

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL PROGRAM SUMMARY

What is Bloomington Safe Routes to School?

Bloomington Safe Routes to School (SRTS) helps children get to school safely, confidently, and actively by bus, walking, biking, or rolling alone or with friends, siblings, and trusted adults. When kids have safe and active routes to school, they get more physical activity, build independence, have fun, and arrive at school ready to learn. The program brings together schools, families, and the city to make everyday trips to school safer and more fun through programs, projects, and policies including:

- Teaching kids age-appropriate walking and biking skills
- Hosting fun low-pressure events that let families try active routes to school together
- Skills and confidence building for kids
- Group travel options like walking school buses and bike buses
- Events and encouragement that make getting to school fun
- Opportunities for play, engagement, and community building
- Short and long term plans for safer streets, trails, and paths using [safety countermeasures](#)

The Safe Routes to School program can result in real infrastructure, programming, and educational outcomes for schools and their students. The program will connect the City of Bloomington with a new school each year, setting up a program each school can maintain moving forward.



Why Safe Routes to School

A generation ago, walking or biking to school was normal. In 1969, nearly half of all U.S. children walked or biked to school. Today, fewer than 15% do. The change has meant less activity for kids and more cars on the road. Driving children to school now makes up as much as 14% of morning traffic. The City's Safe Routes to School program intends to reverse this trend and support several benefits:

- **Active Kids:** Walking, biking, or rolling to school builds daily physical activity into kids' routines, supporting physical health, mental well-being, and better focus in the classroom—habits that can last a lifetime.
- **Safe Travel Options:** Targeted safety improvements to streets, sidewalks, crossings, and trails create safer routes for children while giving families and entire neighborhoods more comfortable, reliable ways to get around.
- **Healthy Kids:** Vehicle idling increases air pollution around schools, exposing children to harmful pollutants linked to asthma and other health problems. Because children's lungs are still developing, reducing idling vehicles helps lower their exposure and supports healthier school environments.
- **Fun and Engagement:** Active routes make the school trip enjoyable giving kids time with friends, opportunities to explore their neighborhood, and a sense of pride and independence.
- **Stronger Neighborhoods:** Active transportation brings families into the public realm, reduces traffic near schools, and helps neighbors look out for one another, creating safer, more connected communities.
- **Stronger School Performance:** Exercise, like walking to school, has even been proven to help kids concentrate better in school helping schools meet their academic and testing goals.



Bloomington Safe Routes to School Planning

Nationwide Context

Since the 1970s, children across the United States have experienced a significant decline in independent mobility, with fewer walking or biking in their neighborhoods or traveling to and from school under their own power. This loss of mobility has contributed to negative health outcomes, reduced physical activity, and increased traffic congestion around schools and in cities more broadly.

In response to growing health and safety concerns, Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs began emerging in communities across the country in the late 1990s. These efforts gained national momentum in 2005, when Congress authorized dedicated Safe Routes to School funding through the federal transportation bill SAFETEA-LU. The program supported a comprehensive approach that combined infrastructure improvements, education, encouragement, enforcement, and evaluation to make walking and bicycling to school safer and more appealing for students and their families.

While more recent federal transportation bills no longer include funding specifically earmarked for Safe Routes to School, Congress established the Transportation Alternatives (TA) program, which continues to support pedestrian- and bicycle-focused projects, including those that improve access to schools. As a result, although the funding landscape has evolved since 2005, communities still have multiple opportunities to pursue infrastructure investments and programmatic initiatives that advance Safe Routes to School goals with local and grant funding.

Active Routes to School in Bloomington Context

Between the years 2019-2023, there were 10,391 crashes on Bloomington's streets; 443 of these crashes resulted in either a life-changing injury or death. These crashes, notably, are more than a statistic to track. These crashes forever impact families, friends, and neighbors throughout Bloomington.

In response, the City adopted a *Safe Streets for All Action Plan* in 2024 which called for the City to “...develop Safe Routes to School Program for all public and private preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools within City limits” intended to provide extra prioritization to improvements within school walksheds. The plan also calls for the City to “...explore establishing a citywide 20 mph speed limit and/or slower speed zones in school areas”.



The City of Bloomington views the Safe Routes to School as a vital part of the City's strategy to eliminate fatal and serious injury crashes. But Safe Routes to School is not just a safety strategy. The program is meant to help build physical activity into kids' routines, help families have fun, and create stronger, more connected neighborhoods.

Our Approach and Principles

While often referred to as "accidents," the reality is that traffic deaths from crashes are preventable. Our approach views traffic deaths as an urgent public health issue with the goal of using a variety of strategies to eliminate all serious injuries and deaths from crashes, not necessarily eliminate all crashes.

Road and vehicle design strongly influence driver behavior. That's why our approach focuses on streets and transportation systems that reduce risks, promote safe speeds, and accommodate human error. People will make mistakes, but those mistakes should not cost lives. Self-explaining and self-enforcing infrastructure (such as crosswalks, protected bike lanes, and traffic-calming measures) helps make streets safer for everyone. Our approach also acknowledges the issue of access, acknowledging that distance, cost, and other factors can impact how easily and safely people travel.

Children are especially vulnerable, relying on walking, biking, and transit for independent travel. We do not blame children for mistakes on the road. Instead, we work to address the systems that put them at risk, ensuring that streets, trails, and transit are safe for all users, regardless of age, income, or mode of transportation.

Our SRTS approach can be customized to each school and typically includes the five E's of safe and active routes to school planning:

- **Engineering:** Creating physical improvements to the infrastructure surrounding schools, reducing speeding, and making routes safer and more comfortable
- **Engagement:** Listening and working with students, families, and organizations to create engaging lessons, programs, and events
- **Encouragement:** Using events and activities to make walking, biking, and rolling to school fun, exciting, and enjoyable
- **Education:** Teaching children about walking, biking, rolling, and how to safely navigate the City's streets.
- **Evaluation:** Monitoring outcomes and trends in active transportation to schools



Decades of safe and active routes to school research shows that the most successful programs combine safety, fun, and social connection. Kids are much more likely to walk or bike when it feels fun, social, and rewarding. Parents are more supportive when children travel in groups, on well-used routes, and with visible road safety measures. Schools with a clear in-school champion and events like Walk to School Day see dramatically higher participation. Programs work best when education, encouragement, and road safety improvements happen together.



Safe Systems Pyramid

Our work draws on a public-health approach to traffic safety, captured in the Safe Systems Pyramid. It's a deliberate break from the frameworks that have shaped American road safety for decades (most notably the "E's" model). Older approaches, like the "E's model, emphasize a single lever or treat crashes primarily as a failure of individual judgment, but the Safe Systems Pyramid does neither. Instead, the Safe Systems Pyramid looks at the population as a whole and asks what systemic conditions are putting people in harm's way.

The base of the pyramid is socioeconomic. That means affordable housing near transit, zoning reforms that bring homes and jobs closer together (cutting vehicle miles traveled, easing the pressure to drive fast over long distances, and broadening access to opportunity), and stronger safety features built into cars themselves. The next layer is the built environment including protected bike lanes, speed humps, and other infrastructure that makes safer behavior the path of least resistance. Above that sits "latent" safety measures, like improved signal timing and leading pedestrian intervals. Higher are active measures including seat belts and helmets. And at the top, narrowest because it's the least effective, is the layer focused on individual behavior such as "slow down" campaigns.



Source: David J. Ederer, Rachael Thompson Panik, Nisha Botchwey, Kari Watkins, The Safe Systems Pyramid: A New Framework for Traffic Safety Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives Volume 21, 2023, 100905, ISSN 2590-1982. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2023.100905>



Improving Access, Happiness, and Community

Our safe systems approach goes beyond traffic safety. It's about creating more joyful and opportunity-rich communities. By offering safe and efficient transportation options, our approach empowers people of all abilities and income levels with greater freedom to travel and improved access to essential destinations like jobs, schools, healthcare, and social spaces.

Access is at the heart of our safe systems approach. Access considers total travel time (and cost) across all modes, driving, walking, biking, and transit, while also addressing land use. Strategic decisions like zoning for dense housing near job centers enhance mobility and support goals such as lowering emissions, expanding opportunity, and addressing economic justice.

Transportation is costly for both individuals and governments. Cars require ongoing expenses like maintenance and insurance, while governments must fund infrastructure upkeep. Our approach promotes a wider range of safe travel options, giving lower-income residents more flexibility and enabling more efficient public spending. For governments, denser development supported by multimodal transportation also produces more tax revenue per mile of infrastructure and requires fewer long-term maintenance costs than models where driving a car for all trips is the only choice available.

A safe systems approach positively shapes the built environment, impacting health and well-being. Walkable areas with greenspaces reduce stress and improve mental health, while neighborhoods dominated by traffic, pollution, and blight experience higher rates of anxiety and depression. Expanded public transit options can reduce crashes, cut pollution, boost physical activity, and improve access to healthcare, nutritious food, services, and community.

Transportation is more than movement. It's a tool for creating healthier, more connected, and equitable communities. Our safe systems approach can help create a city with more transportation options, more access to things that matter, and a healthier, stronger community.



Goals and Expected Outcomes

The goal of Safe Routes to School is to get more kids walking, biking, and rolling to school, improve safety, and increase health and physical activity. In addition, Safe Routes to School programs seek to decrease the number of families driving to school, which can reduce traffic, improve air quality, and reduce costs for families. Our goal is to:

- **Expand a Consistent Program:** Expand Safe Routes to School across Bloomington providing consistent programming, events, and engagement with schools
- **Grow Active Routes to School:** Consistently measure the number of students who walk, bike, and roll to school.
- **Save Families Money:** Families can reduce car use and gas expenses when students walk, bike, or roll to school.
- **Improve Road Safety:** Barriers to walking, biking, and rolling are addressed and opportunities for better infrastructure are identified and implemented
- **Improve Air Quality:** Less driving and idling leads to cleaner air, which reduces negative health outcomes including asthma
- **Increase Academic Performance:** Students who are active before school have better focus and concentration in the classroom with [better academic performance](#) overall.
- **Make Students Healthier:** Walking, biking, and rolling increases students' physical activity and can improve physical and mental health.
- **Support Community:** Walking, biking, and rolling together fosters stronger friendships and builds social connections for families.
- **Support Culture and Behavior:** Create a culture for healthy and safe active and sustainable transportation.
- **Build Sustainability and Legacy:** Support the sustainability and legacy of active and sustainable travel initiatives that focus on children.
- **Develop Resources and Funding:** Build on the need for additional resources and funding to sustain programs, initiatives, and infrastructure that support sustainable travel for children.



Contact Us

Safe Routes to School is an initiative through the City of Bloomington Planning and Transportation Department. You can email the department at planning@bloomington.in.gov or call at 812-349-3423.

To stay informed about the City's planning work, visit the City's website at Bloomington.in.gov/planning