Safe Routes to School District Policy

Safe Routes to School is a nationwide movement aimed at encouraging elementary and middle school students to walk or bicycle to school. The goal of New Jersey’s Safe Routes to School initiative is to get children walking and bicycling to school where it is safe and to make it safe where it is not. In order to earn points for this action a school district must have a Wellness Policy or Active Transportation Policy in place that enables walking and biking to school, and includes a commitment to collaborate with municipal, county or state transportation, land-use planning, law enforcement, and other agencies to plan, construct, and encourage the use of safe, accessible, and convenient pedestrian and bicycle routes to school.

Why is it important?

Increasing childhood obesity rates, combined with the fact that students tend to participate in less physical activity as they move into adolescence, have helped draw the attention of policymakers to the benefits of “active commuting”—that is, pedestrian and other active modes of transportation such as walking, biking, rollerblading, scootering, and skateboarding. The U.S. Surgeon General has recommended routine walking and biking as part of an active lifestyle that is associated with decreased risks for heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and colon cancer, as well as an increased sense of well-being.

In the past several decades, the percentage of trips made by walking has declined among U.S. children and adults. An estimated 48% of students aged five to fourteen walked or biked to school in 1969, but by 2001 less than 15% of students in this age range did so (CDC 2005). To some extent, this decline is due to increased distances between homes and schools; however, children who live close to school are often driven to school or bused by the district due to safety concerns.

In a 2004 U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention survey, policies against walking or bicycling to school were among the top five barriers to walking to and from school. Active commuting can be either encouraged or discouraged by the “built environment,” including manmade factors such as school location, street layout, presence of sidewalks, intersection design, zoning, and housing developments, or the lack of attention to developing and implementing policies and procedures that accommodate walking and biking to school. Schools and communities need to work together to identify and fix practical barriers that interfere with students and staff members actively commuting to school.

A school district policy can set the goals, assign authority, and establish expectations district-wide, thereby laying the groundwork for active and safe behaviors. By proactively adopting policies that encourage safe walking and bicycling to school where appropriate, districts can support daily physical activity for students and staff, and reduce the negative impacts of roadway congestion and greenhouse gas emissions.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

This action will involve the Board of Education, Superintendent, school transportation coordinator and Safe Routes to School (SRTS) champions within the community. School boards set and establish policies and superintendents administer the policies. Superintendents also serve as the chief advisor to the school board and are consulted for background information, suggestions, and recommendations before board decisions are made.

SRTS champions could be school administrators (principal, transportation coordinator, teacher, or school nurse), elected officials (mayor, council member), municipal staff (police officer, municipal engineer), parents or PTO/PTA members, or members of a neighborhood association, environmental group, or community group. The SRTS champions raise awareness of the need for a policy and provide both the superintendent and the board members with information on the benefits of walking and bicycling to and from school. It is important for the SRTS champions to work with the superintendent and the board policy subcommittee to ensure the policy is placed on a meeting agenda for discussion and adoption, and to follow up after subsequent board meetings.

Timeframe

Passing a school board policy could take three months or more depending on the level of support the policy has from school administrators and board members. Once a policy is developed, it must be approved by the school board at an open public meeting. Most districts require that a new policy receive two readings at two separate board meetings and an opportunity for public comment. Board meetings are generally held monthly or twice monthly during the school year; however, this may vary by school district.

Project costs and resource needs

The cost to adopt a Safe Routes to School policy is directly related to the amount of staff and volunteer time needed to:

- Build awareness and allies in the school community regarding the need for the policy.
- Develop the policy through a collaborative process that involves district administration, school staff, parents, non-profit organizations, community members, and other interested parties.
- Shepherd the policy through the board committee review process and place on a board meeting agenda.
- Distribute the policy to the district’s schools with guidance on implementation and compliance.

What to do, and how to do it ("How to")

This section provides guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. A school does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as it meets the requirements for earning points for this action.

The list of resources at the end of this document highlights a number of tools that provide valuable guidance on policy development. A key resource is the National Association of State Boards of Education’s Fit, Healthy and Ready to Learn: A School Health Policy Guide. The following overview is adapted from Chapter B: The Art of Policymaking.

The policy development process will vary based on the local environment and the level of awareness and support a proposed policy has from school board members, administration, school staff, parents, and the community at large. The five common tasks involved in shepherding a policy development process are listed below:

1. Lay the Groundwork: The benefits of developing a Safe Routes to School district policy may be self-evident to the majority of stakeholders, but it is important to support the effort with data specific to the school district. This information will be helpful in clarifying the object of the proposed policy and determining if the existing Wellness Policy should be expanded or updated, vs. creating a new Active Transportation Policy. Do the necessary background research and be sure to identify any financial, contractual, and scheduling implications for the policy options.

2. Build Awareness and Support: The most important step in crafting a school district policy is to enlist widespread support for its goals and strategies, particularly from the superintendent and other administrators who will need to steer the policy through the Board of Education review and adoption process. The National Center for Safe Routes to School recommends building awareness and allies among others in your school community and identifying the pertinent administrators, both at the school and district levels, before presenting the need for a new policy or an amendment to an existing one. Enlist school staff (physical education teachers, school nurses), district transportation coordinators, members of the PTA/PTA, community green teams, and bicycle and pedestrian advocates to support the effort. Safe Routes to School Regional Coordinators at Transportation Management Associations (TMA) throughout the state can provide free technical assistance to develop an action plan to move the initiative forward. To identify the appropriate TMA contact, click here for more information.

3. Anticipate, respond to, and involve critics. Inviting selected opponents into the policymaking process can have positive results. Their constructive criticism could strengthen the proposed policy and they might even be persuaded by the evidence presented to support the effort. Apply communications strategies as needed to increase public awareness of the proposed policy.

4. Draft the Policy: Drafting a policy is likely to be an iterative process, as the details of the policy are worked out and the input and concerns of the various stakeholders are addressed. Draft
the policy language, drawing on the information gathered and the values and experiences of committee members. Some guiding principles are as follows:

- Use language that is simple, clear, specific, and accurate; avoid education, health, and legal jargon.
- Be concise and brief.
- Include a rationale for the policy; describe the benefits of adopting it.
- Build in accountability—cite who will be held responsible for doing what and describe mechanisms for doing it.
- Ensure that the policy provides practical guidance to school staff members about how to address specific issues.
- Include provisions for policy evaluation and periodic review.

The Safe Routes to School National Partnership and ChangeLab Solutions have developed an interactive Safe Routes to School Policy Workbook tool that can be utilized by school boards and advocates to create and customize policies that support active transportation and Safe Routes to School programs.

At a minimum, the policy language should include:

a. A description of the benefits of walking and bicycling to school.

b. A list of conditions explaining the rules and expectations of the student, parent/guardian.

c. A commitment to collaborate with municipal, county, or state transportation, land-use planning, law enforcement, and other community agencies to plan, construct, and encourage the use of safe, accessible, and convenient pedestrian and bicycle routes to school.

The rules and expectations of the student, parent/guardian, and school should be described in detail, usually in a list of conditions. For example, a bicycling policy can include information about helmet use, rules of the road, bicycle maintenance, and bicycle parking and storage. It is always a good idea to include a disclaimer in the policy that states that walking or bicycling is an "assumption of responsibility by students and their parents—a responsibility in the care of property, in the observation of safety rules, and in the display of courtesy and consideration towards others." This will not completely absolve the school district from all liability, but it can offer some legal protection.

Allow time for committee members to share the draft policies with their constituencies, gather reactions, and report back to the full committee.

5. Adopt the Policy: After working with the school board policy committee, present the final draft to the full school board, along with useful background information—but keep the amount of reading material to a minimum. Encourage the policy's supporters to attend relevant meetings to show their support. Be prepared to respond to last minute questions that may arise.

6. Implement the Policy: Adopting sound policy is just a start. A new policy is more likely to be smoothly implemented and consistently enforced if it receives strong administrative support and if all staff members are oriented to the policy and the rationale behind it. The policy should be made available on the school district's website and distributed every year to staff, students, and parents/guardians in a Student Handbook and/or parent information materials. Efforts should be made to connect with key stakeholders such as municipal staff, the community green team or other organizations committed to promoting walking and biking in the community, and local law enforcement. Safe Routes to School Regional Coordinators at Transportation Management Associations (TMA) throughout the state can assist with policy implementation. To identify the appropriate TMA contact, click here for more information.

Real change will occur when municipal government, the school district, local non-profits, and volunteers work together to make a community more walkable and bike friendly. Municipal and school district green teams that work together to implement Safe Routes to Schools initiatives can each earn points toward certification.

What to submit to earn points for this action

In order to earn points for this action, the Board of Education must adopt a Safe Routes to School (SRTS) policy. This can be accomplished by incorporating SRTS components into an overarching, integrated district wellness Policy or through a specific Active Transportation Policy. Existing policies that meet the action requirements are eligible for points. Please submit the following documentation as part of the online certification application to verify that the action requirements have been met.

1. Description of Implementation. In the text box provided on the submission page for this action provide a short summary of the policy implemented including when it was approved, what/who it applies to, and the status of implementation efforts.

2. Upload a dated copy of the policy adopted by the school board.

3. If the policy has been in effect for more than six months, upload evidence of policy implementation in the current school year such as postings on the district website; inclusion of the policy in the student handbook in applicable schools; internal correspondence; information provided to staff, students and parents; program summaries/data, etc.

Approved actions will be set to expire in 2.5 years from the application submission date if the documentation includes evidence that the policy has been implemented. Points awarded for a policy less than six months old will be set to expire August 31 of the year the certification application was submitted. To reapply for this action, provide evidence that the policy has been implemented and the district actively encourages walking and biking to school.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended.

All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Spotlight: What New Jersey schools are doing

Brigantine School Wellness Policy

Brigantine Public School District is committed to providing a school environment that promotes and protects student health, well-being, and ability to learn by supporting healthy eating and physical activity. The School District adopted a School Wellness Policy that includes both nutrition and physical activity policies. The district established School Wellness Councils (consisting of school and community representatives) as resources to develop, implement, monitor and review school nutrition and physical activity policies, and serve as resources for implementing the policies. The School Wellness Policy section about physical activity includes support for Safe Routes to School, daily recess requirements, physical activity opportunities before and after school, and making school facilities available outside of school hours. Brigantine's comprehensive School Wellness Policy can be reviewed on New Jersey Safe Routes to School website at http://www.saferoutensnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Brigantine-Wellness-Policy_2012.pdf.

Camden Wellness Policy on Nutrition and Physical Activity

The Camden City Board of Education recognized that students need access to healthy foods and opportunities to be physically active in order to grow, learn, and thrive. In response to the national obesity epidemic, the Camden City Public School District is committed to providing school environments that promote and protect children's health, well-being, and ability to learn by supporting healthy eating and physical activity. The School District adopted a School Wellness Policy that includes both nutrition and physical activity policies. The district established School Wellness Councils (consisting of school and community representatives) as resources to develop, implement, monitor and review school nutrition and physical activity policies, and serve as resources for implementing the policies. The School Wellness Policy section about physical activity includes support for Safe Routes to School, daily recess requirements, physical activity opportunities before and after school, and making school facilities available outside of school hours. Brigantine's comprehensive School Wellness Policy can be reviewed on New Jersey Safe Routes to School website at http://www.saferoutensnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Brigantine-BOE-Wellness-Policy-Nov-2012-Final.pdf and School Wellness Regulation at http://www.saferoutesnj.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Camden-BOE-Wellness-Regulation-Nov-2012-Final.pdf.

Resources

Active Living Research: Active Living Research offers a range of tools and resources to help practitioners, policy-makers, and advocates create more activity-friendly environments. http://activelivingresearch.org/

ChangeLab Solutions: ChangeLab Solutions provides community-based solutions for America's most common and preventable diseases like cancer, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and asthma. Our solutions promote the common good by making healthier choices easier for everyone. http://changelabsolutions.org/

- The interactive Safe Routes to School Policy Workbook tool that can be utilized by school boards and advocates to create and customize policies that support active transportation and Safe Routes to School programs. http://changelabsolutions.org/safe-routes/welcome

National Association of State Boards of Education: Working with and through our state associations, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. http://www.nsba.org/#sthash.6blSnQLP.dpuf

National Center for Safe Routes to School: Established in May 2006, the National Center for Safe Routes to School assists states and communities in enabling and encouraging children to safely walk and bicycle to school. The National Center serves as the information clearinghouse for the federal Safe Routes to School program. The organization also provides technical support and resources. [http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/](http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/)

NJ Safe Routes to School Resource Center: The center at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, working with the NJ Department of Transportation and the National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN), has created model policies to address walking and bicycling to school. The model “Walking to School Policy” and “Bicycling to School Policy” are available at The New Jersey SRTS Resource Center website and can be modified by schools and school districts. [http://www.saferoutesnj.org/resources/](http://www.saferoutesnj.org/resources/)

NJ Safe Routes to Schools Regional Coordinators: Coordinators are available through the eight NJ Transportation Management Associations throughout New Jersey; they are ready, willing, and able to offer free advice and technical assistance in kicking off Safe Routes to School programs in communities from all twenty-one counties. [www.saferoutesnj.org/about/regional-coordinator-tmas/](http://www.saferoutesnj.org/about/regional-coordinator-tmas/)

NJ School Boards Association’s Recorded Webinar on Safe Routes to School - District Policy

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is a nationwide movement aimed at encouraging elementary and middle school students to walk or bicycle to school. Safe Routes to Schools District Policy can earn your district up to 40 points toward Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification. The goal of New Jersey’s Safe Routes to School initiative is to get children walking and bicycling to school where it is safe and to make it safe where it is not. Participate in this webinar to learn about the SRTS initiative and how the board can adopt a Safe Routes to School policy. [https://njsbaevents.webex.com/ec3100/eventcenter/recording/recordAction.do?theAction=preprecord&siteurl=njsbaevents&entappname=url3100&internalRecordTicket=4832534b00000003ba56289be6d1c43c5f886e4df16a89074e81fd534ac7eae455b5b513809e16&renew](https://njsbaevents.webex.com/ec3100/eventcenter/recording/recordAction.do?theAction=preprecord&siteurl=njsbaevents&entappname=url3100&internalRecordTicket=4832534b00000003ba56289be6d1c43c5f886e4df16a89074e81fd534ac7eae455b5b513809e16&renew)

Safe Routes to School National Partnership: Launched in August 2005, the Safe Routes to School National Partnership is a fast-growing network of hundreds of organizations, government agencies, and professional groups working to set goals, share best practices, leverage infrastructure and program funding, and advance policy change to help agencies that implement Safe Routes to School programs. The resource center section of their website provides wide-ranging resources, from publications to latest news to webinars and up-to-date research. [http://saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter](http://saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter)