

CELEBRATING WALKING, ROLLING, AND SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS ON INTERNATIONAL WALK TO SCHOOL DAY: Ideas to Integrate Safe Routes to Parks into Walk to School Day Events



The first Wednesday of October can be an exciting time of year for many students who walk and roll with their families and friends to school. It is International Walk to School Day, a day when families across several countries celebrate their active route to school. Walk to School Day can be a fun way to encourage or re-energize children and families to walk and roll to school regularly. It can also be a unique opportunity to celebrate great parks and safe park access. This fact sheet shares ideas for incorporating Safe Routes to Parks elements into Walk to School Day – a win-win for Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks advocates. Parks advocates and Safe Routes to School practitioners alike can use this fact sheet for ideas on tying Safe Routes to Parks activities into their Walk to School Day events and keeping up the momentum beyond October.

There are natural overlaps between Walk to School Day and Safe Routes to Parks. For example, some schools use nearby parks as remote drop-off locations to assist children who live too far or have unsafe routes, reduce traffic congestion at schools during arrival and dismissal, and encourage neighbors to walk and roll together to school. Parks can also serve as excellent alternative locations for schools that may not have space to host recess, sports practices, or other out-of-school activities. When schools are close to parks, there are opportunities to support Walk to School Day and engage primary park users in the discussion to improve safe and equitable park access, ultimately leading to more people using the park. Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks advocates can work together to use Walk to School Day as a catalyst for improving safe walking and biking throughout the community.



WHAT IS SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS?

Safe Routes to Parks aims to improve accessibility for people walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation, creating routes that are safe from traffic and personal danger for people of all ages and abilities, and ensuring that well-maintained and well-programmed parks are conveniently located within a 10-minute walk or bike ride (approximately one-half mile) from where people live.ⁱ Safe Routes to Parks provides advocates with the tools to champion safe and equitable access during consideration of park siting, community engagement, allocation of funds, planning, and implementation of traffic and public safety initiatives, as well as park improvements. The Safe Routes to Parks framework helps advocates engage a variety of partners on this work, assess community needs, prioritize needs and create goals and actions, put the plans into action, and sustain their efforts. Over the long term, with increased safety and accessibility, Safe Routes to Parks seeks to increase park usage and improve health and wellbeing for people of all ages, races, abilities, and income levels. To learn more, visit [Safe Routes to Parks](#).



WHAT IS WALK TO SCHOOL DAY?

International Walk to School Day is an annual event held on the first Wednesday of October to encourage walking and rolling to and from school. Walk to School Day in the United States began in 1997 as a one-day event aimed at calling attention to the need for more walkable communities.ⁱⁱ In 2000 the U.S. and Canada joined for the first International Walk to School Day, and since then, worldwide interest and participation in Walk to School Day has continued to grow.ⁱⁱⁱ Walk to School Day is a great opportunity to celebrate the independence of walking and rolling to school, promote healthier travel options, demonstrate community benefits like reduced congestion and air pollution, and help call attention to needed improvements for safer walking and rolling. Some communities participate in a single-day event, and others celebrate all month long. Learn more at [WalkBiketoSchool.org](#).



Ideas for Promoting Parks through Walk to School Day

If schools in your area have existing Walk to School Day efforts, there is an opportunity to integrate park-related activities to help show the connection between safe walking and rolling to schools and parks. Some steps advocates could take to help demonstrate and lead the connection include:

- **Join forces to plan a Walk to School Day event** – Safe Routes to Parks and Safe Routes to School advocates showing up to aid in efforts and events organized by or for community residents, such as Walk to School Day, can help establish mutually beneficial relationships, build community trust, and boost enthusiasm for safe, walkable, and bikeable routes to schools and parks. Identify which schools and parks are located near each other and connect with the corresponding parks and recreation staff, school staff, Safe Routes to School committee members, parent and caregiver volunteers, or the school district. Consider how each partner can help elevate the goal of Walk to School Day through collaboration. For instance, Safe Routes to School practitioners can help make connections with school staff, students and families, and existing walking and biking programming efforts. Parks professionals and advocates can activate parks and recreation facilities to co-lead engaging activities or designate space for remote-drop offs. Working with entities that organize Walk to School Day can be mutually beneficial in building partnerships with local agencies and community organizations, school administrators, and parents and caregivers because of their established relationships from working with these groups during previous events.
- **Take the initiative to plan your community's first Walk to School Day** - If your community doesn't yet have a Safe Routes to School program or any existing Walk to School Day events in the area, offer to help coordinate your community's first Walk to School Day! Convey your willingness to [plan a Walk to School Day event](#) to school staff, parent and caregiver groups, or the school district to help build enthusiasm for students walking to get to school. Safe Routes to Parks and Safe Routes to School advocates are uniquely positioned to take on this role, as they are equipped with programming staff, walking and biking data, and existing community relationships.
- **Co-identify a route** – Safe Routes to School and Parks advocates can work together to identify a walking and rolling route to schools that includes parks along the way. Consult local data on traffic and personal safety in the area, such as collision and crime and violence statistics, [Safe Routes to Parks Walk Audit](#) or [Safe Route to School Walk Audit](#) data, GIS maps, and information collected from surveys, focus groups, and observations, and Safe Routes to School parent and caregiver surveys to determine a course for the event. If there is a park near the school, consider a route that begins at a park as a new and interesting way to get students to school. In addition, a park can be a great alternative gathering spot, or remote drop-off site to help reduce traffic congestion at the school and create a fun and familiar atmosphere for the community to get together and head to school.

• **Offer to host fun activities at a community park**

Bring attention to the benefits of using parks and being out in nature by offering to conduct activities that engage youth:

- Safe Routes to School and Parks advocates can co-lead [energizer activities](#) in the park or organize a quick game in the park to help kick off Walk to School Day.
- Practice pedestrian safety skills before the walk with a traffic playground or traffic garden (painted, child-sized roads that provide a safe space for children to practice their walking and bicycling skills and learn how to safely share road space with other users). Try out a traffic playground in a nearby park using this [toolkit](#).
- Be sure to provide or arrange for supplies for these activities, including incentives or giveaways for active participation, such as stickers or safety reflective gear. In addition, check with your parks and recreation department for exciting things to give away to children that will remind them of their park experience.

• **Propose leading stimulating activities along the route**

To add to the day's fun, suggest coordinating activities on the way to the school. Ideas for enjoyable activities along the way include having children mark their pathway with chalk, take pictures of things that interest them, and participate in a [Photovoice](#) activity where they capture photos of objects that make their walk pleasant or uncomfortable. [Scavenger hunts](#) can also be done for enjoyment or used as a means to collect data from students. These activities can engage students in identifying particular items along a path and as a way to capture information about assets and barriers to walking. Provide prizes or rewards to participants for their active involvement or outstanding contributions made to the activity.

• **Empower youth as champions for Walk to School Day**

Collaborate with students you have engaged through Safe Routes to School or Safe Routes to Parks efforts to advocate for this event with school staff, parent and caregiver volunteers, or the school district. Students can offer a new and convincing voice to the conversation as they share their perspectives on how this activity would interest other students. For more ideas on how to engage older kids and teens in walking and biking initiatives, refer to this [toolkit](#).

Tips for Safe Routes to Parks Advocates

- **Attend school events to foster relationships** - Identify public events at the school where you will have the opportunity to introduce yourself to staff and volunteers and show your support for others' events and priorities. A vital community engagement principle is to show up for community members instead of always looking for residents to be present for your endeavors. By doing so, the hope is to foster a two-way supportive relationship that will lead to countless collaborative efforts, such as a walk to school activity from the park.
- **Help connect the dots between parks and schools** – Safe Route to Parks advocates can increase the utilization of parks by helping people see how close they are to schools. Connect with school staff and present data and maps to help demonstrate safe crossings, sidewalks, and other walking facilities to encourage incorporating parks into walking routes to schools.



Tip for Safe Routes to School Practitioners

- **Begin your Walk to School Day at a park**

Is walkability a challenge around your school? Are you struggling to identify a safe walking route from where students and families live? Consider using a nearby park as a remote drop-off location to kick off your Walk to School Day event. In communities where students travel from distances too far to walk from home, a park can be an excellent location for remote drop-off. Remote drop-off means parents, caregivers, and school buses drop students off at a site within walking distance from the school so they can participate in Walk to School Day or regular walk to school activities. Learn more about remote drop-off and other arrival and dismissal strategies with this [fact sheet](#).



Sustaining the Momentum beyond Walk to School Day

After your event has wrapped up, think through how you can use the energy from Walk to School Day to generate even more interest in drawing the connection between schools and parks to increase park use. Consider the following:

- **Use data to prioritize the need for improvements schools and parks** – Review findings of data collected before and during Walk to School Day, such as Safe Routes to School parent and caregiver surveys and student travel tallies, Photovoice observations, walk audits, GIS maps, collision and crime and violence statistics, focus groups, etc. Partner with school administrators and students to prioritize improvements for walking and bicycling facilities in areas identified as having the most traffic safety and accessibility barriers.
- **Create change with an initial action** – Connect with community members and the school to select an initial action to build support for more permanent changes or continued work, such as a [pop-up project](#). Team up with school staff to get students and their families involved in making the improvement. Center youth leadership and make activities enjoyable for kids to be a part of to build enthusiasm or reignite excitement around walking to school and encouraging community buy-in of the implemented change. Host an event that promotes awareness of your initial action, such as a walk to school activity along the path from the park to the school.
- **Collect data on the implementation of the initial action** – Involve students in collecting data on the project and compare it to baseline findings. Share results with local foundations, local jurisdiction staff (e.g., departments of transportation, planning, parks, and recreation), and other decision-making bodies (e.g., city council, county board, transportation, or planning commissions) to create more interest in furthering active transportation facilities near the school and park.
- **Form a coordinating team** – Invite members from your parks and recreation department, schools, parent and caregiver groups, youth, and Safe Routes to School program to participate in a coordinating team that plans ongoing activities. Use regular coordinating meetings to share program and planning updates, recruit volunteers, and gather ideas for more well-rounded programming. Check out this [resource](#) for more ideas on aligning Safe Routes to Parks with Safe Routes to School.

- **Collaborate to sustain Walk to School activities and promote parks** – Hold programming activities that activate the park and inspire students to walk to and from the school more times during the year (such as a cleanup program, [walking school bus](#) programs, recreational programs at the park, etc.). Research and apply for funding opportunities that support walking and bicycling facilities near schools and parks. Support the development of a Safe Routes to School Travel Plan that includes using a park as a remote drop-off location to help reduce traffic congestion near the school.

Conclusion

Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks advocates can partner to create more walkable, bikeable, and safer communities. By working together, advocates can bring more resources to bear and accomplish even more than they could do separately. Walk to School Day is a great starting point to kick off this new partnership to promote initiatives that focus on safe access to everyday destinations. Still, the benefits will last much longer than the month of October. Working together on walking, biking, and park initiatives can help grow lasting relationships, diversify community engagement, and foster opportunities for future collaborations.

References

- i. "Safe Routes to Parks." National Recreation and Parks Association. 2016. Accessed September 7, 2021. <https://www.nrpa.org/Safe-Routes-To-Parks/>
- ii. Walk and Bike to School History. WalkBiketoSchool.org, September 7, 2021. <http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/learn-more/about-the-events/history/>.
- iii. Ibid.

