

# SCHOOL TRAVEL PLANS: THE KEY TO SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL SUCCESS IN OHIO

CHANGE CAN HAPPEN



## OHIO CASE STUDY

*This case study looks at the ten-year history of Safe Routes to School in Ohio and highlights factors that have contributed to the program's success.*

When a child's school is less than a mile from home, getting there by foot or bike should be easy. Yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that of the 30 percent of children who live a mile or less from their school, two-thirds arrive by private vehicle. Even when school is less than a half mile away, half of those students get there by car.

In Ohio, Safe Routes to School programs have been successful at increasing rates of walking and biking among students who live a mile or less from their school. Since the program was launched in 2006, it has awarded \$64 million to 550 infrastructure, non-infrastructure, and planning projects. With projects having occurred in 72 of Ohio's 88 counties, a wide cross-section of Ohio's students have benefited from improved safety and ease in getting to school on foot or bike.

### SCHOOL TRAVEL PLANS: A REQUIREMENT FOR SUCCESS

In Ohio, a community-developed, state-approved school travel plan (STP) is required in order to be eligible to receive

Safe Routes to School funding from the Ohio Department of Transportation for infrastructure or non-infrastructure projects. The STP is a written document that outlines a community's intentions for enabling students to walk or bike to and from school, and it is created through a team-based approach that involves community stakeholders and members of the public. The STP team works together to identify barriers to walking and biking, and, using the 5 Es (Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, and Evaluation) as a framework, develops strategies to address them.

Julie Walcoff of the Ohio Department of Transportation, who has led the state's Safe Routes to School program since it began in 2006, attributes a large part of the program's success to the STP requirement. "By requiring the STP up front, it means that the Safe Routes to School team has to coordinate with other community partners like city and regional planning agencies, public transportation agencies, health departments, law enforcement, and educators to develop a plan that is community-backed and endorsed," said Walcoff.

To make it easier, the state's Safe Routes to School website offers an array of tools, resources, and templates to help communities develop their school travel plan. However,



expert assistance may be a benefit to many communities in developing this crucial planning document. Communities are often awarded the assistance of an ODOT consultant to develop the STP. Such assistance can be particularly valuable for low-income communities, where staff may be stretched thin and may lack the necessary technical expertise for the process.

The Village of Lucas, population 615, was the first Ohio community to have an STP approved for funding in 2008. The village CFO, Patti Constance, headed up a task force that included village administrators, teachers, and the district superintendent.

“Everyone involved was enthusiastic about the program and contributed any information they had that would strengthen the school travel plan. But it was brand new for all of us. ODOT staff Julie Walcoff and Julie Cichello were instrumental in providing us with guidance and resources on what needed to go into the plan.”

The Lucas task force obtained public input in 2007 by interviewing key stakeholders, holding information gathering sessions, and hosting public meetings. They also administered parent surveys, solicited student opinions, conducted student arrival/departure tallies, and completed sidewalk inspections and a walkability survey. The travel tallies and surveys found that in 2007, 10 percent of students were walking to school, but 44 percent said they would walk or bike if improvements were made. The school travel plan requested funding for new sidewalks, sidewalk repair, pavement striping, and signage. When the infrastructure improvements were put in place, the village held a celebration. “You could see the crosswalk paint from space!” said Constance.

Constance remains a strong champion for Safe Routes to School. “The way the money is used wisely, the competency of the staff, the integrity of the program – it all contributes to the success we have had,” Constance said. “There is overwhelming support for Safe Routes to School and our continuing education and encouragement programs.”

Another smaller community that has implemented a successful Safe Routes to School program is the Village of Chagrin Falls. Kathryn Garvey, president of the local Safe Routes to School volunteer group, cites the local school travel plan as integral to honing their mission. “We got guidance from the National Partnership on how to proceed, and got local students, parents, school administrators and government involved in the details. The travel plan solidified the concerns and goals of our community, helping to define who we are and what we’re trying to accomplish.”

The group spent about nine months doing research and engineering analysis. “It was worth it,” adds Garvey. “We refer to it all the time. It guides every decision we make, from deciding on the safest routes to getting funding for things like sidewalks and signage. We now have intersections that are safer than before, and areas that are more walkable overall.” Garvey, who has a business background as director of strategic planning, is also a strong champion for walkable and bikeable school siting. She ran for and won a seat on the Chagrin Falls Board of Education to ensure that school buildings do not move out of town when they are rebuilt, and continues to advocate for the need to preserve the community school aspect of the village.

## LARGE DISTRICT SCHOOL TRAVEL PLANS AND HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Most school travel plans are specific to individual schools, but for large districts, that is not a practical approach. As a result, five large school districts in Ohio have created Large District School Travel Plans – Columbus, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Toledo, and Akron. While all STPs are required to have a health component, two of the large district school travel plans have added a more focused health component by incorporating a Health Impact Assessment (HIA), a process that takes a detailed, data-driven look at the health impacts of a policy, plan, or project. The HIAs analyzed health and socioeconomic disparities and identified local social determinants of health. Each also prioritized specific schools for Safe Routes to School projects.

One of those districts is Columbus, which has 94 K-8 schools and more than 38,000 students. The large district school travel plan process was led by Columbus’s Safe Routes to School Coordinator, Alex Smith, in 2015.

Smith assembled a team of relevant stakeholders (including representatives from Columbus City Schools, the Columbus Division of Police, the Safe Routes to School National Partnership, and the Mayor’s office), and solicited significant public input with surveys sent to parents of over 30,000 students. Smith also coordinated the accompanying HIA to prioritize the travel plan’s implementation, identifying schools with the most urgent need for Safe Routes to School interventions. The HIA used socio-demographic data along with a selection of health indicators to select 15 focus schools out of the 94 K-8 Columbus City Schools. This data was used to make predictions and recommendations that would help the travel plan steering committee ensure that health and social equity would be effectively addressed within the plan.

As a result, the completed travel plan was endorsed by Columbus City Council, Columbus City Schools

Superintendent and Board of Education, the City of Columbus Health Commissioner, and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission. The final product now serves as an essential guiding document for current and long-range Safe Routes to School programming and infrastructure efforts in Columbus.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District also incorporated a Health Impact Assessment into their large district school travel plan. Led by Safe Routes to School coordinator Calley Mersmann, the district used guidance, templates, and toolkits from ODOT to complete the plan in 2015. Through a planning grant from ODOT, an experienced consultant team worked with Mersmann and local stakeholders to develop a district travel plan in 2015. “Julie Walcoff’s office provides all the tools and resources you need to start, so it’s essentially the scaffolding of the plan that you can build and customize around. You don’t have to start from scratch,” said Mersmann.

“We did parent surveys, principal surveys, travel tallies, and walk audits at all 69 of the buildings included in the STP. All that went into the plan,” said Mersmann. “At the end, you essentially have an action plan for the next seven to ten years. It includes short and long-term goals, priority levels, cost estimates, and time frame targets.”

The steering committee’s core team included representatives from city and regional planning agencies, the school district, Bike Cleveland, and ODOT. The broader committee included officials from the departments of building and housing, public safety, capital projects, health, and community engagement.

## INNOVATIONS BEYOND THE STP

Ohio’s program has also been innovative when it comes to educational and awareness campaigns for students and community members. ODOT has created toolkits that help explain and illustrate common infrastructure and non-infrastructure safety recommendations. The toolkits

highlight effective programs that include arrival and departure suggestions, healthy fundraising, and traffic-calming measures.

Ohio’s First Lady, Karen W. Kasich, has championed the program and helped ODOT launch an awareness campaign called Every Move You Make that aims to reduce injuries and fatalities near K-8 schools. The campaign included press events, 36 safety rallies, and a school safety contest that received more than 400 entries from students, ranging from videos to art projects to posters.

To ensure that Ohio communities are able to get up to speed on how to create safe and active communities for children and all residents, the Ohio Safe Routes Academy was launched in 2015, acting as a centralized resource for active transportation-related trainings. The training topics include walking school buses, crossing guards, designing for pedestrian and bicycle safety, and more.

ODOT even created the All-Ohio Safe Routes to School Show Choir with students from across the state. The show choir created a hip-hop style safety song and video called “Keep it Safe Out the Door” with a choreographed dance routine.

## END NOTE

The information in this case study was drawn from a series of phone interviews conducted in August 2016. Individuals interviewed include:

- Julie Walcoff, Active Transportation Program Manager, Ohio Department of Transportation
- Calley Mersmann, Safe Routes to School Coordinator, Cleveland Metropolitan School District
- Alex Smith, Safe Routes to School Coordinator and Active Transportation Program Manager, Columbus Public Health
- Patti Constance, Chief Financial Officer, Village of Lucas
- Kate Moening, Field Services Manager, Safe Routes to School National Partnership