

SCHOOL BICYCLING AND WALKING POLICIES: Addressing Policies that Hinder and Implementing Policies that Help

As key partners in Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs, schools and school districts can play a big role in establishing a culture of bicycling and walking to school. School policies that encourage and support bicycling and walking can substantially boost a SRTS program, both within individual schools and throughout the community. In contrast, a policy that discourages or prohibits bicycling or walking can stop a SRTS program in its tracks. While SRTS programs are developing and flourishing in many communities around the country, some communities are discovering barriers to active transportation due to school policies.

Because school or school district policies can play such a significant role in starting and continuing a SRTS program, it's important to be able to identify both:

- 1) Barrier policies, which discourage, prohibit, or otherwise present barriers to bicycling and walking to school; and
- 2) Supportive policies, which encourage, support or enable bicycling and walking to school programs.

For both supportive and barrier policies, the impact may be direct or indirect. A school policy that requires any student riding a bicycle to school to also wear a helmet is an example of a policy that directly demonstrates support of safe bicycling. In contrast, a school district policy that provides busing to all students regardless of where they live—including for those within easy walking or bicycling distance—is an example of a policy that indirectly discourages bicycling or walking to school. More often, “barrier” policies will directly target bicycling to school. Whether out of fear of liability, concerns for the security of bicycles on school property, or because of a previous safety incident, schools and school districts may have a policy that prohibits students from bicycling to school—either entirely, or until a certain age—regardless of whether or not they are supervised by a parent.

Obviously, if conditions are sufficiently safe for walking and bicycling, it would benefit your SRTS program to work to have a barrier policy removed or, even better, converted to a supportive policy. However, sometimes significant safety issues exist that may have played a role in the policy being adopted in the first place. In these instances, the safety issues should be addressed before considering removal of the barrier policy.

It may seem like a daunting undertaking to get barrier policies removed or converted to supportive policies, but parents and advocates have had success in doing so. It is important to approach these situations strategically. Below are some simple steps explaining how to approach and overturn barrier policies that prohibit walking and/or bicycling to school. Remember, this is only guidance. It is important to assess any school's situation independently and without bias, paying special attention to unique circumstances, politics and personalities that may exist.



Developed jointly by the National Center for Safe Routes to School and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership

School Bicycling and Walking Policies (continued)

1 Research the barrier policy's history

Questions to ask:

- What was the reason behind the policy?
- When was it adopted?
- Was there a specific incident? If yes, when and what are the specifics of the incident?
- Who enforces the policy, and how strictly is it enforced?
- Who made the policy and what would it take to change the policy?
- Who are the key players? For instance, who is a big supporter, and what is his/her perspective on the policy? Who else might have an interest in this policy (i.e. risk managers), and what are their perspectives?

Who to approach:

- **Parents** First learn as much as you can by talking with parents, so that you have as much information as possible before speaking with school personnel.
- **School Administrators** Talk to school administrators to gather background information on the policy. This could include school principals, the school superintendent and/or school board members.

2 Build awareness and allies among others in your school's community

Depending on what is found when researching the policy's history, it may help to talk with others at the school and in the community. Potential allies include:

- The **Parent Teacher Association** (and other parents) can be vital allies as you are seeking more like-minded parent advocates.
- If the school has a **Wellness Committee**, reach out to them to join your efforts. It is likely they are already advocating for physical activity opportunities, so the message of walking/bicycling to and from school should resonate with them.
- **Teachers, specifically PE teachers**, may help by equipping students with skills for their commutes to school, such as looking both ways before crossing any street.
- **Local non-profit organizations**, such as bicycling or walking organizations, will sometimes champion local issues, particularly if it is related to their organization's mission. These organizations can also help to spread the word throughout the community.
- **School nurses** have student health at the forefront of their minds. What better champion to bring on board than someone who can speak from professional experience about the risks of physical inactivity?
- A local **Neighborhood Association** may want to get involved. Who doesn't want less traffic during morning and afternoon rush hour in their neighborhoods?

Find people with common concerns and build support for converting the barrier policy into a supportive policy. Don't overlook the value of making residents in the school's surrounding community aware of the issues at hand, as they may be important allies in facilitating a safe environment for children to walk and bike to school. Finally, learn from others who have undertaken similar projects to change individual school or school district policies, such as student health and wellness policies. People who have worked on comparable efforts in the past often have valuable insight and they may be able alert you to approaches that work well within your school or community.

School Bicycling and Walking Policies (continued)

3 Identify the pertinent administrators, both at the school and district levels.

It is important to figure out which administrators are responsible for establishing policy on students walking and bicycling to school. Below are descriptions of the typical administrative roles that may be integral links to addressing policies either allowing or prohibiting students to walk or bike to school. Finding out who can change this rule will be critical in developing your strategy.

- The **school principal** may have established the barrier policy at the school, and may be the first point of contact in your effort to address this policy.
- **District superintendents** or other administrators at the school district level may be able to play a role in guiding policy decisions at schools across the entire district.
- **School district transportation officials** may be in charge of developing or administering policies related to student transportation. While their primary responsibility may focus on bussing, they may also be involved in walking and biking issues.
- One or more **school board members** may support a change in the District's active transportation policy. Finding a school board member or person on the inside of the governing body who will be the champion for moving a new policy forward can be key to making this change.

4 Develop your strategy and present your case to school administrators

Were the original reasons for the barrier policy unfounded, or are they no longer applicable because of changes in infrastructure or practice? Could SRTS non-infrastructure strategies (education, encouragement, enforcement) or infrastructure improvements address any existing concerns? Or do infrastructure improvements need to be made as a first step to improve safety before getting others to agree to a change in policy?

If you can make a compelling case to change the policy, work to develop relationships with the school administrators identified in the previous step, and make sure that they understand the issues and have the information needed to make informed decisions.

To ensure your efforts are effective, work with the allies you've developed to:

- Create a plan for how to approach the school administration – this is a critical step, as you'll want a strategy before you start to act. If there is someone on the "inside" of the school who can help you with this strategy, that information will be very important for navigating school politics.
- Compile documentation and research supporting the goal of walking and/or bicycling to school. Some universal reasons follow, but you should tailor this list to your community:



School Bicycling and Walking Policies (continued)

- **Health:** The Surgeon General recommends 60 minutes of physical activity each day for children and walking/bicycling to school is a great way to help meet this goal. Nearly one in three children in the US is overweight or obese.
- **Safety:** Some Safe Routes to School Programs have been shown to improve traffic safety issues .
- **Environment:** Getting more children walking and bicycling to school may help to reduce air pollution around the school and support efforts to reduce climate change.
- **Community:** Neighborhood parents are often interested in having groups of children walk and bicycle with parent chaperones as a way to build community connections.
- **Education:** Teachers report improved behavior and productivity when students are physically active before school.

In addition, collecting hard data relevant to the specific reasons behind the school's or school district's barrier policy can be a very useful element of this step.

- Decide if your first contact will be a meeting with the decision-makers, a letter or petition signed by several different advocates or a phone call. Even if you send a letter or email, follow up with the contact either in person or via phone in order to put a friendly human face to your request. One approach is to first send a letter that requests a meeting with the decision-makers, and then follow up with a phone call and future letters if needed. It will be important to identify one person who will be the primary contact with the school and will make follow up phone call(s), but if a meeting is scheduled, it may be helpful to bring a few others to demonstrate community support.
- In all communications with decision-makers, be concise, rationale, reasonable and respectful. Offer to share the documentation you have collected related to walking and/or bicycling to school.
- In written and verbal communications, be clear in stating your concerns and how you think it could be handled (such as suggesting a new school policy that supports walking and/or bicycling).
- Consider scheduling a brief walking tour with decision-makers to illustrate your points.
- Listen carefully to the administrator's concerns and issues, and try to find common ground.
- Follow up and be persistent, yet always patient and polite.
- Bring a group of parents, local residents, bicycle and pedestrian advocates, students, and teachers to a School Board meeting to show broad support from a wide spectrum of the community, if necessary.

Additional tips:

- Build support with all stakeholders and don't burn any bridges. As often as possible when making your case, talk about opportunities and past successes rather than problems and challenges. Be diplomatic, not abrasive, and try to recognize your listener's side of the situation. Be a good listener yourself, and you will find that it will encourage fellow stakeholders to work with and support you. Always send thank you notes after meetings and include a brief summary of what was discussed.
- Keep in mind that supportive walking and bicycling to school policies often dovetail with wellness policies. In the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, Congress established a new requirement that all school districts with a federally-funded school meals program develop and implement wellness policies that address nutrition and physical activity by the start of the 2006–2007 school year. Walking and bicycling to school have lots of advantages, including physical activity benefits and opportunities for social interaction. Work to include or strengthen support for active transportation in the school wellness policy.

School Bicycling and Walking Policies (continued)

- Even if the school does not currently have a policy that prohibits walking or bicycling to school, work to have a supportive policy adopted. A supportive policy demonstrates a community's commitment to healthy lifestyles for their children. It also provides assurance that children will be allowed to walk and/or bicycle to school.
- After doing some research, you may find that liability is one of the factors behind the school's barrier policy. Find out if the School Board and/or municipal insurance carriers or risk managers have a position on the subject. You can find more information addressing liability concerns specifically from the National Center for Safe Routes to School at www.saferoutesinfo.org.
- If you are having trouble getting the school's attention, get media involved. If you are struggling to get the attention of the school's administration, work with other allies in the community to alert the media to the problem. If the school still isn't listening, you can also talk to local politicians like the mayor or city council members. Be sure to have the facts and a positive message in place versus using the airtime to attack the school. You can also point out that more than 5,000 schools throughout the nation are already participating in official SRTS programs.

Remember, the work doesn't stop once a barrier policy is changed. Even if a supportive policy is adopted, continuing with education and encouragement at the school can help influence the attitudes of those who might still be opposed to students bicycling or walking. Bicycle rodeos and walk/bike to school days are just two ideas that can be implemented to continue the message. The key is to celebrate by doing exactly what you have been advocating so tirelessly for—walk and bicycle to and from school! By example, your behavior will demonstrate the ever-increasing demand for Safe Routes to School.

Alexandria, VA Parents Work with School to Change Policy That Discouraged Bicycling and Walking

When it opened in 2000, Samuel Tucker Elementary School in Alexandria, VA became the city's first new public school in 30 years. Surrounded by newly built townhouses, condominiums, and retailers, it was also an on-going and active construction site, which led the Alexandria City Public Schools to provide "hazard" busing to all students who lived within a one-mile radius of the school. This busing policy also led to an unwritten no walking/no bicycling policy. In 2008, parents told the school administration about the Safe Routes to School program and asked to have the busing policy rescinded so that they could apply for federal SRTS funding. Both the school and school district were extremely supportive, and in 2009 they rescinded the busing policy. The parents' request was aided by outside factors: nearby construction had ended and safety conditions had improved and school budget constraints were helped by reductions in busing.

St. Johnsbury, VT SRTS Program Inspires Change in Attitudes and Policies

St. Johnsbury School, a Vermont elementary school, had a no-bicycling policy. By the end of their first year of a SRTS program, students indicated that they wanted to bicycle to and from school, so the school instituted a new policy for students in grades four and above. The policy stated that if these students participated in bicycle safety education taught at the school and pledged to wear a helmet, they would receive a "license" allowing them to bicycle to school.

School Bicycling and Walking Policies (continued)

Waucaonda, IL School Board Plays A Vital Role in Overturning Barrier Policies

In 2003, a crash between a motorist and a student bicyclist occurred. Due to liability concerns, this Chicago suburb school district instituted a policy that students could no longer bicycle to or from Wauconda Grade School. Parents of bicycling students responded immediately: they organized themselves, started a media campaign to build awareness, and contacted a local bicycling advocacy organization for help. Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, now the Active Transportation Alliance, made a presentation to the school district's board, offering SRTS as a process that would address bicycling safety without prohibiting bicycling to school. After this presentation, the school board convened a committee that began collecting data to help make the case for allowing bicycling to and from school. The committee's findings, including data demonstrating that the crash was an anomaly for the area and that students wanted to bicycle to/from school, changed how district staff and school administrators viewed the problem and they decided to overturn the barrier policy allowing students to resume bicycling to and from school.

Netcong, NJ Superintendent Uses SRTS to Change Perspectives and Remove Barrier Policy

Sometimes barrier policies that prohibit walking or bicycling to and from school exist for no apparent reason. This was the situation at Netcong Elementary School in New Jersey, where walking to school was allowed but bicycling was not. The policy was brought to light when the superintendent wanted to apply for SRTS funding. As part of the application for SRTS funding, the school proposed to overturn the policy prohibiting bicycling to and from school should the application be successful. The school was awarded the funding, and as of April 2009, has a new transportation policy in place. They met some resistance with a new superintendent, but the school board, Mayor, and administrator remained strongly supportive of the policy. To kick off the new policy and to provide safety education, the school and municipality sponsored a bicycle rodeo for students at the school to learn safe bicycling skills and are working on additional safety programs.

This resource was developed by the National Center for Safe Routes to School and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership.

For more resources and information on Safe Routes to School, please visit the National Center for Safe Routes to School Web site at www.saferoutesinfo.org and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership Web site at www.saferoutespartnership.org.



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