STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

HEARING ON

THE ROAD AHEAD: PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE AMERICA'S TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE
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Good afternoon, Chairman Cramer, Ranking Member Alsobrooks, and members of the subcommittee.

My name is Marisa Jones, and I am the Managing Director of the Safe Routes Partnership, the national organization leading the Safe Routes to School movement in the United States. We work to make it safer and easier for children and families to walk, bike, and roll—every day and everywhere. We represent a network of more than 800 partner organizations, 425 local Safe Routes to School programs, and champions in every state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the unique transportation needs children have, the urgency with which we must address youth transportation safety, highlight the successes of the Safe Routes to School program, and underscore the need for dedicated Safe Routes to

School coordinator positions within each state department of transportation to maximize the transportation and safety benefits of the Safe Routes to School program.

The Problem

Traffic crashes are the second leading cause of death for children in the United States. [1] Over 20 percent of these fatalities involve kids walking or biking. [2] These children aren't being reckless—they're navigating environments designed without them in mind.

As adults, we've built transportation systems that too often force children into unsafe situations: crossing wide roads, lacking sidewalks, and exposed to fast-moving traffic. Yet millions of children rely on walking and biking to school each day. It's not just play—it's a daily transportation necessity. Research shows that children want to walk, and parents want to let them—but they're held back by concerns about speeding cars and traffic hazards.[3] And when traffic is dangerous and bus routes are cut due to driver shortages, families have limited, often unsafe options.

Despite the evidence of the importance and effectiveness of Safe Routes to School programs, robust and consistent programs are only present in a fraction of the communities that could benefit from them. Federal funding has helped thousands of communities implement Safe Routes to School programs, boosted by the role of a dedicated statewide Safe Routes to School coordinator responsible for implementing the program in each state from 2005-2012. Since 2012, the program has lacked dedicated coordination in more than half of US states. At a time when we have reached crisis levels of traffic fatalities for people walking and bicycling; we need a proven solution. Safe Routes to School – implemented effectively through the coordinating role of a statewide coordinator is that solution.

The Solution: Safe Routes to School

Traffic injuries and fatalities for children are a persistent but not intractable problem. There is a way to build safer, and a more accessible future through Safe Routes to School programs. Safe Routes to School creates a safer experience for children to walk and bike to and from school through infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalks, bike paths, crosswalks, school zone

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[1] Cunningham RM, Walton MA, Carter PM. The major causes of death in children and adolescents in the United States. *N Engl J Med* 2018;379:2468-2475.
[2] National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2025, April). *Children: 2023 data* (Traffic Safety Facts. Report No. DOT HS 813 712). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
[3] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Child Pedestrian Injuries—United States, 2001–2002." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 54, no. 38 (2005): 884–887.
https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5438a2.htm

signage, and traffic calming, as well as programming to teach children traffic safety skills and encourage more children to walk and bike to school. Safe Routes to School is a proven, cost-effective transportation solution addressing daily school travel needs for children and their families while improving community health and quality of life.

And it works. Nationally, since the program's creation:

- Fatal pedestrian injuries among children have dropped 34 percent.[4]
- A multi-state study showed a 13 percent decline in fatalities and a 14–16 percent decline in injury risk.[5]

Safe Routes to School is also fiscally responsible:

- Every $1 invested yields $4.40 in health and safety benefits.[6]
- It costs $692 to bus a student per year; a Safe Routes program costs just $13–35 per student.[7]
- School districts spend $100 million to $500 million annually to bus children within 2 miles of school because of unsafe roadway conditions.[8] Investing in these infrastructure fixes that enable students to walk and bicycle to school this reasonable distance could save school districts real money.

More than 10 million students in the U.S. live within one mile of school. With safe infrastructure, many could walk or bike, relieving transportation burdens on parents, schools, and districts.

Safe Routes to School Works in Rural Communities

Safe Routes to School is not just a big city program. Safe Routes to School works in rural communities. Rural communities participate in Safe Routes to School at rates similar to their

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[4] National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Fatality and Injury Reporting System Tool (FIRST). https://cdan.dot.gov/query. Accessed July 2023. 2. Population estimates used for rate calculations obtained from CDC WONDER. https://wonder.cdc.gov/bridged-race-population.html. Accessed July 2023.

[5] DiMaggio, C., Frangos, S., and Guohua Li (2016). National Safe Routes to School program and risk of school-age pedestrian and bicycle injury (2016). *Annals of Epidemiology*, 26: 412-417.

[6] Jacob V, Chattopadhyay SK, Reynolds JA, Hopkins DP, Morgan JA, Brown DR, Kochtitzky CS, Cuellar AE, Kumanyika SK; Community Preventive Services Task Force. Economics of Interventions to Increase Active Travel to School: A Community Guide Systematic Review. Am J Prev Med. 2021 Jan;60(1):e27-e40. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2020.08.002. PMID: 33341185; PMCID: PMC7770808.

[7] https://saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/buses-boots-and-bicycles-2014_0.pdf

[88] DiMaggio C, Li G. Effectiveness of a safe routes to school program in preventing school-aged pedestrian injury. Pediatrics. 2013;131(2): 290–296. doi:10.1542/peds.2012-2182.

share of the population.[9] Small towns across America want safe places for kids to walk and bike, to school and beyond. In fact, some of the most enduring and committed Safe Routes to School programs in the country are found in small towns across the country. Looking at North Dakota provides an opportunity to illustrate how this program works in small and rural communities.

- In Minot, North Dakota, population 47,373 and large by North Dakota standards, but small compared to many communities across the US, the city has been implementing Safe Routes to School for more than 15 years. They began with a district-wide study mapping sidewalk gaps and hazards. Every year, they apply for federal funding and make improvements at one or two schools. Most recently, they used Transportation Alternatives Program funds to build new sidewalks near Washington Elementary School, creating safer passage for young students along 17th, 18th, and 19th Avenues SE.
- In Gwinner (population 924), sidewalks were built to connect the Southside neighborhood to the school.
- In Milnor (population 624), a Safe Routes to School project connected Main Street to Northview.
- Towns as small as Medora (pop. 155) and Grenora (pop. 221) have built Safe Routes to School projects in recent years.
- Local Safe Routes coordinators in Grand Forks have been instrumental in educating and encouraging students to walk and bicycle safely to school and aligning community priorities with funding to build on-the-ground projects connecting kids to school.

This isn't anecdotal—it's strategic. North Dakota's Strategic Highway Safety Plan recommends Safe Routes to School to address the overrepresentation of young drivers in crashes. The state is investing in Vision Zero Schools building student leaders as traffic safety ambassadors. And the Vulnerable Road User Safety Assessment identifies children and school zones as key areas for safety investment.

Solutions

Despite the evidence of the importance and effectiveness of Safe Routes to School programs, robust and consistent programs are only present in a fraction of the communities that could benefit from them. To ensure Safe Routes to School programs reach more communities and

[9] Zimmerman S, Lieberman, M. Safe Routes Partnership. 2019. Safe Routes to School National Census. https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/national_srts_census_report_final.pdf

deliver measurable safety benefits, we must strengthen the foundation that makes them work: state-level coordination.

The clearest distinction between states that effectively deliver on-the-ground improvements and those that don't is the presence of a Safe Routes to School coordinator. From 2005 to 2012, when Safe Routes to School was a standalone federal program, every state had a coordinator—and during that time, programs flourished. Since then, more than half of states have lost that dedicated role, and the results are evident.

Coordinators are not just program administrators. They are connectors, champions, and problem-solvers. They:

- Help local communities apply for and access federal funding
- Ensure projects are delivered on time and according to plan
- Coordinate across federal, state, and local agencies to align transportation and safety goals
- Track outcomes and maintain accountability and
- Make sure federal dollars translate into real benefits for children and families.

Massachusetts shows what's possible with consistent coordination and leadership. Since the program's inception in 2005, the state has had a dedicated Safe Routes to School coordinator at MassDOT. The Massachusetts program served more than 590,000 students in the 2023–2024 school year**,** including rural schools in proportion to the state's rural population.

Massachusetts also leads the nation in programming for high schools—made possible by Senator Cramer's 2021 bill to expand Safe Routes to School eligibility. And through rural case studies and technical assistance provided by the state Safe Routes to School coordinator, Massachusetts is helping other states learn how to make Safe Routes to School work in smaller communities. These results are not coincidental. They are the outcome of having dedicated, informed coordination at the state level.

In small towns and big cities, Safe Routes to School is highly visible and broadly popular. It has enjoyed bipartisan support in Congress since its inception in 2005. It's one of the few transportation programs that parents, school leaders, and communities consistently praise. And when state DOTs support it through strong coordination, they earn public trust and demonstrate smart, people-focused governance.

Recommendations

To realize the full safety and transportation benefits of Safe Routes to School, I urge the Committee to include the Safe Routes Improvement Act (S.1828) in the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization.

This bipartisan bill—led by Senator Cramer and Senator Markey—restores the requirement for every state to employ a Safe Routes to School coordinator within its department of transportation.

Importantly, this is a revenue-neutral solution. States already have multiple pathways to fund these positions using existing federal resources, including:

- Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) technical assistance funding
- Highway Safety Improvement Program funds

S.1828 builds on a 20-year track record of success, ensures strong local support for transportation investments, and helps federal transportation dollars reach the communities they are meant to serve—large and small, rural and urban.

Conclusion

At a time when we have reached crisis levels of traffic fatalities for people walking and bicycling; we need a proven solution. Safe Routes to School – implemented effectively through the coordinating role of a statewide coordinator is that solution.

A Safe Routes to School coordinator is a smart, strategic use of the tools Congress has already provided to state departments of transportation and local communities. Safe Routes to School coordinators help maximize safety, deliver local impact, and show families that our transportation systems work for them.

I thank you for your leadership and for your attention to this life-saving program. I look forward to working with you to ensure that Safe Routes to School—and the dedicated coordination it requires—remains a national priority in the next transportation reauthorization.