

Walking and Biking to School: Giving Children a Healthy Start - To the Day and to Life

Walking and biking to school is good for children and communities! It is among the most relevant, observable topics highlighting the links between the built environment, public health, and quality of life. As you likely know, the rate of children walking and biking to and from school has declined significantly over the past generation. Data from the 2009 National Household Travel Survey showed that 13% of children between the ages of 5 and 14 usually walked or biked to school, down from 48% in 1969. Most notably, only 38% of students living within one mile of a school walk or bike there now; down from 88% in 1969.

You probably also realize that today's children face unprecedented levels of overweight and chronic diseases – a path leading to shorter lifespans than their parents. The burden they face is physical, emotional, and financial. Nearly 30% of Hoosier children are overweight and too few meet national physical activity guidelines. It's hard to miss the continual barrage of media stories highlighting the serious health risks children face – and yet real strategies for action aren't quick or easy. We definitely need more physical education at school, less screen time (from TV, video games, and non-academic computer use) at home, and better nutritional options everywhere; but we also need to find ways to incorporate physical activity into kids' routine daily life, just as we need to do with adults! Walking and biking to and from school is a great way to accomplish this.

Beyond the health benefits of using active transportation there are numerous other community benefits we must consider. Walkers and bikers reduce traffic congestion near schools and lead to transportation cost savings for the district. Fewer vehicles mean less air pollution. Children who walk or bike have the chance to spend time in the natural environment, to interact and socialize with adults and peers, and to experience a sense of independence and responsibility. Providing education and skills training for students, parents, and community members can make everyone safer as pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists. Finally, we prepare our youngest citizens for a lifetime of active living and the variety of advantages that accompany it.

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is the formal name of many efforts across the country to increase rates of children walking and biking to school. A SRTS federal aid program was created in 2005; since that time, the Indiana program has provided \$12 million in funds to more than 60 projects around the state. Those projects have been for both infrastructure and non-infrastructure investments, and rely heavily on the 5 E's – Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, Engineering, and Evaluation – for success. Over the past few years, a number of diverse and robust Hoosier SRTS programs have developed that can serve as excellent models for others around the state as we move forward.

To assist with such capacity-building, a number of Health by Design partners have come together to convene a SRTS state network. Our broad purpose at this time is simply to organize ourselves to better promote and expand SRTS activities throughout Indiana; to share information, resources, and technical assistance; and to work together towards known best practices and policies that ultimately make it easier and safer for children to travel by foot or bike. We want to build awareness about the vast benefits of walking and biking to school and to encourage schools and communities to participate in SRTS activities – even in the absence of funding – as there are so many no- and low-cost ideas that can be implemented!

We hope you will join us in advancing Safe Routes to School for Hoosier children!

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Safe Routes to School in Indiana

Walk to School Day

Celebrating 'Walk to School Day', which is held each year on the first Wednesday in October, is a wonderful introduction to Safe Routes to School. It allows parents, administrators, and community members to be introduced to the broader programmatic and policy applications of the topic and to get involved in an easy, non-threatening way. Congratulations to the 45 schools who registered events this year! It's not too early to begin planning for next year and to work to make every day 'Walk to School Day'!

State Network Development

Partners from around the state of Indiana are working together on the development of an Indiana Safe Routes to School State Network. Our goal is to increase the number of children safely walking and biking to school through sharing information, resources, technical assistance, and ideas. We are following the model of many other states around the country and are using the [10-Step Guide](#) and [State Policies: Best Practices](#) resources provided by the [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#).

Safe Routes to School Workshop

Last year Health by Design hosted a workshop to provide information and guidance for developing or expanding a Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program in schools and communities across Indiana. More than 100 participants learned about the benefits of and barriers to walking/biking to school; the process and steps for developing a SRTS program; best-practices and lessons-learned from schools/ communities across the state; no/low-cost strategies for implementing a SRTS program; and about the importance of developing a statewide network of partners. Presentations are available on our website and future workshops are being considered.

Grant Funding

The Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) is responsible for administering the Indiana SRTS Program that makes federal funding available for eligible activities and improvements. Infrastructure and non-infrastructure proposals are accepted. Applications are typically due in the spring.

Related Facts and Information

- The average cost per student using bus transportation was \$737 in 2004-2005, up from \$466 in 1980-1981. Each bus route can cost from \$30,000-\$60,000 per year.
- It takes about 5-10 minutes for children to walk a quarter of a mile or bicycle an entire mile.
- Physical activity is associated with improved academic performance in children and adolescents.
- The daily walk to school offers children an opportunity to spend time in the natural environment; exposure to nature and time for free outdoor play can have multiple health benefits including stress reduction, relief of ADHD symptoms in children, and increased cognitive and motor functioning.
- Passenger cars, trucks, motorcycles, and SUVs together account for 62% of transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions.
- Studies in some cities show that 17-26% of morning rush hour traffic can be school-related.
- Teaching children walking and bicycling safety skills – such as how to choose where to walk and cross streets, obeying crossing guards, and being visible to drivers - can help create lifelong traffic skills.
- Vehicle speed is a key element in safety. A pedestrian hit by a car traveling 40 mph has a mere 15% chance of survival; at 20 mph, that chance of survival increases to 85%.
- Safety education also includes working with parents, drivers, law enforcement, and local officials.

Links and Resources

National Center for Safe Routes to School: <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org>

Safe Routes to School National Partnership: <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/>

Indiana Safe Routes to School Program: <http://saferoutes.in.gov/>

Walk to School Day: <http://www.walktoschool.org>