

Safe Routes to School: Increasing Walkability in Urban Neighborhoods

What is a Safe Route to School?

A safe route to school program encourages children to walk or bicycle to or from school.

Safe routes **educate children** on the benefits of biking and walking to school, and how they can do it safely. They can **encourage** active transportation to school through community events that get the school, parents, and the students involved like bike rodeos and walk to school days. Some programs look to **improve the infrastructure** around schools such as improving speed zones, signage, and making sidewalks safer for our children. A safe routes to school program can also work with local and community law **enforcement** agents to ensure traffic laws are obeyed in school zones. Finally, a safe routes to school program **evaluates** the attitudes, outcomes and trends of the community before and after the changes.¹

Safe routes to school programs work:

- One national study of 800 schools who participated in a complete safe routes to school program shows that five years after the implementation, 30 percent more children were walking or biking to school.²
- Programs that improve neighborhood infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.), improve the number of children walking or biking to school by 5 to 20 percent.³
- When encouraged to walk or bike to school, one study shows that this can increase the number of children actively commuting to school by 5 percent.⁴

Why is it important?

One third of all school aged children in New York State are overweight or obese. Children who are obese or overweight are more likely to develop high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, joint problems, liver disease, and poor self-esteem.⁵ Locally in Rochester, New York the numbers are striking. In the City of Rochester, 39 percent of children aged 2-18 are either overweight or obese.⁶



Physical activity is an important key to ensuring children in our community reach a healthy weight. Active children are more likely to be at a healthy weight, which lowers their chance of developing chronic diseases.⁷ Physical activity is crucial for a child's development of strong muscles, bones, and vital organs. In fact, children who are physically active for at least 60 minutes a day have improved thinking and concentration skills that can lead to improvements in school grades.⁸

**“I don’t let my child walk to school by
themselves - it’s not safe”
- Parent at School #2**

Why is no one walking or biking to school?

Unfortunately, despite the health benefits of incorporating physical activity throughout the day, the number of children who walk or bike to school has declined over the decades. In 1969, over 50 percent of children walked or biked to school; while in 2009 a recent study demonstrates only 13 percent of children walked or biked.⁹

The opportunity for children to incorporate physical activity in their daily lives depends on their environment. Studies show that parents are less likely to let their children actively commute if they perceive the neighborhood to be unsafe.¹⁰ Efforts to improve hazardous streets, traffic barriers and signage; and to clear abandoned buildings and graffiti can increase the likelihood of children walking or biking to school.

Walking 1 mile to and from school each day means a child will get two-thirds of their daily recommended physical activity. Safe routes to school programs in Rochester are important. Working with the City of Rochester, the Rochester City School District, local schools, parents, students and community partners, a safe routes to school program can lead to a 30 percent increase in the number

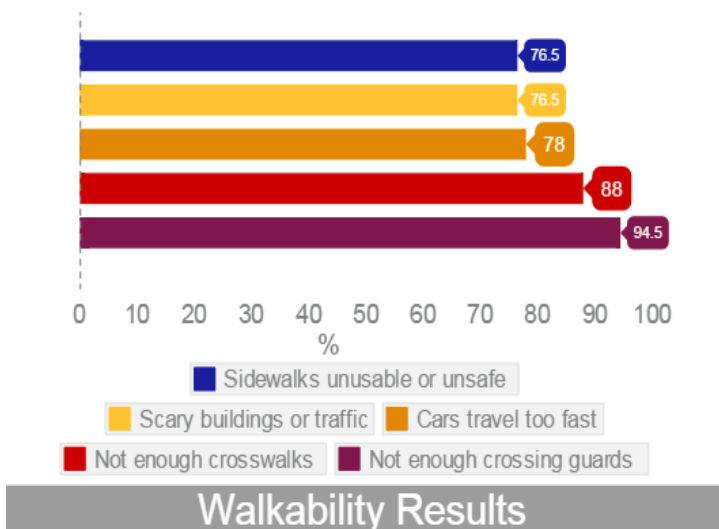


What is happening in Rochester?

In 2013, through funding by the federal government, the City of Rochester established a program that gave money to schools, PTA's and community groups to create or enhance programs that encourage safe walking or biking to school. The money was used for programs such as: student safety patrols, school speed zone awareness, walking school bus or bike train programs, bike racks, covered bike parking, and walk or bike to school day events.

Healthi Kids has been working closely with schools as they create opportunities for safe routes to school events, and encourage their students to walk or bike to school. Last year, Healthi Kids and parents from Schools #2, #10 and #19 looked at walkability in each neighborhood to see what barriers children may face when walking to and from school every day.

The results from our assessment identify lack of crosswalks, unsafe sidewalks, scary buildings, traffic, cars traveling too fast, and not enough crossing guards as the key barriers to walkability in the neighborhood.



It is clear from our assessment that there are still barriers children face when they walk to and from school every day. More must be done to ensure safety and promote safe routes to school.



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Healthi Kids Opportunities for Action

- Engage community parents to share information on safe routes to school and learn about additional barriers in their neighborhood;
- Connect with local neighborhood associations, bloc clubs, and parent groups to sponsor a BoulevArt project around schools or R-Centers to promote traffic calming and promote community.
- Connect school parents with parent liasons in each school to learn more about safe routes at monthly parent coffee hours, PTO/PTA meetings, and other engagement opportunities;
- Work with school principals to share resources and provide technical support for establishing walk or bike to school days;
- Advocate for changes to city policies and programs that promote safe routes to school such as:
 - Prioritizing street signage around schools such as stop and street signs in the multi-year replacement of signs across the city;
 - Developing a traffic calming policy that creates traffic calming infrastructure in schools and residential areas such as: reduced traffic speeds, curb extensions, and speedbumps;
- Work with local law enforcement to:
 - Hire additional crossing guards in school zones;
 - Support walk and bike to school days.

Endnotes

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