



ALIGNING SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS WITH SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL



saferoutespartnership.org



[SafeRoutesPartnership](https://www.facebook.com/SafeRoutesPartnership)



[@SafeRoutesNow](https://twitter.com/SafeRoutesNow)



**Safe
Routes**
PARTNERSHIP

Active Paths for Equity & Health



INTRODUCTION

Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks both focus on providing safe, convenient, and healthy ways for people to get to important community destinations. They both intend to improve the mobility and health of the people who need it most, such as children, families, and people without cars. Both efforts specifically focus on low-income and communities of color in order to address histories of underinvestment. Aligning these efforts can support active trips throughout neighborhoods, not just to specific destinations, and ultimately help shift how people get around daily. This fact sheet will outline how Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks programming and advocacy can align to achieve shared goals and accomplish even more than each could do separately.

Broadly, Safe Routes to Parks and Safe Routes to School share a core constituency: kids and their caregivers. Both programs should actively seek to better understand the experiences of this constituency and provide the programs and advocacy to help do the following:

- Increase opportunities for physical activity
- Strengthen community connections
- Decrease the environmental impact of daily travel
- Improve safety from traffic and personal violence

Entities involved with Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks can each bring unique assets and resources to their shared work — whether through shared use of school yards and playgrounds that are open to the entire community, or combining staff resources and partnering to teach children how to ride bikes.

WHAT IS SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS?

Safe Routes to Parks is a movement that aims to make it safer and easier for people to access great parks by walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation, especially low-income communities and communities of color, where we know that less investment has gone into the routes to and the amenities in parks. This means 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 (approximately one-half mile) from where people live. 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](http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/healthy-communities/saferoutestoparks) (www.saferoutespartnership.org/healthy-communities/saferoutestoparks).

The 6 E's of Safe Routes

The 6 E's of Safe Routes to School & the Safe Routes to Parks Framework

The [Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework](#) outlines a process to work through improvements to parks and the routes to access them. The 6 E's of Safe Routes to School outline the programmatic content of Safe Routes to School programs. These two tools can be used to better understand how these two efforts align. Engagement and equity should shape both of these processes and be integral parts of any activities. Evaluation in the 6 E's corresponds with assessment in the Safe Routes to Parks framework. Planning and implementation in the Safe Routes to Parks framework are where the planning and implementation of engineering, education, and encouragement from the 6 E's can take place.

Thinking through how these programs can align is only the first step. Next, take specific steps to merge efforts. The following pages contain ideas and examples from other communities that take advantage of the alignment between Safe Routes to School and Safe Routes to Parks to advance shared goals and values.

THE 6 E'S OF SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Engagement

All Safe Routes to School initiatives should begin by listening to students, families, teachers, and school leaders and working with existing community organizations, and build intentional, ongoing engagement opportunities into the program structure.

Equity

Ensuring that Safe Routes to School initiatives are benefiting all demographic groups, with particular attention to ensuring safe, healthy, and fair outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students of all genders, students with disabilities, and others.

Engineering

Engineering: Creating physical improvements to streets and neighborhoods that make walking and bicycling safer, more comfortable, and more convenient.

Encouragement

Encouragement: Generating enthusiasm and increased walking and bicycling for students through events, activities, and programs.

Education

Education: Providing students and the community with the skills to walk and bicycle safely, educating them about benefits of walking and bicycling, and teaching them about the broad range of transportation choices.

Evaluation

Evaluation: Assessing which approaches are more or less successful, ensuring that programs and initiatives are supporting equitable outcomes, and identifying unintended consequences or opportunities to improve the effectiveness of each approach.

Engagement

Combine Engagement Efforts

Kids and families are core constituencies for both schools and parks. Collaboration on meaningful and authentic engagement opportunities can work well because community members' experiences often do not cleanly fit into specific boxes. Partner on joint listening sessions to understand how kids and their families feel about walking and biking back and forth to school and around their neighborhood's public spaces. This is especially important for neighborhoods with primarily Black, indigenous, people of color, and immigrant communities. Invite local youth and community leaders to open the conversation with their stories and shape the structure of the engagement to be meaningful, authentic, and culturally relevant. For more specific details on how to run community visioning activities and ideas for potential questions, look at [A Checklist for Facilitating Community Engagement During Safe Routes to Parks Visioning Activities](#).



Cultivate Youth Leadership

Kids can take on leadership roles to advance Safe Routes to School and Parks programming as well as park stewardship. Ask kids what they love about walking and biking around their community and what could be improved. Support their ideas and encourage their creativity. For more ideas on how to engage older kids and teens, refer to [Safe Routes for Youth: Engaging Teens in Vision Zero](#).

ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION: TUSCON, AZ



In Tucson, Arizona, the transportation and mobility department partnered with Living Streets Alliance, a local non-profit, to coordinate a movie night complete with ice-cream, free bike maintenance, and opportunities to share input on a proposed bicycle boulevard project that connects to several parks, schools, and a library. Living Streets Alliance has been working on Safe Routes to School and Complete Streets initiatives in the City of Tucson, and generally engaging community through events that invite people to enjoy their streets and articulate their visions for what their communities could be. This partnership allows for the city to take more fun, creative, and informal approaches to engaging community members, allows shared resources to go further, and helps both organizations understand and address the broader interests of the community they are working in.

Equity

Prioritize Resources to Increase Equity

Coordinate to prioritize projects and funding based on community data, which can include quantitative data like crash and crime rates, as well as qualitative data like perceived safety on routes between parks and schools. Perceptions of safe park and school access may vary based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and a whole host of other factors that make up one's identity. Be cognizant of this and listen to what members of the community say about their experiences. In many cases, data show that communities of color and low-income communities have fewer safe street amenities and are over-represented in pedestrian fatalities.¹ Prioritize funding and projects for these neighborhoods and schools based on the data.

Open School Grounds for Community Use

Shared use, also known as joint use, occurs when one entity agrees to open or broaden access to their property and/or facilities for community use, such as recreational activities. The partnerships can be formalized through agreements or informally based on historical practices. Formal arrangements are often documented through an agreement which sets forth the terms and conditions for the shared use of the property or facility. Regardless, successful partnerships generally rely on the pooling of resources to expand community access and use public space more efficiently. These agreements can meaningfully expand play and recreation opportunities, particularly for areas with low park access. Parks and recreation departments may take on shared responsibility for maintenance of these existing facilities on school grounds, which is far less expensive than building new facilities in areas with limited park access. For more detailed tools and resources for shared use agreements, read [this factsheet](#) on shared use that also includes common challenges and keys to success. For more details on the potential forms of shared use policies, read [this factsheet](#) on the spectrum of shared use policies and agreements.



Increase Access to Organized Sports

Recreational youth sports programs provide critical opportunities for physical activity, social development, and learning, but kids from lower-income families are less likely to participate in youth sports.² This may be due to less access to the facilities and equipment, a lack of school programming, or the inability to pay fees required to participate. Schools and parks and recreation departments can partner to lower fees as well as share recreational facilities, equipment, and transportation resources that may not otherwise be available.³

Education

Pop-Up Traffic Gardens

Traffic gardens (miniature, child-sized roadways) can vary from complex and professional-grade to simple constructions of common materials like chalk, paint, and duct tape. All that you need to begin is an unused flat surface such as a portion of a school parking lot or an unused tennis court.

Support Each Other's Programming

In New York City, the Department of Parks and Recreation's summer camps participate heavily in Bike NYC's Summer Youth Program. New York City Parks also provides most of the locations for BikeNYC's Bike Education Centers, and the National Parks Service hosts one of their Bike Education Centers in Ft. Wadsworth Staten Island.

EDUCATION IN ACTION: NEW YORK & DENVER

In New York City, every year Bike NYC trains NYC parks and recreation staff on how to run Learn to Ride classes. Bike NYC provides the tools necessary for the classes and handles registration and customer service. Parks and recreation staff then schedule and run their own Learn to Ride classes for kids citywide.



Denver's Safe Routes to School program created five short videos in English and Spanish to instruct people of all bicycling levels how to ride safely.

In Denver, Colorado, the City and County of Denver's Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DOTI) houses the Denver Safe Routes to School program. DOTI partnered with Denver Parks and Recreation to construct a practice bike course in a Denver recreation center located in a high-need neighborhood. The course is designed to instruct cyclists of all levels on how to ride safely on Denver streets with simulated streetscapes on the course. Check out [this video](#) to see the course. DOTI collaborated with parks and recreation to create five short training videos with instruction in English and Spanish on how to practice at each station on the course. Safe Routes to School program staff are also developing a series of training modules into their active transportation education that will train champions at public elementary schools, within parks and recreation, and other city staff who engage with the public through a safety education lens. Some of the modules are directly related to walking, biking, and rolling to and from school.

In 2015, the District of Columbia Public Schools' (DCPS) Director of Physical Education, Miriam Kenyon, started "Biking in the Park", a program where every second grader would learn how to ride a bike in physical education class and culminate the experience with a ride to a nearby park or other community destination. She was motivated to start the program after speaking with DC's local bike advocacy group and discovering that many area children did not learn how to ride home. In DC, a rapidly gentrifying city, the road infrastructure and cost of living are changing. Bike skills are a way that kids who grow up in DC can move around the city safely and affordably. This program is an opportunity to ensure that every child at DC public schools has an equal opportunity to learn bike skills. It is also an opportunity to expand learning past the walls of the classroom. Kids taking that five to seven-mile ride can build resilience, overcome the physical challenges, and come to understand their neighborhood as a stage for their learning.



The series of lessons are intentionally flexible, but they generally begin with helmet and safety checks, tips on manipulating the bike, power pedals, and then work on different terrains as well as uphill and downhill riding. Miriam encouraged teachers to take ownership of the program. Teachers know their school's kids and neighborhood, so they could choose routes to highlight specific neighborhood connections or trails and even add on time to play in the park or have a picnic as part of the culminating ride. Over the years, schools have built groups of volunteers to support this fun program and they have grown to manage it more independently.

Since 2015, the program has grown and incorporated two more supportive elements: balance bikes for pre-k kids and traffic gardens on school grounds. The balance bikes became part of the regular equipment for pre-k kids during recess and PE so that by the time kids got to second grade, they would already have baseline skills to prepare them for learning how to ride a bike.

A common barrier to learning how to ride a bike is that there are not many spaces to safely practice in the city. Traffic gardens, which are painted, child-sized roads, on school property provide a safe space for children to practice their bicycling skills and learn how to safely share road space with other users. For example, a traffic garden may have small roads winding around trees, traffic signals, and other road markings to simulate the experience of navigating on actual roads. DCPS worked with a host of partners, kids, and parents to design their traffic gardens and used funding from DC's Vision Zero initiative. The final designs were much loved not just by kids during school, but also by community members who used it for practice outside of school hours as well. For more on the process of engagement and design that went into these traffic gardens, read this [blog post](#).

All of these elements work together not just to teach kids how to ride a bike, but how to apply those skills in their community. This will help ensure that future residents of DC have strong active transportation skills, and whatever the city does to shift infrastructure, they will be ready to utilize it.

"While you work together on one project, ideas for 50 more projects come to light. For example, we may be working on a traffic garden behind a school, but then we want to make sure kids have access to bikes at home and that they can ride safely to the traffic garden as well."

- Finoualla Quin, Discover Traffic Gardens

Encouragement

Highlight the Connections Between Schools and Parks

Partner on events and activities to connect kids to their local parks from school. This can look like an end of the year field day where kids bike and walk to the park together, a science class field trip, or even an art project to draw attention to safe route between the two locations.

Use Parks as Remote Drop-off Locations

A park near a school can be a great location for families who do not live within walking distance to meet and participate in a walking school bus for at least a portion of their daily journey to school.

Walk and Bike to School Day

These are major events for Safe Routes to School programs to get kids and their families using active transportation on their commute to school. These events, held in October and May, can also provide an exciting opportunity to connect with community members and ask them what their experiences of getting around their neighborhood have been. Neighborhood residents are experts on their community and will likely be able to identify the greatest assets and most important opportunities for improvement if given the chance.

TIP: Parks can serve as a gathering point to begin events. Parks and recreation staff can also participate by leading a warm-up before kids continue on the route to school, or even be stationed along the route during departure and arrival times to connect with parents and students, host energizer stations with snacks or prizes, and connect participants with park amenities.



Photo: Cultiva La Salud

ENCOURAGEMENT IN ACTION: MERCED COUNTY, CA

Cultiva La Salud, a nonprofit focused on creating healthy and equitable communities made the connection between parks and schools during their time as a 2018 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities grantee. Cultiva La Salud partnered with residents, the town and county parks and recreation department, United Way of Merced County, and Planada Elementary School District to decorate a path between Houlihan Park and Planada Elementary School. They worked together to paint art on the sidewalk and install educational signs in English and Spanish with activities for families to complete on the journey between the park and school. This playful installation offers an interactive experience for youth and supports early learning along the route from the school to the park.

Encouragement

Support Events

Show up to each other's events to share resources and programming information. Ensure that the information and programming shared are culturally relevant to the population of that particular neighborhood.

TIP: For community park events, Safe Routes to School practitioners can set up a table for helmet fittings, bike maintenance, and other promotional activities.



Photo: Shawnee Family YMCA

Celebrate and Elevate Success

Elected officials have hard jobs, but events for Safe Routes to Schools and Safe Routes to Parks can provide a much needed celebratory win that sets the stage for stronger relationships. Celebrate shared successes publicly with parties and ribbon cuttings, and make sure to invite elected officials, board members, and other key decision-makers in your community.

Provide Equipment

Parks often host recreational equipment, and this could include a bike library for recreational use in the parks as well as bike education. New York State Parks hosts a bike library that Bike NYC runs at the new Shirley Chisholm State Park where people can borrow bikes to ride around the park.



ENCOURAGEMENT IN ACTION: BEAVERTON, OR

In Beaverton, Oregon, the parks and recreation department coordinated the grand opening of a new trail serving the community close to an elementary school as part of the International Walk and Roll to School Day. Parks and recreation staff had a table where during arrival and dismissal time to talk with parents and hand out prizes.

Photo: Leah Biado-Luis

Engineering

Parks and trails can be important connections for kids on their routes to school. Many kids also pass through parks to get to school or spend their time in these spaces before and after school.

Coordinate Future Capital Improvement Projects

Work together to identify potential projects that can support both park and school goals to increase equity, access, safety, and physical activity. Park improvement projects are often planned years in advance in master planning documents, capital improvement plans, and other park or trail system-specific plans. Review these documents for opportunities for alignment.

Ensure Accessibility

Ensure that existing trails, playgrounds, parks, and other green spaces near schools are accessible for everyone, including kids and other community members with disabilities.

Replicate Proven Approaches for Slowing Traffic

In Honolulu, Hawaii, Blue Zones Hawaii painted bulb-outs, street corner extensions that encourage drivers to slow down as they turn, near Old Stadium Park to slow traffic. Their successful process included significant community involvement in the design and application of the street art. A year later, they applied for and won \$320,000 of infrastructure funding to organize the same process of community-led and installed art to slow traffic near a local school.

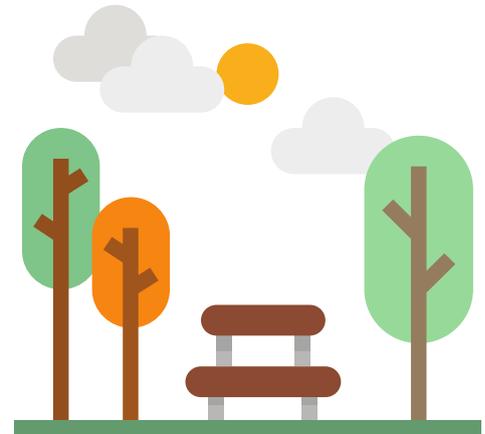


Photos: Blue Zones Hawaii

Engineering

Increase Safety Through Design and Programming

Design, retrofit, and maintain spaces with approaches that support safety, increased community use, more visibility, and community ownership. This can look like removing low hanging branches on trees to increase visibility into the park from neighboring homes, adding additional lighting to spaces, or adding a community-designed mural.



ENGINEERING A SAFER PARK IN YOUNGSTOWN, OH



Photo: Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation

In Youngstown, Ohio, the old tennis courts at Homestead Park were in a serious state of disrepair, secluded from the rest of the park, and were attracting illegal activity. With no fence to control access, people would drive over the sidewalk and park on the courts to drink and party, with occasional fights and even shootings breaking out. Residents would often wake up to find broken glass, trash, and drug paraphernalia littered around the courts, including on the sidewalk, which connects the park with two nearby elementary schools and a playground. Safety and infrastructure improvements along this route has also been specifically identified in the city's Safe Routes to School Travel Plan. The community identified this park and these issues specifically as priorities to address as part of their Safe Routes to Parks work.

With funding from the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities Grant, Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation removed the old court blacktop and planted grass seed in the space. They added a split rail fence to prevent car access and added four LED spotlights to illuminate the area. In response to this community-led effort, the councilwoman for that area donated \$10,000 to repair broken sidewalks leading to the park.

Evaluation



Photo: Blue Zones Hawaii

Identify Community Goals

Work with youth, families, community members, school staff, parks and recreation staff, and other key stakeholders to identify what success could look like. Then, work backward from that big vision to identify potential ways to measure progress toward that end goal. For example, you can measure the number of school events that happen at the park, the number of students participating in park and walk programs, or self-reported feelings of safety on trails that connect to schools.

Partner to Collect Data

Collecting data before and after infrastructure and programming improvements is essential for measuring success and supporting further work. Work together to mobilize staff and volunteers for activities like bike and pedestrian counts and survey distribution. For more information on methods to collect data related to Safe Routes to Parks, read [Safe Routes to Parks Evaluation Guide: Steps and Tips to Assess and Inform Efforts to Improve Park Access](#).



The Secret to Success: Partnerships

A partnership between Safe Routes to Parks and Safe Routes to Schools efforts may naturally take shape between specific parks and schools that are within walking or biking distance of each other. It can also take shape through intentional relationship building between the parks department and the agency that houses the local Safe Routes to School program.



In Beaverton, Oregon, the Safe Routes to School coordination team includes a representative from Tualatin Hills Parks and Recreation as well as other city and county departments. The team meets monthly to discuss projects and events as well as update each other on programming that may be of interest to the group. This allows for easier coordination and support for projects and programming. For example, when the parks and recreation department applies for grants to support

infrastructure improvements that align with the school district's goals, the school district writes a letter of support to strengthen the application. The coordination committee has also allowed members to strengthen working relationships across departments, setting the stage for future collaborative work. They worked together to install temporary, "pop-up" traffic safety playground (also known as a "traffic garden") on a basketball play pad that is currently unused. Leah Biado-Luis, the Safe Routes to School Coordinator, presented the idea to the coordination team at their June 2020 meeting. She shared photos of a similar concept in Portland, explained the rationale and benefits, and explained that they were seeking a location for installation. The parks and recreation department followed up the next week offer up locations. They are now coordinating to plan for a permanent installation in the coming year.

It is important to build relationships between school staff, park staff, parents, students, and other community members to support ongoing programming and collaboration. The relationships fostered through one project can open doors to future opportunities for increasing access, equity, and health in the community.



In Shawnee, Oklahoma, the Shawnee Family YMCA mobilized local youth and families to pass a Safe Routes to School plan. Those same youth activists and families formed the core community coalition to work on assessing Safe Routes to Parks and advocating for improvements. As part of this effort, the Shawnee Family YMCA organized a group of youth and city residents to ride their bikes to a city commissioners meeting to testify in support of Safe Routes to Parks, Safe Routes to School, and the need for safer streets for riding bikes in Shawnee.



In Marin County, California, Safe Routes to School staff collaborated with Marin County Parks and Recreation to design and install safety signs, a roundabout and other features along the rail trail that leads to a middle school and high school. The parks department took the lead on the infrastructure improvements. They have continued to explore further partnership around sea level rise along that same trail. You can read the report on the sea level rise project [here](#).



CONCLUSION

Hopefully, these ideas have inspired you to get creative and have fun collaborating with your fellow advocates. Ultimately, the health and safety of communities depends on a strong network of safe routes between important destinations. By working together, Safe Routes to Parks and Safe Routes to School efforts can move toward this goal more effectively than they could individually with the same budgets, staff, and time.

References

1. “At the Intersection of Active Transportation and Equity.” Safe Routes Partnership, 2015. Accessed September 23, 2020. <https://saferoutespartnership.org/resources/report/intersection-active-transportation-equity>.
2. Whitaker, Anamarie A., Garrett Baker, Luke J. Matthews, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, and Mark Barrett. “Kids from Low-Income Families Are Less Likely to Participate in Sports,” July 18, 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2581.html.
3. “Leveling the Playing Field for Youth Sports: Perspectives: Parks and Recreation Magazine: NRPA.” National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). Accessed October 14, 2020. <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2019/october/leveling-the-playing-field-for-youth-sports/>.