



Safe Routes
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Active Paths for Equity & Health

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Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) throughout the country have adopted policies and practices that strengthen their ability to improve the livability of their region through strategies that support and encourage Safe Routes to School.

Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Regional Governments



Introduction to Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost half of all students walked or rolled to school, and most lived within a mile of the school they attended. Today, only 11 percent of students walk or roll to school. The decrease in walking and rolling can have a long term, negative impact on the livability of an area, affecting important issues such as health, education, land use, safety, and the environment. Safe Routes to School is a national and international movement to increase physical activity, improve health, reduce traffic congestion, and address air quality by getting more students walking and rolling to school and in daily life. The Safe Routes to School 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 17,400 schools and over 6.8 million children nationally have benefited from Safe Routes to School projects and programs that work to provide an affordable, accessible and convenient alternative to driving.

In 2012, Congress made changes to federal funding for Safe Routes to School that gave some MPOs decision-making authority over which projects to fund and increased the importance of engaging MPOs in Safe Routes to School. Under the current federal transportation bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, also known as the [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#), each state is required to suballocate 59 percent of its Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) based on population, meaning funds are awarded through competitions based on community size, with funds proportionately divided into pots based on population. MPOs serving a population of at least 200,000 are required to coordinate a competitive grant process for the eligible TAP funds. TAP is one of the largest sources of federal funding for Safe Routes to School. In addition to allocating TAP funds for projects supporting walking and rolling to school, MPOs can increase its commitment to Safe Routes to School through policies, planning, and staffing.



The 6 Es Approach to Safe Routes to School

The Six Es of Safe Routes to School summarize the key components of a comprehensive, integrated approach, that includes:

ENGAGEMENT – Listening to students, families, teachers, and school leaders and working to build intentional, ongoing engagement opportunities into the program structure.

EQUITY – Ensuring initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities, and others.

ENGINEERING – Creating physical improvements to streets and neighborhoods that make walking and rolling safer, and more comfortable and convenient.

ENCOURAGEMENT – Generating enthusiasm and increased walking and rolling for students through events, activities, and programs.

EDUCATION – Providing students and the community with the skills to walk and roll safely, educating them about benefits of walking and rolling, and teaching them about the broad range of transportation choices.

EVALUATION – Assessing which approaches are more or less successful, ensuring that programs and initiatives are supporting equitable outcomes, and identifying unintended consequences or opportunities to improve the effectiveness of each approach.

Policies and Funding for Safe Routes to School at the Regional Level

Innovation is happening. MPOs concerned with exploding populations, deteriorating roadways and bridges, air quality targets and congestion mitigation are looking for and enacting viable solutions through policy and funding decisions. The following strategies are excellent opportunities to incorporate walking, rolling, and Safe Routes to School as ways to address these challenges. These strategies are not intended to be a comprehensive list, but can provide a glimpse into some of the accomplishments of large and small regions around the country.

Strategy: Include Local Complete Streets Policy as a Project Selection Criteria

As municipalities compete for scarce dollars for regionally funded bicycle and pedestrian projects, there is an opportunity to encourage a local [Complete Streets](#) policies for potential applicants. Complete Streets policies ensure 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. This bold approach ensures that municipalities are prioritizing bicyclists and pedestrians in all their projects and not just within the projects receive federal funding.

Strategy: Create a Regional Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan

Consider creating a regional Safe Routes to School strategic plan that systematically identifies and supports local communities in establishing new programs and works to support and improve ongoing efforts. Include a diverse group of stakeholders in developing the plan, such as public health organizations, nonprofits, local jurisdictions, and school districts. The final regional Safe Routes to School plan can be adopted into the Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) at its next revision.

San Diego Association of Governments and a Regional Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan

Beginning in 2010, with funding from the federal [Communities Putting Prevention to Work initiative](#), the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) worked to create a regional Safe Routes to School strategic plan that was adopted by its board in 2012. Developed with input from a diverse group of stakeholders, the strategic plan outlines existing issues and opportunities as well as a regional strategy for moving forward that includes data collection, project collaboration and coordination, technical assistance, regional education, encouragement strategies and a defined implementation process. By creating a unified plan for implementing Safe Routes to School projects throughout the region, SANDAG has streamlined costs, engaged critical stakeholders, and addressed the regional need to support walking and rolling to school and in daily life.



Strategy: Fund Full-Time Staff to Prioritize Bicycle and Pedestrian Projects

Bicycle and pedestrian projects have a large impact for a small amount of funding but are often underutilized at the regional level. MPOs can consider the creation of an active transportation department within the MPO with the expressed goal of improving conditions for walking and rolling. If you are a hosted MPO, consider sharing this suggestion with your host agency to combine planning and implementation duties.

Strategy: Revise Scoring Criteria to Prioritize Bicycle and Pedestrian Projects

The scoring criteria for MPO projects are the key to all applications that follow, and jurisdictions will adapt their projects to score as high as possible. Revising the scoring criteria to assign higher points to applications that encourage projects near schools, promote physical activity, include bicycle and pedestrian elements, address high-crash corridors, improve access to transit and assess the health impact of projects ensures that awarded projects will encourage more walking and rolling in the long-term.



East Central Wisconsin Leads a Safe Routes to School Program

MPOs can directly staff or host Safe Routes to School programs, creating initiatives that focus not only on street improvements that make it safer to walk or roll to school, but also on activities that encourage and educate students. The East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (ECWRPC) is the regional planning agency for ten counties in Wisconsin, acting as the MPO for two MPO areas in its region and staffing a third MPO. The ECWRPC runs a large and complex Safe Routes to School program, serving 59,000 students in close to 200 schools at dozens of school districts. The ECWRPC supports local districts in developing Safe Routes to School efforts, provides technical assistance and a range of resources for Safe Routes to School initiatives, and runs regional Safe Routes to School program activities such as a walking school bus program and a variety of walking and biking competitions.

A Regional Approach to Safe Routes to School in Greater Kansas City

Kansas City organization BikeWalkKC manages a Safe Routes to School program across two states: Kansas and Missouri. This requires a high level of coordination to access funding and implement programming. BikeWalkKC is based in Kansas City, MO where they are eligible to apply for funding through Missouri Department of Transportation. However, they cannot apply for federal funding in Kansas despite running programs in the state. As a solution, they contract with Kansas public health and planning departments to provide program services. BikeWalkKC also partners with the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) to promote Safe Routes to School and to access federal funds. This flexibility allows them to serve more communities across the Greater Kansas City region.



Strategy: Improve Data Collection

Data and the tools used to collect it are essential to driving regional decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that tools such as traffic crash, mode share and other pertinent data sets are utilized to ensure that walking and rolling are fairly represented in the region. The regional household travel survey should include questions that inquire into specific travel patterns, including walking and rolling to school. If funding is an issue, consider coordinating with neighboring regions to create a more robust and effective regional household travel survey.

Strategy: Share Best Practices in the Region to Encourage Innovation in Submitted Projects

Utilize the expertise in the region by holding regular information sessions with municipal staff and supporters to share best practices in bicycle, pedestrian and Safe Routes to School projects. This will inform future projects, encourage peer learning between jurisdictions, support collaboration between transportation management agencies, and ultimately provide more robust, thoughtful bicycle and pedestrian projects in the long run.

Strategy: Integrate Safe Routes to School into Regional Plans

As with all topics in planning, if the necessary language isn't included in long- or short-range plans, desired outcomes are unlikely to come to fruition. In turn, ensure that walking and rolling and Safe Routes to School are included in regional planning and that such transportation modes and programs are given a fair share of funding.

Strategy: Involve Bicycling, Walking and Safe Routes to School Practitioners

MPOs should take advantage of bicycling and walking expertise during programming discussions, funding decisions and planning. MPOs can form or add to a bicycle and pedestrian advisory council to ensure the involvement of local supporters, public health officials, planners and other professionals with first-hand experience as bicyclists and pedestrians, including representatives from lower-income communities in the region. Before including bicycle and pedestrian projects or programs in the LRTP, make sure that the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) scoring criteria or project selection includes bicycling and walking expertise.





Strategy: Ensure Equity and Fair Share of Funding

At a minimum, MPOs should provide fair and equitable funding for bicycling and walking projects and programs. Compare local mode share against crash data when allocating regional dollars to specific projects and programs. Additionally, the funding process can be an opportunity to prioritize walking and rolling safety projects such as Safe Routes to School as effective avenues to better health and injury prevention. Ensure that your bicycle and pedestrian advisory council and scoring criteria address the needs of lower-income communities and ensure such communities receive a fair share of funding during project selection.

Conclusion

Safe Routes to School can help regions achieve their goals of reducing congestion and improving air quality and traffic safety. While the above list of strategies is innovative, it is not exhaustive. Adopting funding policies, involving local experts, adjusting scoring criteria and dedicating funding to regional walking and rolling improvements are great ways to begin to build Safe Routes to School into the MPO planning process and creating healthier communities for all.

Additional Resources

- [Transportation Alternatives Program Federal Funding Flow](#)
- [Benefits of Safe Routes to School](#)
- [Federal Funding for Safe Routes to School: Evolution Through Four Transportation Bills](#)
- [Investing in Walking, Biking, and Safe Routes to School: A Win for the Bottom Line](#)
- [MPO funding allocations for Transportation Alternatives](#)
- Examples of [Transportation Alternatives competitive processes](#) for MPOs
- [Metropolitan Planning Organizations & Health 201: Best Practices & Promising Opportunities for Health](#)
- [The Role of MPOs in Advancing Safe Routes to School through the Transportation Alternatives Program](#)

Refer to [The Role of MPOs in Advancing Safe Routes to School through the Transportation Alternatives Program](#) for more ideas and case studies on how MPOs can be a leader in Safe Routes to School.