

Executive Summary

The Town of Chapel Hill has promoted Safe Routes to School (SRTS) for 20 years. Chapel Hill was awarded a [Safe Routes to School Non-Infrastructure Grant](#) by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) in 2023, and funds from this Grant were used to hire the Town's first full-time SRTS Coordinator and to create the Town's first Safe Routes to School Action Plan. The Plan was developed under the leadership of a project team of staff from the Town of Chapel Hill and Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (CHCCS), as well as a Steering Committee comprised of stakeholders from various Town Departments and from across the community. The planning process began with an assessment of existing conditions and a review of relevant plans and studies. Public input, fieldwork, and roadway safety analysis provided a foundation for the recommended programs, policies, and infrastructure projects.

This Safe Routes to School Action Plan will be an appendix to the [Triangle West Vision Zero Action Plan](#). It contains recommendations for programs, policies, and infrastructure improvements around 14 schools in Chapel Hill. A "quick-build" demonstration project is included for each school to test new ideas and garner support for implementation. The plan will support strategic efforts to fund and implement a multipronged approach to improve walking, biking, and rolling to school in Chapel Hill.

This Plan

This SRTS Action Plan aims to create a holistic and action-oriented document that has clear recommendations to support and promote safe walking and biking to school for students in the Town of Chapel Hill. While many SRTS plans focus solely on elementary schools, this Plan includes school-specific analyses and recommendations for all K-12 schools in Chapel Hill to support students as they grow and their needs change.

Policy and program recommendations aim to prioritize walking and biking, create a SRTS-friendly culture in Chapel Hill, and help ensure the effectiveness of infrastructure investments through education and engagement efforts, promoting safe behaviors, enforcement strategies, and performance tracking. Infrastructure recommendations around schools are designed to create dedicated facilities for people who walk and bike, to increase visibility of school zones and people who walk and bike, simplify crossings and intersections, and to help calm traffic around schools. Infrastructure recommendations are prioritized using criteria such as equity, safety, and risk exposure that have been used to prioritize other transportation projects and investments throughout Town.

The Planning Process

This Plan was built upon ongoing engagement activities and leveraged existing partnerships within the School District to reach a broader audience. CHCCS staff, educators, and community members were engaged throughout the planning process as a steering committee to guide the overall development of this Plan, provide specific insight on existing conditions, and refine draft recommendations. During the planning process, we held meetings with the steering committee, conducted a public survey, and surveyed school staff. We also held three Focus Groups: with Crossing Guards, Spanish-speaking families, and high-school students. Pop-up events were held in different locations around Chapel Hill, and a community-wide Open House was hosted at the Chapel Hill Public Library and online through the Engagement HQ site.

School Travel in Chapel Hill

Throughout the planning process we heard strong support from students and families in Chapel Hill for investments in walking and biking to school. During the engagement process, residents highlighted the need for safer, more connected walking and biking routes to schools and an improved safety culture around schools in Chapel Hill. Walking is the primary non-motorized mode of student transportation in Chapel Hill. Biking is low overall, but more common among middle and high school students. Key barriers to walking and biking include driver speed and congestion around schools; a lack of connected, dedicated space for people walking and biking; an absence of a safety culture around schools; long travel distances from assigned schools; and lifestyle factors such as after-school activities and related schedule challenges.

Safe Routes to School and the Safe System Approach

[Vision Zero](#) is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries while increasing mobility, and is Chapel Hill's guiding principle for a safe transportation system. The Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program in Chapel Hill applies a Vision Zero lens to the safety of people walking, biking, and rolling to and from school. Vision Zero is rooted in the Safe Systems Approach, which focuses on proactively and systemically addressing roadway safety for everyone.

Key principles of the Safe System Approach are:

- Deaths and serious injuries are unacceptable
- Humans are vulnerable
- Safety is proactive
- Humans make mistakes
- Responsibility is shared
- Redundancy is crucial

A Vision Zero approach prioritizes the safety of the most vulnerable roadway users, including children walking and biking to school. Many activities undertaken in SRTS programs center around education and encouragement. These activities require higher levels of individual effort and deliver population impact primarily when implemented alongside infrastructure improvements and other factors that enhance walk- and bike-ability. This Plan provides systemic recommendations designed to have the highest impact.

Conclusion

Safe Routes to School has a positive impact on individual students, families, and the community at large. Walking, biking, and rolling to school can improve mental and physical health, learning outcomes, and youth independence and self-reliance. Additionally, increased numbers of students walking and biking to school can improve quality of life and the environment for the surrounding neighborhoods and the community. Shifting vehicle trips to walking or biking trips reduces greenhouse gas emissions, decreases school-related traffic congestion, reduces transportation costs, and can lead to greater independence for community members who cannot or choose not to drive. By focusing on schools and making it safer and more convenient for young people to get around without a car, the Town can ultimately make Chapel Hill's transportation system safer for everyone.