

On the Move

Safe Routes to School Policies in Rural School Districts



Safe Routes to School policies can be effective in rural areas in supporting healthy, active, and successful students.

Children in rural communities often miss out on the health and academic benefits that Safe Routes to School initiatives bring. But Safe Routes to School programs can flourish in these communities, particularly when school districts embrace techniques that are tailored for rural areas. This fact sheet calls out specific approaches and tools that may be of particular assistance to rural schools, exploring elements of the *Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook*, a free online resource that can help rural districts develop effective policies for supporting healthy students.

WHY SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL MATTERS

Safe Routes to School initiatives are increasing children’s physical activity across the country, making it safer and easier for kids to walk and bicycle to school. Safe Routes to School programs provide crucial benefits for rural areas, addressing such serious challenges as:

- **Disproportionately high rates of childhood obesity.** Childhood obesity is at epidemic levels nationally, but obesity rates are far higher for rural children, especially those who are low income. According to the results of one study, rural children have nearly double the odds of obesity as compared to that of children living in metropolitan areas.¹ Obesity matters because it is associated with a range of negative health conditions – diabetes, cancer, strokes, mental health issues, and more.² Getting regular physical activity decreases rates of obesity and supports good health. Research demonstrates that children who walk or bicycle to school have higher levels of physical activity and better cardiovascular fitness than those who do not.³
- **Lower high school and college graduation rates than suburban and urban children.** Research increasingly demonstrates the relationship between health and academic achievement.⁴ A recent study of 20,000 students showed that children who actively commute to school perform measurably better on school tasks that demand concentration than children who do not actively commute to school.⁵
- **High levels of injury and death from traffic collisions.**⁶ Reasons for this include narrow, winding roads; high speed state highways that pass through towns and residential areas; a lack of lighting; and drivers’ behaviors. Safe Routes to School initiatives decrease these risks in a variety of ways. Areas near schools can get grants for safety related infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalks, street lights, and protected crossings. One study showed that locations with Safe Routes to School interventions saw a 44 percent decline in school-aged pedestrian injury during school travel hours, while injury rates in locations without Safe Routes to School interventions stayed the same.⁷ In addition, Safe Routes to School programs and policies can decrease the amount of driving and the number of vehicles near schools during school travel hours, reducing the risks of collisions.
- **High poverty rates, aging infrastructure, and limited resources with which to proactively address these issues.**^{8,9} Safe Routes to School enables communities to access federal (and sometimes state and local) grant dollars for programs and infrastructure. At the same time, Safe Routes to School programs are often run by volunteers, and can be put into place without requiring a significant financial commitment.

Rural communities come in many different shapes and sizes – from agricultural plains, to small towns with clusters of residents, to vacation destinations with a high number of tourists but few permanent residents. In all of these settings, Safe Routes to School initiatives can provide a low cost, manageable way to support the health, academic achievement, and well-being of rural students.



Other Benefits of Safe Routes to School Programs

In addition to addressing kids’ needs for healthy physical activity, Safe Routes to School programs reduce traffic congestion, which decreases the danger of students suffering traffic injuries.

Fewer cars on the road also improves air quality, a significant challenge in many rural areas in California.

Safe walking and bicycling options can benefit rural families’ budgets as well. Transportation costs are a major expense for American families – the largest after housing¹⁰ – and high rural poverty rates make this expense even more challenging for rural families.¹¹

SUCCEEDING WITH SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Despite the benefits described above, there may be hurdles to walking and bicycling in rural areas. Recognizing these challenges can help rural communities capitalize on their strengths and advance Safe Routes to School. One significant challenge can be the distances between destinations.¹² Because of these long distances, walking and bicycling for transportation (as opposed to recreation) is sometimes seen as possible only in dense urban communities. But despite the presence of longer overall distances, many rural trips are an ideal length for walking or bicycling. In rural communities, nearly 40 percent of trips are less than three miles long, and half of these are less than a mile.¹³ There is high potential to increase walking and bicycling within these trips.

Other hurdles to walking and bicycling in rural areas include roads that have high speed limits that divide communities, lack of sidewalks and bikeways, scarce resources for redesigning and maintaining safer streets, and few, if any, public agency staff with specialized knowledge about safer streets. Rural communities can overcome these hurdles by employing their strengths and strategically approaching the challenge with a variety of tactics. Moreover, in many ways, rural communities are better positioned than urban areas to improve conditions for walking and bicycling. For example, consider the following:

- Because of their relatively small population size, the life and vibrancy of rural communities often revolve around their schools, and it can be easy to make the case that the school serves as the center of community activity and deserves attention.
- In an intimate rural community, decision makers may be more accessible, and may be able to make decisions more quickly and with less red tape, achieving significant impacts despite limited resources.
- Federal funding for bicycling and walking is almost twice as much per capita in rural areas versus urban areas, providing key opportunities for rural towns and school districts to improve walking and bicycling infrastructure through federal grants.¹⁴

Using the approaches described on the following pages, rural communities across the country are implementing innovative policy solutions to get more students moving.

Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook Available!

The *Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook* was designed by ChangeLab Solutions and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership to support school boards, district staff, parents, and community members.

The Policy Workbook helps in developing a comprehensive Safe Routes to School policy that provides strong language, creative approaches, and liability mitigation. It ensures that the district and its schools prioritize walking and bicycling whenever possible.

Get started on your policy now!
www.changelabsolutions.org/safe-routes/welcome



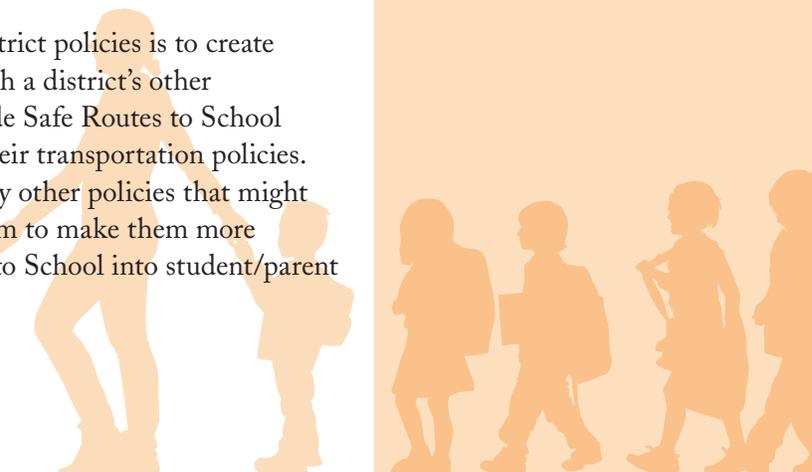


SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES THAT SUPPORT WALKING & BICYCLING

Schools are not only settings for education – they also influence the current and future health and behavior of students. No other institution has as much continuous and intensive contact with youth during their formative years. Schools are on the front lines of the battle against the childhood obesity epidemic, and Safe Routes to School policies and programs can increase students' well-being, instill healthy long-term behaviors, and improve academic achievement, all without taking time from the school day.

The most effective way for rural school districts to establish a permanent commitment to Safe Routes to School is by adopting policies that support walking and bicycling. District-wide policies standardize expectations for all schools, ensuring that support for bicycling and walking is consistent for all kids throughout the district. Spelling out explicit procedures can also strengthen Safe Routes to School programs. And well-designed policies can reduce schools' risk of liability by, for example, clearly defining the role of schools in student travel, and ensuring that schools act to reduce the risk of injury to students as they arrive or depart from school.

One approach to incorporating Safe Routes to School into district policies is to create a series of stand alone district policies that can be grouped with a district's other transportation related board policies. Districts may also include Safe Routes to School provisions in their wellness policies, their safety policies, or their transportation policies. An important step in assessing district policies is to update any other policies that might conflict with Safe Routes to School approaches and revise them to make them more supportive of walking and biking. Incorporating Safe Routes to School into student/parent handbooks is a key implementation step.



WHAT SHOULD RURAL DISTRICTS INCLUDE IN SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL POLICIES?

The *Safe Routes to School District Policy Workbook* contains a comprehensive set of policies that will help any district develop tailored policies on topics such as curriculum, bicycle parking, and supporting walking and biking. But, as discussed above, rural communities often face unique challenges related to walking and bicycling to school. As a result, rural districts may want to focus on provisions that are particularly relevant to rural areas, such as the following:

Support for Safe Routes to School. District policies that are supportive of bicycling and walking can create an encouraging atmosphere for walking and bicycling and can make districts competitive for funding opportunities. In addition, supportive district policies prevent individual schools from implementing restrictions that impede students from walking and bicycling to school. Restrictive policies may be particularly apt to occur in rural schools that are located on state highways or other high speed roads, but such restrictive policies generally exceed schools' authority. Because schools may sometimes put such policies in place anyway, it can be important to include a clear statement of support for Safe Routes to School activities in district policy. Such policies ensure that all schools understand that Safe Routes to School activities are not only beneficial to their community, but are also supported by their district.

Crossing guards. Many rural communities are divided by a state highway or other thoroughfare that students must cross to get to school. Policies can promote (and outline expectations for) volunteer or paid crossing guards and student safety patrols. These policies can improve safety and increase families' comfort with their children walking or bicycling to school. Crossing guards may be employed by school districts or by local police departments or other agencies. Effective crossing guard policies and programs provide a system for hiring, funding, training, locating, supervising, and properly equipping crossing guards and student safety patrols.

Assessing recommended routes to school and hazard busing. Policies can require that districts assess routes to schools from different areas of the community, and create maps with recommended walking and bicycling routes, prioritizing safer streets and avoiding unsafe areas or hazards. Rural districts can use such assessments to understand how many students can realistically walk or bicycle from their homes, and what impediments exist to safe walking or bicycling. Where major hazards cannot be avoided except by busing students, the district can commit to working with the local municipality to fix the hazard so that walking and bicycling can be an option – an approach that is much more fiscally prudent in the long run. These policies can assist in applying for funding for Safe Routes to School initiatives by demonstrating both need as well as district support for students walking and bicycling to school.

Remote drop-offs or safe routes to bus stops. Although long distances between homes and schools are a problem all over the United States, this issue is often more acute in rural areas. Long distances mean that some students are likely to require busing or personal automobiles to get to school. Districts can adopt policies that replace part of the ride with a walk. One such approach is to have school buses and parents drop off children at “remote drop-off sites” several blocks from the school, providing a short, safe walk to school. A complementary approach situates bus stops a short walking distance away from students' homes. In addition to getting students walking, these measures reduce traffic congestion near the school, improving safety and air quality in the school area for all children.

Case Study: Eureka City Schools, CA

Washington Elementary School in Eureka, California, was in sore need of pedestrian infrastructure and more sidewalks. Concerned about the danger to students, the school district initially obtained a grant for infrastructure improvements, which bolstered interest in Safe Routes to School. The infrastructure work eventually led the district to take additional steps to support Safe Routes to School, purchasing encouragement materials for Walk to School Day and Walking Wednesdays, hiring a certified instructor to teach pedestrian safety classes, and providing a half-day workshop for families on developing a student transportation plan.

These activities sparked enormous community enthusiasm, and a district-wide Safe Routes to School Task Force was born. The Task Force was composed of parents, traffic engineers, law enforcement personnel, stakeholders from Humboldt County Public Health and Humboldt County Public Works, and other community advocates, and it began collaborating to improve conditions for walking and bicycling throughout the school district. Eventually, as a result of the Task Force's work, the district passed a Safe Routes to School policy that set out its support for students walking and bicycling. The Task Force has also provided the district with transportation safety information, arrival and dismissal maps, and material for inclusion in parent handbooks. Now, the Task Force is working on revising the school district's Wellness Policy to include walking and bicycling.

School siting and design. Many rural schools and towns were built at a time when bicycling and walking to school was the norm. Older schools are often located near town centers and residential areas. New schools, however, may be built on the outskirts of town or in between two towns, where the land is cheapest but the distance between home and school is the greatest. Policies can require that districts consider the long-term costs, both fiscal and to student health, of building or moving a school away from the center of a community.¹⁵ Policies can also ensure that new and renovated schools have bicycle parking and are designed with easy entrance points for students who walk or bike to school.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways that rural school districts can use policy to support Safe Routes to School. The policies discussed above represent only a few of the numerous strategies available. By implementing Safe Routes to School policies and programs, districts can make the trip to school safer and easier for children, with academic, economic, environmental, and health benefits for the entire community.

RESOURCES

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

A Primer for Understanding the Role of School Boards and Principals

Safe Routes to School National Partnership

<http://saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Primer-to-Understanding-the-Role-of-School-Boards-and-Principals.pdf>

BACKING OFF BIKE BANS

The Legal Risks of Banning Bicycling to School

ChangeLab Solutions

www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/bicycling-to-school

GET OUT & GET MOVING

Opportunities to Walk to School through Remote Drop-Off Programs

www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/SRTS_remote_drop_off

CROSSING WITH CONFIDENCE

Steps to Creating a Legally Sound Crossing Guard Program

www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/crossing-guards

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICY WORKBOOK

ChangeLab Solutions & Safe Routes to School National Partnership

www.changelabsolutions.org/safe-routes/welcome

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Minimizing Your Liability Risk

ChangeLab Solutions

www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/SRTS-resources

SMART SCHOOL SITING

How School Locations Can Make Students Healthier and Communities Stronger

ChangeLab Solutions

www.changelabsolutions.org/publications/smart-school-siting



LEARN MORE ABOUT CA4HEALTH

CA4Health is the Public Health Institute's Community Transformation Grant, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that is focused on reducing the burden of chronic disease in California counties with populations under 500,000. CA4Health partners with some of the state's leading technical assistance providers and content experts to provide local county partners with tools, training and guidance to make their communities healthier. CA4Health's four strategic directions are reducing consumption of sugary beverages, increasing availability of smoke-free housing, creating safe routes to schools, and providing people with chronic disease with skills and resources to better manage their health.



See ChangeLab Solutions Resources on Safe Routes to School
www.changelabsolutions.org/childhood-obesity/safe-routes-schools

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