



The ABCs of Safe Routes to School: What Safe Routes to School Is, Benefits, History and Current Funding

Before you launch your legislative campaign, it will be paramount for you to know the ins and outs of Safe Routes to School. You will need to know the program benefits, key principles, key players, and why obtaining strong levels of dedicated funding, as well as codifying the program, is good for the state as a whole and local communities.

The Basics: Background on Safe Routes to School

In 1969, almost half of all students walked or bicycled to school. Today, fewer than 1 in 6 children walk, bike, or roll.¹ These changes are detrimental to the health and safety of students, increase traffic congestion, and worsen air pollution near schools. Low levels of physical activity are one of the factors that have led to increased numbers of children at an unhealthy weight, with a tripling of childhood obesity rates since the 1970s.^{2,3}

Safe Routes to School is recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as one of a handful of community interventions that are proven to rapidly produce public health results in a cost effective manner.⁴ Evidence shows that Safe Routes to School programs make the trip to and from school safer, increase the number of children who get to school by walking and bicycling, and promote the health of children and the community as a whole.⁵ Using Safe Routes to School as a way to create environment, policy, and behavioral change is a powerful way to increase physical activity and promote the health of both children and adults.

The benefits of Safe Routes to School extend far beyond safety and health for students to the larger community. Schools are often located near parks, libraries, local businesses, and other neighborhood amenities. Many schools are used by neighbors for extended learning or recreation. Street features that improve safety for children are also essential for the safety of older adults, and benefit everyone else using the roads too. By supporting funding for students to walk and bike to school, people throughout the community are served, benefitting health, sustainability, and quality of life. When communities thrive, they contribute to the vitality of the whole state.

Safe Routes to School Funding: Need, History, and Context

The Need for Safe Routes to School Programs and Funding

As of 2015, more than 17,400 schools and 6.8 million children nationally have benefited from federally funded Safe Routes to School projects and programs.⁶ This is a strong foundation upon which to build, but with almost 100,000 public schools and 50 million public school students in this country, it means that less than one-fifth of schools have had any exposure to Safe Routes to School – let alone the level of street improvements and program investments that most schools need.⁷ That leaves an enormous unmet need for safer routes to school, and a tremendous opportunity to provide more communities with the benefits of a strong Safe Routes to School initiative.



Decades of design of streets and towns for travel by car, not by foot, mean that most school routes have multiple obstacles to safe walking and bicycling for students. More funding for Safe Routes to School can make a measurable difference in addressing those dangers, while implementing the education and encouragement programs that will enable students to adopt a lifetime of healthy habits. Robust funding would allow Safe Routes to School encouragement and education efforts to reach students throughout the state, support substantial infrastructure change to address the most dangerous walking routes, and enable Safe Routes to School initiatives to be comprehensive and sustainable.

Funding of Safe Routes to School has undergone an ongoing metamorphosis over the years. Each change has brought on its own set of benefits and drawbacks. However, one thing always remains the same: funding levels are far lower than the need. In the following sections, the historic flow of money and roles of various levels of government related to the Safe Routes to School program are discussed.

Historic Flow of Funding

In 2005, decades of federal transportation funding that focused almost exclusively on the movement of cars saw a significant change. A federal Safe Routes to School program with significant funding was established by the 2005 federal transportation bill, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Through the Safe Routes to School Program, from 2005 to 2012, every state received funding for Safe Routes to School initiatives to grant out to local schools and communities, and each state was required to have a state-level Safe Routes to School coordinator to administer the funds. This program provided more than \$1 billion in funding in all states to support infrastructure improvements and programming to make it safer for children to walk and bicycle to and from school.

In June 2012, Congress passed a new federal transportation bill, MAP-21 (Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act). This legislation made significant changes to funding for bicycling, walking and Safe Routes to School. The federal Safe Routes to School program was combined with other bicycling and walking programs into the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP). Safe Routes to School projects – both infrastructure projects and education/encouragement projects (non-infrastructure) – are among the specific types of projects eligible for funding under TAP. In 2015, the current transportation law, the FAST Act (Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act), was passed, preserving funding for Safe Routes to School, bicycling, and walking for five additional years. The Transportation Alternatives Program became a sub-program of the Surface Transportation Program, a large and fairly flexible pot of federal transportation dollars available to state and regional governments. While the program was renamed to “Surface Transportation Program Set-aside” at the federal level, states and regions are continuing to use the TAP name. Overall, the program still operates in large part as it did under the previous transportation bill, MAP-21.

Overview of current federal funding for Safe Routes to School:

- Safe Routes to School (both non-infrastructure and infrastructure), walking and bicycling projects are all still eligible to compete for funding. States can run one big TAP competition or can choose to separate out Safe Routes to School as a separate competition.
- Projects require a state or local match of up to 20 percent of the project cost.
- All TAP dollars have to be allocated through a competitive process. The states and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) themselves are not eligible for the funding, but local governments, school districts, and nonprofits are eligible, giving them the opportunity to put forward the projects that are most important to their communities.

- Funding decisions are divided between state and regional governments (MPOs). State departments of transportation control 50 percent of TAP funds, which they can either award to projects or transfer to other uses. The other 50 percent is targeted for projects in small towns, mid-sized communities, and larger urban areas. For large urban areas with more than 200,000 people, MPOs run the competitions and pick the projects.
- Funding grows from \$819 million in 2015, to \$835 million in 2016 and 2017, to \$850 million in 2018 through 2020. Although significant, the funding for TAP is considerably less than the level that was previously available for Safe Routes to School, walking, and biking when they were independent programs.
- Safe Routes to School, bicycling, and walking infrastructure projects are still eligible for funding under all other federal highway programs, including the Surface Transportation Program (STP), Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ), and the Highway Safety and Infrastructure Program (HSIP). There is also a funding stream to support high-risk states in implementing bicycle and pedestrian education and enforcement programs that is implemented by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Government Roles and Safe Routes to School

Federal, state, regional, and local authorities each play a role in supporting and advancing Safe Routes to School.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) distributes funds for transportation projects, including TAP funds for walking, biking, and Safe Routes to School. USDOT also provides direction to state departments of transportation (DOTs) in the administration of federal funds and sets broad guidelines for the design of federally-funded roads and highways. In addition, USDOT provides larger goals and direction for the American transportation system.

State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) take the lead on transportation investments, design, and priorities for the state. They make funding decisions about how pedestrian and bicycling projects are funded and prioritized in the state. They act as a gate keeper for federal and state appropriated funds to facilitate project completion at the local level and provide guidance on using funds in accordance with the law. Since federal funds for Safe Routes to School flow from the federal level to the state DOTs for administration, state DOTs have a profound impact on the quality of local infrastructure and programs and whether the funding reaches underserved communities.

Regional Transportation Planning Organizations/Agencies (RTPOs/RPTAs) are regional agencies, funded by state resources, responsible for planning, coordinating, and administering state funds for regional transportation systems in rural and urban regions, including Safe Routes to School.

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are regional government entities that are charged by the federal government with transportation planning for urbanized areas with populations of more than 50,000 residents. MPOs develop and adopt policy for federal transportation spending within their region. MPOs for urbanized areas with more than 200,000 people now administer their own Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) competitions and choose the projects within their region. As gatekeepers to TAP funding, large MPOs have the authority to determine which types of active transportation projects, including Safe Routes to School, receive funding. MPOs now make many decisions about how to administer TAP that affect whether or not Safe Routes to School projects are competitive—such as funding priorities, type of scoring criteria are used, how schools are

notified about the availability of funding, whether funding is set aside for Safe Routes to School projects, and more.

County Transportation Commissions/Agencies (CTCs/CTAs) plan and maintain local transportation infrastructure within cities and counties. They oversee local transportation tax measures which leverage potential state and federal transportation funding. To obtain priority in regional, state, and federal funding, the CTC's transportation projects, including Safe Routes to School improvements, need to be part of the regional transportation plan maintained by the MPO or RTPA/RTPA.

Municipal Transportation Departments evaluate problems and develop plans that improve livability by working to reduce congestion, create safer streets and ultimately make it easier for people and goods to travel to their destinations. Sometimes housed under the municipality's Department of Public Works, the transportation departments ensure that they are responsive to the future transportation needs of the community while maintaining the existing infrastructure in the municipality through local funding, taxes, and resources from the state and federal level. To be eligible to receive regional, state, or federal funding, the municipal transportation department's transportation projects, including Safe Routes to School projects, need to be part of the regional transportation plan maintained by the MPO or RTPA/RTPA.

School Districts ensure a safe learning environment for maximum academic achievement for all students. Since it has been established that physical activity helps students with focus and achievement, many districts are electing to enact district-wide or school specific policies and plans that support walking and biking to and from school. For district Safe Routes to School projects to achieve priority designation at various levels of funding, it is wise for the district to work with their municipal and county transportation agencies, to make sure district priorities are included in transportation plans. School districts are eligible to apply for TAP funding on their own, but often work with municipal or county agencies to coordinate project efforts.

¹ National Center for Safe Routes to School. (n.d.). The decline of walking and biking. In [guide.saferoutesinfo.org](http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/introduction/the_decline_of_walking_and_bicycling.cfm). Retrieved from http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/introduction/the_decline_of_walking_and_bicycling.cfm.

² Fryar, C., Carroll, M., & Ogden, C. (2016). Prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents aged 2–19 years: United States, 1963–1965 through 2013–2014 (pp. 1-5). National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/obesity_child_13_14/obesity_child_13_14.pdf.

³ The state of childhood obesity. (2016). Trust for America's Health and The Robert Wood Foundation. Retrieved from <http://stateofobesity.org/childhood/>.

⁴ Health Impact in 5 Years: Safe Routes to School. (2016). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/policy/hst/hi5/saferoutes/>.

⁵ Orenstein, M., Gutierrez, N., Rice, T., Cooper, J.F., & Ragland. (2007). Safe Routes to School safety and mobility analysis. University of California-Berkeley Traffic Safety Center. Retrieved from <http://repositories.cdlib.org/its/tsc/UCB-TSC-RR-2007-1>.

⁶ National Center for Safe Routes to School. (2015). Creating healthier generations: A look at the 10 years of the federal Safe Routes to School program. Retrieved from http://saferoutesinfo.org/sites/default/files/SRTS_10YearReport_Final.pdf.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). Digest of education statistics, 2015 (NCES 2016-014), Table 105.50. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>.

Note that the federal program has traditionally only funded Safe Routes to School efforts for K-8 schools, while the 100,000 number represents all K-12 public schools. We include all in this number because we think that Safe Routes to School is essential for all ages. In addition, note that many of the 33,000 private elementary and secondary schools in the United States also have Safe Routes to School programs.