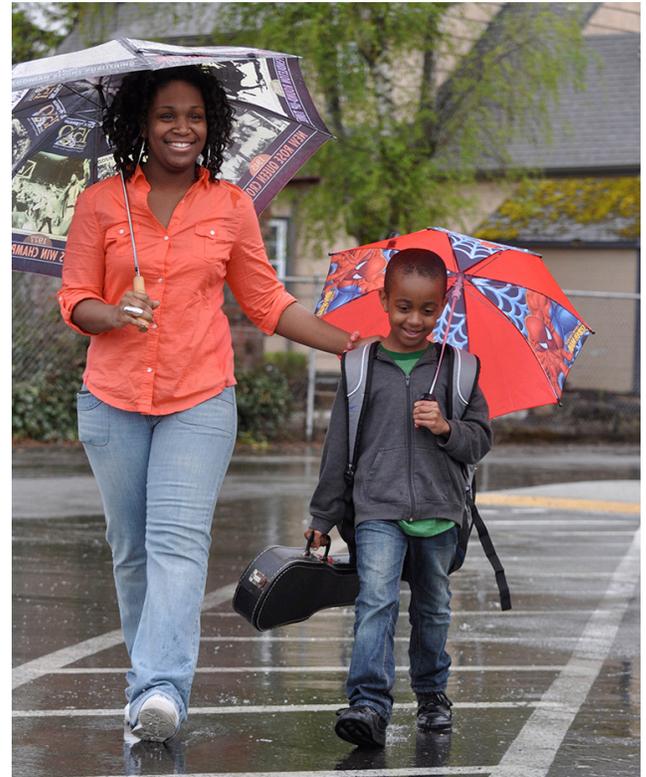


SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL:

# A Primer to Understanding the Role of Governors and State Agency Leaders



*There are many opportunities for governors and state agency leaders to improve walking and bicycling conditions in their states through allocation of funding streams or adoption of supportive policies. This action brief is designed to provide the Safe Routes to School practitioner with the basic tools to understand the priorities of governors and their state agency leaders and recognize how to further educate them on opportunities to improve walking and bicycling at the state level. A companion document, *Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Governors and State Agency Leaders*, focuses on informing these decision-makers on the benefits of Safe Routes to School while sharing best practices in state level decisions, programs and funding that result in more people walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.*



## Introduction to State Government Policies

During the past 15 years, the Safe Routes to School movement in the United States has grown larger and more sophisticated. Walking and bicycling to school is attracting more and more interest from leaders and decision-makers at the local, regional, state and federal levels. As such, Safe Routes to School practitioners have been expanding their efforts to encompass policy, systems and environmental changes in their work and are increasing their focus from a local one to one with regional, state and national reach.

For Safe Routes to School, this has become particularly pertinent with the passage of the new federal transportation act. Commonly referred to as [MAP-21](#),

[the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century law](#) combines what were originally the **Safe Routes to School**, **Transportation Enhancements** and **Recreational Trails** funding programs into one pot of money that is now known collectively as the **Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)**.

For practitioners, TAP is an opportunity to engage governors and their state agencies — not just around the allocation of these funds, but also in a larger discussion around additional programs, funding mechanisms, and policies, such as Complete Streets, that can be leveraged to improve conditions for walking and bicycling throughout the state.

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## Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of Governors and State Agency Leaders

Governors and the appointed or elected leaders that head their respective departments (Transportation, Education, Health, Environment, etc.) are extremely busy managing their various priorities. Before engaging in a conversation around Safe Routes to School, it is wise to understand the influence these leaders are capable of exerting and what they have identified as important goals for the state. First, keep in mind that governors themselves do not dictate local issues, judicial issues, or federal issues. Therefore, the Safe Routes to School practitioner working to educate state leaders should ensure that problems and their solutions are scaled to the state level and include actionable items by state leaders. Understand that governors are approached by many stakeholders with differing views. Any issue brought to a governor likely has opposing groups (such as those that do not support, or that compete with, walking and bicycling facilities and funding). It is valuable to understand the viewpoints of opposing groups and to be prepared to address any talking points they may have.

Priorities of governors span a broad spectrum and are often specific to their state, but common priorities are the state's fiscal status, job creation, education, safety, transportation and health. Each governor has their own publicly stated priorities and decision-making record which should reflect or predict their stance on investments in walking and bicycling. Governors have staff members, each with a specialty, including transportation, land use and health. These staffers are highly influential to the governor and are often your primary conduit. Practitioners should not worry about not personally interacting with the governor since working directly with the governor's staff is a common option for educating them on Safe Routes to School. Additionally, governors have the opportunity to initiate advisory or local project selection committees and



coalitions to address specific issues such as childhood obesity, health, smart growth, bicycling/walking, and Safe Routes to School.

## Understanding the Capacity and Limitations of State Agency Leaders

Ultimately, state agency leaders must balance the competing interests of their governor, their boards and commissions, their own staff, and of course, pressure from the public sector. An educated practitioner will consider the current capacity and limitations of their state leaders in advancing Safe Routes to School.

While traditionally funding for Safe Routes to School had been funneled through the state Department of Transportation, other departments may also have an interest or role in walking and bicycling to school, including the Departments of Education, Health or Environment. Each of these departments has the ability to affect policies, systems, and environmental changes that support walking and bicycling to school and in daily life.

State agencies are mostly constrained by politics, gubernatorial or board directives, state law, federal law, funding, and associated guidance. For instance, the Federal Highway Administration releases guidance for each new federal transportation law that state governments must adhere to. Additionally, many of these agencies work in silos with rare opportunity for meaningful interaction with other agencies.

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## What You Can Do

As with most successful work, your success is predicated on your knowledge of the processes and the people involved. Use the following tips as a starting point for achieving supportive state bicycle, pedestrian, and Safe Routes to School policies:

### LEARN

- » Talk to experts and conduct research to learn about your state's record on bicycle and pedestrian projects and programs.
- » Subscribe to the governor and state agency media updates and announcements.
- » Find out about existing state boards, governor-appointed or state agency committees, coalitions, and other initiatives that can influence Safe Routes to School, Complete Streets, health, and related concerns.
- » Understand which committees, staff, or state leaders are involved in the process of developing projects, plans and programs, or making decisions.
- » Identify the staff or appointed committees that advise the governor in the realm of transportation, land use, and health or any other relevant sector.
- » Attend meetings at the appropriate agency or review the regularly published minutes of key meetings that affect funding for walking and bicycling projects.

### REVIEW

- » Familiarize yourself with the state statutes, guiding principles, and other policies and parameters of state leadership.
- » Research your governor's stated priorities and record of decisions, often listed on the state website.
- » Review all documents that are publicly available and posted online such as the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP), State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP), and other relevant plans and project lists.
- » Review all documents that are publicly available with regard to state board, committee, and coalition planning documents and reports. These groups often make preliminary decisions on projects and programs before they are brought to state agency leaders.

### CONNECT

- » Develop a relationship with the identified governor's advisory staff and educate them on key talking points that are relevant to your governor's stated priorities.
- » Connect with coalitions and their leaders and begin discussions on collaboration on similar goals.
- » Reach out to organizations whose mission aligns with the outcomes of Safe Routes to School.
- » Talk to your state bicycle and pedestrian coordinator, Safe Routes to School coordinator, state surgeon general, other health department leaders, and other relevant state agency staff.

### PARTICIPATE

- » Inform state leaders about the priorities of bicycling, walking, and Safe Routes to School. Participate in relevant committees, coalition meetings, and bicycle and pedestrian or Safe Routes to School advisory councils. Engage state level decision makers.
- » Schedule meetings with staff members who work closely with the governor and state agency leaders as well as with members of advisory and selection committees. They can keep you up to date on issues or even become vocal educators and supporters for Safe Routes to School and related issues during key meetings, planning processes, and decisions.
- » Invite the governor and/or agency leaders to community bicycling and walking events and include them in the planning of such events. Offering public acknowledgement of their support can go a long way in encouraging an official to attend the event.
- » Be persistent. Navigating and influencing the state's internal processes can feel overwhelming, but don't give up.

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## Align Talking Points with the Governor's Stated Priorities

In addition to providing your governor and their staff with the companion Safe Routes to School: A Primer for Governors and State Agency Leaders action brief, customize your talking points by considering the following common priorities of a state government and how they align with Safe Routes to School priorities.

### Economy

- Reducing the miles parents drive to school by just one percent would reduce 300 million miles of vehicle travel nationally and save an estimated \$50 million in fuel costs each year, thereby reducing traffic congestion.<sup>1</sup>
- Given the up to \$14 billion in annual direct medical costs to treat childhood obesity nationally, creating more opportunities for children to be physically active can reduce the burden on our public health system.<sup>2</sup>
- In a recent survey of mayors in 176 cities, 60 percent said that the lack of additional funding for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure was hindering their efforts to reduce congestion, improve livability, and increase economic competitiveness.<sup>3</sup>

### Safety

- Pedestrian safety improvements near New York City schools were associated with a 44 percent decrease in the rate of school-aged pedestrian injury during school-travel hours.<sup>4</sup>
- A motorist is less likely to collide with a person walking and bicycling if more people walk or bicycle. For example, in a community with two times as much walking, pedestrians are 66 percent less likely to be involved in a crash.<sup>5</sup>

### Health

- Research demonstrates that children who walk or bicycle to school have higher daily levels of physical activity and better cardiovascular fitness than children who do not actively commute to school.<sup>6</sup>



- Children in neighborhoods with sidewalks and safe places to cross the street are more likely to be physically active than children living in neighborhoods without such safe infrastructure elements.<sup>7</sup>
- Safe Routes to School programs can increase walking and bicycling by 20 to 200 percent.<sup>8</sup>

### Education

- Findings from large, nationally representative studies show that physical activity has a positive impact on academic achievement in both young children<sup>9</sup> and adolescents,<sup>10</sup> regardless of other factors such as age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and prior achievement scores.
- After adjusting for socioeconomic status and gender, the percent of eighth graders at academic risk (report usually getting C's, D's or F's) was significantly higher for those with insufficient exercise (35 percent at risk) versus those who had sufficient exercise (22 percent).<sup>11</sup>

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### Transportation and Environment

- In 2009, American families drove 30 billion miles and made 6.5 billion vehicle trips to take their children to and from schools, representing 10-14 percent of traffic on the road during the morning commute.<sup>12</sup>
- Children exposed to traffic pollution are more likely to have asthma, permanent lung deficits, and a higher risk of heart and lung problems as adults.<sup>13</sup>
- Over the last 25 years, there has been a 74 percent increase in asthma cases among children ages 5 to 14.<sup>14</sup> In addition, 14 million days of school are missed every year due to asthma.<sup>15</sup>
- A five percent increase in a neighborhood's "walkability" reduces vehicle miles traveled by six percent.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Encouraging children to walk and bicycle to school safely should be an important goal for governors and state agency leaders looking to improve livability and boost local economies. Fortunately, Safe Routes to School can and does meet many overarching goals that are significant to most, if not all, states. State leaders can help to move these priorities forward by ensuring that Safe Routes to School funds are allocated and obligated, and that supportive policies and dedicated state funding are created.

## Resources

[What is Safe Routes to School?: Quick Facts](#)

(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2011)

[State Level Safe Routes to School Involvement](#)

(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

[A Toolkit for Building Congressional Champions for Safe Routes to School](#)

(Safe Routes to School National Partnership, 2012)

[Safe Routes to School: Helping Communities Save Lives and Dollars](#)

(Safe Routes to School National Partnership)

The [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#) works to advocate for safe walking and bicycling to and from schools and in daily life, to improve the health and well-being of America's children, and to foster the creation of livable, sustainable communities.

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