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Teaming Up on Road Safety: Actionable Guidance for Integrating Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero Programs

The road safety movement has been growing steadily over the years with programs like Vision Zero and Safe Routes to School. Vision Zero is an international movement to eliminate all traffic fatalities and serious injuries by taking a systemic approach to road safety. There are dozens – and that number is growing. More communities are adopting Vision Zero goals, creating action plans, and dedicating staff and resources to Vision Zero. At the same time, specific strategies aimed specifically at children are often missing from Vision Zero efforts, despite children being considered vulnerable road users. Children have unique needs when it comes to mobility and safety. So how are we prioritizing their needs within Vision Zero?

Vision Zero and Safe Routes to School partnerships are a win-win. As more communities are adopting Vision Zero goals, Safe Routes to School is well-positioned to bring children to the forefront of road safety. In turn, Vision Zero can bolster Safe Routes to School initiatives within the larger movement to create safer streets. Combining resources, knowledge, and expertise can result in a more streamlined approach to road safety that is easier to implement and easier for community members to understand. This factsheet offers actionable guidance on how to build partnerships between Vision Zero and Safe Routes to School and how to streamline planning, programming, and communications efforts.



A SAFE SYSTEM APPROACH TO VISION ZERO

Vision Zero programs implement the [Safe System Approach](#). Safe System shifts away from the traditional E's of transportation safety to a more human-centered, holistic approach. It acknowledges that since humans make mistakes and humans are vulnerable, we must be proactive in anticipating human errors and mitigating safety risks.

Safe System is guided by the following principles:

- Death and Serious Injury Are Unacceptable
- Humans Make Mistakes
- Humans are Vulnerable
- Responsibility Is Shared
- Safety Is Proactive
- Redundancy Is Crucial

Similar to the Six Es of Safe Routes to School, Safe System is a comprehensive approach. It works best when each of the five Safe System elements are working together:

- Safe Road Users
- Safe Vehicles
- Safe Speeds
- Safe Roads
- Post-Crash Care

Contact your local transportation department to see how the Safe System approach is being applied in your community. For more general information on Safe System, visit the [Federal Highway Administration website](#).

Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero: Common Elements with Unique Approaches

	Safe Routes to School	Vision Zero
Leadership	Bottom-up or Top-down: May start at an individual school, school district, or local or state agency	Top-down: Starts with a mayoral or city/county council commitment
Typical Partners	School/School district Parents and caregivers Students Public works/planning/transportation department Public health department	Elected officials Public works/planning/transportation department Public health department Advocates and community organizers
Population Focus	K-12 students, families, school personnel, and community members	All road users
Key Strategies	The Six Es Equity Encouragement Education Engineering Engagement Evaluation	The Five Element Safe System Approach Safe Road Users Safe Vehicles Safe Speeds Safe Roads Post-Crash Care
Primary Intended Benefits	Improved road safety around schools Higher rates of walking, biking, and rolling to school Higher rates of physical activity among children and youth Less traffic congestion around schools	Improved road safety across the country Reductions in traffic deaths and serious injuries





Partnership Benefits

Partnerships between Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero can provide many benefits. Each partner brings their own sets of knowledge and expertise. Safe Routes to School practitioners have experience implementing safety solutions specifically for children. They also have local contacts – like schools, students, parents/caregivers, and community partners - that might not engage regularly with Vision Zero programs. Bringing these groups into Vision Zero can build awareness of the movement and boost public engagement. It will also demonstrate the need to address child safety within Vision Zero. Safe Routes to School practitioners know first-hand the kinds of barriers children are facing during the critical school travel hours. Their knowledge could greatly enhance Vision Zero's efforts to keep children safe. Plus, Safe Routes to School activities are fun! For Vision Zero programs looking to boost engagement and accessibility, Safe Routes to School practitioners could be ideal partners.

Vision Zero partners can also support Safe Routes to School programs. Vision Zero staff typically bring transportation planning, engineering, and safety experience that can lead to better roadway design. For Safe Routes to School programs the focus more on non-infrastructure programming, having a partner who can support infrastructure improvements is beneficial. A protected bike lane or slow speed limit in a school zone keeps kids safe and advances Vision Zero. Federal programs like [Safe Streets and Roads for All \(SS4A\)](#) support projects focus on preventing roadway deaths and serious injuries. These projects can be for planning and demonstration or implementation and can include

Safe Routes to School elements. For example, many communities are dedicating funding to Vision Zero planning. If a community is not in a position to create a Safe Routes to School plan, there might be opportunities to integrate Safe Routes to School elements into an existing or future Vision Zero action plan. Since planning processes also involve elected officials, Vision Zero staff can elevate the importance of Safe Routes to School in these conversations. This will ensure that children are prioritized in the decision-making process and can increase political will to support Safe Routes to School initiatives.

Lastly, Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero can partner around messaging. Both programs aim to be accessible and responsive to community members – but explaining transportation concepts can be hard to understand and confusing. Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero rely on robust community engagement and public messaging in order to be successful. This partnership can provide opportunities to streamline messaging about safe behaviors, especially from the child safety perspective. It can also expand the reach to new audiences, with Safe Routes to School targeting students and families and Vision Zero targeting the larger city or county.

Partnering with Purpose in Denver

City of Denver understands that road safety initiatives are more successful when we work together. Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DOTI) has dedicated staff to manage their Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero programs. Staff collaborate on various initiatives including action planning, community engagement, education, and program evaluation. [Denver's Vision Zero Action Plan](#) outlines several provisions that prioritize children as road users including developing a K-12 multimodal safety curriculum. There was also a school working group that assisted in the action planning process. [Denver's Safe Routes to School Action Plan](#) includes a specific Vision Zero goal of eliminating all fatalities and serious injuries for youth under 18 by 2026. All Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects are guided by FHWA's proven safety countermeasures to ensure Vision Zero alignment. Schools have also benefitted from the citywide Vision Zero speed limit reduction. Denver Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero plan to grow their partnership in the coming years by focusing on youth safety education and conducting school travel plan studies at priority locations.

Identifying Partnership Opportunities

Similar to Safe Routes to School, Vision Zero programs look different depending on where they are being implemented. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. This means that partnerships between Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero can vary depending on the needs of the community and the resources that are available. We suggest doing a bit of pre-planning to determine where your goals align, what assets each partner will bring, and how this partnership can respond to the community's needs. Here are a few partnership planning questions to consider:

- Where are your program priority areas (neighborhoods, zip codes, demographic groups, etc)? Where is there overlap?
- How does data inform your program priority areas? What other information helps you determine your priority areas?
- What are some of the biggest road safety concerns you hear from the communities you work with?
- How do you communicate with community members (ex. monthly newsletter, social media, in-person outreach)?
- What resources can you bring to this partnership (ex. funding, school contacts, staff to assist at events)?
- What are some of your upcoming program activities or initiatives?



Once you've assessed your individual programs, you can begin planning how to collaborate to reach your shared goals. Again, this will look different in each community. You must choose a partnership model that is within your capacity and that advances your goals. Some partnerships will be more informal and lower effort, like sharing each other's information with your respective audiences. Other partnerships might be more formal or time intensive, like participating in a joint task force or action planning process. That's okay! Just find the right partnership that works for you. As you get started, here are a few potential opportunities to explore:

ENGAGEMENT

- Share an outreach table at a community event
- Host a community listening session
- Distribute joint surveys

PROGRAMMING

- Have a Vision Zero table at Walk/Bike and Roll to School Day events
- Incorporate Vision Zero concepts into bike and pedestrian education
- Organize a Vision Zero Ambassador program for youth

ENGINEERING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

- Host a Vision Zero walk/bike/roll audit that includes school routes
- Implement Safe Routes to School engineering strategies – link to guide
- Host a student design charette for upcoming projects

PLANNING

- Include a Safe Routes to School representative on a Vision Zero Task Force and vice versa
- Create a joint Vision Zero and Safe Routes to School task force
- Incorporate Safe Routes to School elements in a Vision Zero action plan

MESSAGING

- Include Safe Routes to School links on a Vision Zero website and vice versa
- Create a Vision Zero campaign specifically focused on safety along school routes
- Organize a Safe Routes to School session at a local Vision Zero conference

Ultimately, a partnership is what you make it. There are plenty of ways that Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero can partner – the key is thoughtful planning, aligning your goals, and using your resources strategically. This will keep you on track and focused. Also, remember it's okay to start small and build a partnership over time. Your programs might be in different stages of development or you don't have the bandwidth for a large collaboration. Be realistic about what you can do and work from there!



Albuquerque Public Schools Vision Zero for Youth Initiative

Schools are not always the primary partners for road safety initiatives, but [Albuquerque's Vision Zero program](#) is changing that narrative. As part of their [Capital Master Plan](#), Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) adopted a Vision Zero framework to make it safer for students to travel to school. This includes different modes of student travel - walking, biking, rolling, riding the bus, riding public transit, or traveling in a vehicle. The [APS Vision Zero for Youth Initiative](#) has three components: traffic safety curriculum, traffic safety awareness campaigns, and an [action plan](#). The goals are to ensure that kids and their families feel safe walking and riding to school, to eliminate barriers to walking and biking, and to educate all road users on how to keep each other safe.

APS intentionally centered students in their engagement efforts. They conducted 11 [mapping sessions](#) and [surveys](#) to engage students in developing the pedestrian safety program. Over 150 students participated in sessions where they drew maps of their pedestrian experiences and share potential safety solutions. APS also engaged teachers and school staff and convened a Vision Zero Task Force to review the curriculum and action plan. The action plan outlines youth Vision Zero strategies and evaluation measures. It designed to be a living document and is reviewed on a regular basis. Visit the [APS website](#) for links to additional information.

Conclusion

As Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero continue gaining momentum, it is even more important to consider how the two programs work together. Communities want to see shared messaging, streamlined engagement, and cooperation between project partners. This kind of thoughtful collaboration will make it easier to reach the goal of creating safe streets for everyone, especially kids. Take the time to explore what type of partnership works for you, even if you start small. Integrating Safe Routes to School and Vision Zero will put your community on the right path to achieving your road safety goals.