

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL:

# A Primer to Understanding the Role of the Student Transportation Department



*Student transportation departments typically focus on car and bus travel, but they can work for the benefit of active travelers as well. Understanding the responsibilities of student transportation departments could help Safe Routes to School efforts become more successful. Because this is such a complex and important issue, most school districts create student transportation departments, also known as pupil transportation departments or offices, to ensure that every student has the ability to safely travel to and from school on a daily basis. These student transportation departments can evaluate their policies*

*concerning all modes of transportation to decide what is cost-effective, safe, healthy and convenient for the majority of students. In the 1960s, most students who lived close to school walked or biked, but now most students in the United States get to school via a school bus or a family car, so student transportation departments primarily focus on school bus routes and traffic concerns related to parent drop-off areas. Because of this shift in focus, walking and bicycling options can be overlooked. However, Safe Routes to School can help the departments identify ways to safely get children actively commuting to school. In light of major funding cuts to busing programs, as well as concerns regarding growing childhood obesity rates, student transportation departments and Safe Routes to School can work together to help schools save money, decrease traffic, increase community safety and improve the health of children.*

## Introduction to Safe Routes to School

During the past 15 years, the Safe Routes to School movement in the United States has grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and bicycling to school is attracting more and more interest from leaders and decision-makers at the local, regional, state and federal levels. As such, Safe Routes to School practitioners have been expanding their efforts to encompass policy, systems and environmental changes in their work. With declining federal transportation dollars dedicated to bicycling and walking and the uncertainty of state budgets, it is even more important to ensure that stable funding streams and supportive policies are pursued locally. The student transportation department is one potential ally that can help advance these measures.

## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of the Student Transportation Department

The primary role of a student transportation department is to create operating procedures that provide safe and efficient ways of getting students to and from school. Most student transportation departments spend the majority of their staff time and resources focused on busing. This focus is often driven by state requirements for districts to provide and operate buses.

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In addition to understanding the policies that dictate student transportation, it is also important to research how the district funds the student transportation department. Funding is often attached to the number of buses required and routes run, which can, in turn, affect the size of the department's staff. A majority of states provide financial support to school districts for transportation, typically covering around 70-80 percent of the district's busing costs.

A recent challenge for student transportation departments is rising fuel costs, which has led many transportation departments to consolidate or eliminate their routes and stops. This can lead to the creation of an expanded "walk zone" – the area within a determined distance from the school where busing is not provided. Far too often, "walk zone" becomes a misnomer; when stops are eliminated or routes changed, more parents ultimately drive their children to school. This causes an increase in traffic congestion and safety concerns along with more potential for conflicts. In an effort to avoid this outcome, Safe Routes to School practitioners should use this opportunity to discuss the inclusion of bicycling and walking initiatives. These are not only good models to mitigate costs and logistics of busing, but also have positive effects on the safety and health of children.

Student transportation departments are responsible for making decisions concerning (but not limited to):

- Staffing all positions related to transportation (bus drivers, crossing guards, and safety patrols).
- Setting school bus routes and schedules, location of bus stops and policies dictating eligibility for busing.
- Working with local officials such as police departments to set up trainings for volunteers that will assist in student safety patrol, such as youth that are trained to monitor safety on buses, at crosswalks and sometimes at identified drop off/pick up areas.
- Providing supervision of loading and unloading areas at or near the school and ongoing evaluation of route pick-up and drop-off locations for safety. This



includes devising a system to separate buses from pedestrians, bicyclists and the parent drop off area.

- Providing safe access to entryways on school property for students that walk or bicycle to school.

When working with student transportation departments, Safe Routes to School practitioners should keep in mind that the departments have to deal with pressures from parents, school administrators, busing companies and state and federal mandates. The best way to ensure that decisions made by the department will not adversely affect walking and bicycling opportunities is to educate each stakeholder involved on the numerous ways that active transportation can be seamlessly integrated into each child's commute. Utilize the steps below to gather information, combine it with some of the outlined talking points, and familiarize yourself with the strategies that are included in the companion document, *Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Student Transportation Departments*.

### What You Can Do

As with most successful work, success is predicated on knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Use the following tips as a starting point for engaging the district's student transportation department (*continued on page 3*):

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## LEARN

- » Talk to student transportation department staff and conduct research to learn about the district's past involvement in walking and bicycling efforts, if any.
- » Talk with a school board member or review any policies and laws that dictate the actions of the student transportation department.
- » Check with individual schools to learn about their policies and how those impact the student transportation department.
- » Research how the student transportation department receives funding and how it responds to increased or decreased demand for busing or funding changes.
- » Identify existing committees, coalitions and other initiatives that focus on walking and bicycling to school at individual schools and throughout the district, if any.
- » Determine staff or appointed committees that liaise with school board members on transportation decisions.

## REVIEW

- » Become familiar with the school or school district's written transportation and other Safe Route to School related policies, if any.
- » Review the student transportation department's website to better understand its stated priorities and find opportunities for synergy.
- » Utilizing all the information learned and reviewed, put together a strong case for Safe Routes to School that will resonate with the student transportation department. Prepare to connect and participate.

## CONNECT

- » Develop a working relationship with the student transportation department; educate on key talking points that are relevant to stated priorities, position and authority.
- » Connect with previously identified coalitions, committees and other initiatives to bring them into the discussion with student transportation department staff.
- » Invite the student transportation department staff to join the district or community-wide Safe Routes to School task force (if one exists) or to attend a school team meeting so that they might see more opportunities for collaboration.
- » Don't stop at the student transportation department staff! Connect with the district superintendent and supervisor of facilities maintenance to get buy-in at all levels for improved conditions for walking and bicycling.

## PARTICIPATE

- » Inform student transportation department directors and their staff about the priorities and benefits of bicycling, walking and Safe Routes to School. Participate in relevant committees, coalition meetings and bicycle and pedestrian or Safe Routes to School advisory councils.
- » Regularly check in with student transportation department staff, who work closely with the department director, to serve as experts and resources on developing walking and bicycling to school programs and projects.
- » Ask the student transportation department to publicize walking and bicycling initiatives on their websites as a viable alternative to taking the bus or the family car.
- » Invite student transportation department staff to participate in Safe Routes to School events and include them in the planning process, such as "Remote Drop-Off" programs.
- » Be persistent, but professional and understanding. Student transportation departments are often focused on how to safely move students from one place to another using buses – it may take some time to warm up to 'new' ideas about student transportation, such as walking or bicycling.

## Align Talking Points with the Stated Priorities of Student Transportation Departments

In addition to providing the student transportation department and its staff with the companion, *Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Student Transportation Departments* action brief, and reviewing the strategies outlined within the document, customize talking points by considering the following common priorities of student transportation departments and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities. After choosing impactful talking points, supplement those with photos and real-life situations that outline the hazards students face while walking or bicycling, or successful Safe Routes to School projects in other cities that include collaboration with student transportation departments.

### School Transportation Costs

- In 2004-05, the most recent year for which statistics are compiled, 55.3 percent of the 45,625,458 children enrolled in public K-12 schools were bused to school at public expense.<sup>1</sup>
- The United States spends \$17.5 billion per year on school bus transportation at an average cost of \$692 per student transported.<sup>2</sup>
- Eliminating one bus route, based on average per-pupil expense and the average number of children per bus, saves the school district an estimated \$37,000 per school year.

### Increasing Safety through Walking and Bicycling

- A California study showed that schools that received infrastructure improvements through the Safe Routes to School program yielded walking and bicycling increases that were often in the range of 20 to 200 percent.<sup>3</sup>
- A recent study of Safe Routes to School projects in New York City found that census tracts with Safe Routes to School interventions saw a 44 percent decline

in school-aged pedestrian injury during school travel hours while locations without Safe Routes to School interventions stayed the same.<sup>4</sup>

- A safety analysis by the California Department of Transportation estimated that the safety benefit of the Safe Routes to School program was a 49 percent decrease in the childhood bicycle and pedestrian collision rates.<sup>5</sup>
- Safety in Numbers: A motorist is less likely to collide with a person walking and bicycling if more people walk or bicycle. For example, pedestrians are 66 percent less likely to be involved in a motor vehicle crash in a community with two times as much walking.<sup>6</sup>

### Traffic Congestion and Air Quality

- In 1969, 40.7 percent of students walked or bicycled to school, but by 2001 only 12.9 percent of children walked or biked to school. Of students that lived within one mile of schools, 87 percent walked or bicycled.<sup>7</sup>
- As much as 20 to 30 percent of morning traffic is generated by parents driving their children to schools.<sup>8</sup>
- Approximately one-third of U.S. public schools are located in “air pollution danger zones,”<sup>9</sup> putting students at risk of acquiring asthma and/or reduced lung function.<sup>10</sup>
- In a recent study, exposure to roads with high vehicle traffic accounted for 14 percent of all asthma cases.<sup>11</sup>
- Returning to 1969 levels of walking and bicycling to school would save 3.2 billion vehicle miles, 1.5 million tons of carbon dioxide and 89,000 tons of other pollutants—equal to keeping more than 250,000 cars off the road for a year.<sup>12</sup>
- Safe Routes to School programs and projects can increase walking and bicycling by 20 to 200 percent.<sup>13</sup>

### Education

- Findings from large, nationally representative studies show that physical activity has a positive impact

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on academic achievement in both young children<sup>14</sup> and adolescents,<sup>15</sup> regardless of other factors such as age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and prior achievement scores.

- A Danish study of 20,000 students showed that children who actively commute to school perform measurably better on tasks demanding concentration once at school than do children who do not actively commute to school.<sup>16</sup>
- After adjusting for socioeconomic status and gender, the percent of eighth graders at academic risk (report usually getting C's, D's or F's) was significantly higher for those with insufficient exercise (35 percent at risk) versus those who had sufficient exercise (22 percent).<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Safe Routes to School is a logical partner for student transportation departments. Since both groups are interested in children arriving and leaving schools safely, there are many opportunities to link to existing projects and programs to bolster walking and bicycling to school. Safe Routes to School practitioners can advance this relationship toward a shared cause by carefully considering the student transportation department's responsibilities, reviewing the talking points and potential department strategies to bolster walking and bicycling, and utilizing the suggestions in the above "What You Can Do" section to develop relationships with student transportation department staff and achieve mutual goals.

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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## Resources

- [What is Safe Routes to School?: Quick Facts](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)
- [School Bus Funding: Cuts and Hazard/Courtesy Busing](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2010)
- [Media Talking Points on School Bus Cuts and Safe Routes to School](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2009)
- [Local Safe Routes to School Involvement](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)
- [Safe Routes to School Local Policy Guide](#)  
(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)
- [Evaluation: Data Collection Forms](#)  
(National Center for Safe Routes to School, 2013)