

Focusing on the Safety of Children Can Propel Vision Zero Initiatives

Today cities and communities across the U.S. are committing to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries, often as part of Vision Zero initiatives. A growing group of these cities are including a focus on improving safe walking and bicycling in school zones and other places where youth are present. There are many reasons why focusing on safety for youth can be an important component. Children and youth need and deserve special protection, and starting with youth can be the spark that builds community support for a broader Vision Zero program.

Vision Zero is a movement in cities around the world to eliminate traffic death and serious injuries, making cities safe for all road users.

To achieve the goal of zero, cities, through collaboration across multiple agencies, employ a variety of tactics to address the causes of unsafe road conditions. While some communities have developed comprehensive Vision Zero plans, others may be searching for a place to start addressing safety needs.



Walk to School Day 2016, Woodbridge, Va.

Starting Near Schools

Starting safety initiatives near schools and in areas where youth often walk and bike, first and foremost creates a safer environment for children. In addition, prioritizing the needs of child pedestrians and bicyclists can form an integral piece of a plan to meet larger safety goals. Safety measures targeted at protecting youth, whether in controlling speed, creating safer, improved walking and biking facilities, or in changing behaviors, have broader effects that benefit entire communities.

Starting in areas where youth walk and bike offers five ways to integrate into broader safety initiatives such as Vision Zero plans.

1. Areas around schools provide a logical starting point to employ innovative infrastructure to improve driver behavior and pedestrian safety at crossings.
2. Programs for youth create opportunities to try behaviors that inspire community-wide change.
3. School-zone focused efforts serve as starting points for using strategies to tackle speed that may require more political traction.
4. Improving safety where youth walk and bike supports safer walking and biking networks in general.
5. Programs that aim to protect children encourage broad support from the community.



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School-Based Safety Projects

Communities throughout the country have implemented a broad variety of youth-targeted safety improvements. Street crossings have been improved through installation of pedestrian refuge islands, improved crosswalk markings, and beacons such as rectangular rapid flashing beacons or pedestrian hybrid beacons. Communities have targeted speeding where children walk and bike with infrastructure improvements such as road diets, roundabouts, and other traffic calming devices and enforcement initiatives such as the use of speed camera in school zones. Finally, many communities have stepped up their education campaigns to encourage safe behavior from all road users.



From top: Redwood City, Calif.;
Lahaina, Hawaii; New London, N.H.

- In Redwood City, California, sidewalk improvements, a raised crosswalk with high visibility striping, bulb-outs, uniform warning signage around a school, pedestrian lighting, and accessible curb ramps all benefited residents in the surrounding neighborhood by reducing speeds.
- A road diet, new sidewalks, crosswalk improvement, and new school-zone signage benefitted students walking and biking to school at three school locations in Meridian, Mississippi while also increasing connectivity and accessibility to multiple other destinations in the community.
- At multiple locations in Hawaii, rectangular rapid flashing beacons, a countermeasure with a known crash-related benefit, have been employed to provide safer crossings for children walking to school.
- Improving safety for children walking to school through sidewalk, crosswalk, and signage, improvements in Wilmington, Delaware has create a larger, safer network for all pedestrians in the neighborhood.
- School-based pedestrian infrastructure projects for Columbus Public Schools in Ohio have not only connected students to school but have also made services and job centers more accessible for residents.
- Building a new sidewalk along a rural route in New London, N.H. provided a safe, valuable link between schools and neighborhoods.
- A school safety project in Chelsea, Massachusetts included a sidewalk, a curb extension, a crosswalk, pedestrian crossing signs and flashers, and bicycle lanes that increased accessibility to a commuter rail station.

Youth Safety as a Component of Vision Zero

Given the opportunities for improving safety in areas where youth walk and bike, youth-centered safety initiatives also serve as an integral component of city Vision Zero programs.

Automated Enforcement

Automated enforcement, which can encounter political and public controversy, has found traction in Vision Zero cities by focusing the enforcement on managing speed to protect youth walking and biking to school. In New York City, 140 speed cameras have been deployed, all in school zones. In Seattle, automated enforcement works to support youth safety by using the revenue from citations to fund the city's Safe Routes to School program. San Francisco's Vision Zero program has identified automated enforcement as a necessary component. As the city works to gain state-level approval for automated enforcement, it has framed its goal as protecting children by only placing speed cameras in school zones.

School Safety = Neighborhood Safety

Vision Zero cities have identified that improving school safety improves neighborhood safety, much like the example schools mentioned earlier. In Seattle, Vision Zero efforts that target school areas not only benefit the nearby neighborhood, but they also receive more community support. Framing a project as a school safety project places the focus on protecting children walking and biking to school. In the end, however, the project's benefits extend in to the neighborhood, creating safer environments throughout a network for all road users. New York City has also seen neighborhood effects from their speed camera program. Though cameras are only placed in school zones, the speed reduction effect has extended into streets in proximity to these zones, spreading the benefit of automated enforcement into the local neighborhoods.

Education

As part of its Vision Zero program, Washington, D.C. has introduced a bicycle education program to all second grade students in public elementary schools. The short-term goal of the program aims to educate children on safe bicycling behavior. In the long-term, the behavior change expands beyond these children's bicycling skills. A cultural change in which children are exposed early to safe bicycling behavior recognizes that today's children are tomorrow's drivers. Learning bicycle safety as elementary school students helps to develop an awareness of bicyclists on the streets. As some of these children become drivers, keeping this awareness serves to create a culture of safer streets for all road users.

The speed program in New York City includes a public education and outreach component. A driver education campaign emphasizes "Your Choices Matter" and that crashes are preventable. The NYC Department of Transportation also partners with the NYC Police Department to provide a week of driver education about the laws followed by a week of traffic enforcement. City youth are developing safety messages, videos, brochures and other materials through a program called Safer Streets.

For more information on how community leaders and communities can commit to a future with zero traffic deaths and a focus on youth, see walkbiketoschool.org/commitmenttoyouth. A menu of actions for getting started is provided so that communities can find starting points that suit their specific issues. Action items include links to more detailed information.

For more information on slowing down traffic where children walk and bike, see "The Benefits of Slowing Down Traffic -- Starting Where Children Walk and Bike" (bit.ly/managing-speed-for-youth).

For information on using Bike to School Day and Walk to School Day to advance community change, see "Events as Tools for Change" (bit.ly/events-for-change).

