to address obesity. The Cherokee Nation focused on four communities – Nowata, Tahlequah, Pryor Creek, and Stillwell – and selected Safe Routes to School as a key strategy to implement.

The communities faced decreasing rates of walking and biking and a lack of infrastructure to support walking and biking. The Cherokee Nation worked with the four communities to develop

a comprehensive Safe Routes to School program. In addition, the Cherokee Public Health Department partnered closely with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation to apply for grants to make infrastructure improvements, as well as raise awareness around walking and biking. Key partners included planning departments at the local cities and the tribal GIS department, which supported data collection and mapping.

Due to the increased awareness around walking and biking, these communities now participate regularly in walking and biking events such as International Walk to School Day. In addition, they coordinate walking school bus routes and conduct events at school, including bike safety rallies, helmet distribution, and provision of walking and biking safety messages in the morning assemblies at the schools. The cities of Tahlequah and Pryor Creek have taken walking and bicycling efforts a step further, working to develop Complete Streets policies and broadening the coalitions to include business owners to advocate for increased walkability and bikeability.



Pryor High School leadership students painted a graphic to draw attention to an intersection adjacent to their school. Photo courtesy of Doug Moore.

Additional Strategies

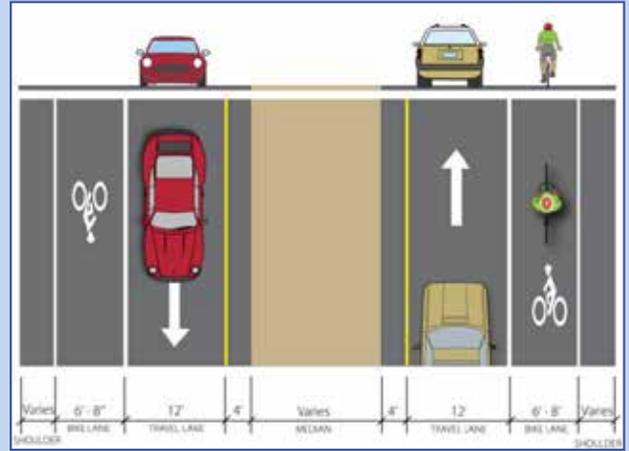
In addition to the strategies described in the community profiles, there are additional strategies that tribal communities may want to consider:

Remote Drop Off Programs — For tribal communities in rural areas, where there is a greater distance between home and school, remote drop off programs help increase walking and physical activity opportunities. Children are driven most of the way to school by their parents or on the bus, but then are dropped off a short distance from school so that they can walk the remainder of the way. A remote drop off site may include a park, a parking lot, or anywhere else where students can be easily dropped off, can safely congregate, and can follow a relatively safe route to the school. Once children are dropped off, they may be accompanied to school by a school bus driver, teacher, or adult volunteer, or may walk on their own, depending on their age and how the program is structured.



Including Safe Routes to School in Tribal Safety Plans

— Tribal Transportation Safety Plans, often referred to simply as Tribal Safety Plans, are a tool used by tribes to identify areas with large transportation safety concerns, develop transportation safety goals, and plan a comprehensive strategy to address the community's needs. By including projects and programs to support safe walking and bicycling in a tribal safety plan, the community's commitment and desire for these modes is documented and planned for alongside other improvements. Also, having a project or program identified within an adopted plan helps tribes in pursuing funding for implementation. For example, tribes can apply for federal Tribal Transportation Program Safety Funds for projects and programs included in their tribal safety plans.



Improvements to bike lanes are included in the Pueblo of Laguna Bicycle and Pedestrian Route plan. Photo courtesy of Pueblo of Laguna

Including Safe Routes to School in Health and Wellness Policies — Safe Routes to School can be incorporated into a school district or local school's health and wellness policy as a means to provide students with daily physical activity. Elementary and secondary schools and residential facilities operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) are required to adopt a local health and wellness policy. The overarching BIE health and wellness policy recommends schools strive to provide safe and active walking and bicycle routes to school, and promote walking and bicycle programs. BIE encourages grant and contract schools to follow the policy and adopt a local policy as well. Public schools in tribal communities can also incorporate Safe Routes to School in their wellness policies. Incorporating Safe Routes to School into school policies helps to institutionalize the programs that support walking and bicycling, leading to more consistent implementation and prioritizing them for funding and accountability.

Conclusion

While working to increase walking and bicycling comes with challenges, many tribal communities are prioritizing projects and programs to support active travel by children and the community as a whole. Through strong collaborations with local partners, perseverance in seeking funding, and strategies rooted in community engagement, these communities are providing opportunities for their residents to have healthier, active lifestyles while benefiting the environment and improving neighborhoods. While there is much more to be done to support active transportation across the country, these communities provide inspiration to move initiatives forward.

1. US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health <http://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlID=62>.
2. Sharon Hausam, Planning Program Manager, Pueblo of Laguna, phone conversation, June 17, 2015; Pueblo of Laguna, Bicycle and Pedestrian Route Plan, May 2012.
3. Taylor Lonsdale, Research Engineer, Western Transportation Institute, phone conversation, June 29, 2015; Safe Routes to School National Partnership, Safe Routes to School in Action – Ronan, Montana, <http://saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/MT-Ronan11-09.pdf>.
4. Julie Deerinwater, Hillary Fry, Doug Moore, Clint Johnson, phone conversation, May 22, 2015; WALC Institute, Safe Routes to School, 2013, <http://cherokeepublichealth.org/index.php/2012-12-04-13-10-3/item/1289-safe-routes-to-school-giving-kids-a-healthy-start-with-a-walk-to-school>; CN Healthy Nation, Your Safe Routes to School Digital Story, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGIQyJD_Wog.

