



Seattle models strategies for equitably advancing safe walking and biking for youth

Seattle's work to prioritize safe walking and biking for youth, particularly in underserved areas, offers a blueprint for other cities to follow. In 2022, through the work of the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) and Seattle Public Schools, Seattle received the National Center for Safe Routes to School's Vision Zero for Youth Leadership Award. The award recognizes communities that have taken bold steps to reach zero pedestrian and bicyclist serious injuries and deaths among children and youth with the goal

to inspire other communities to take action. The award committee particularly noted the City's work in creating a racial equity vision specifically for its Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS); using a comprehensive approach to managing speeds; creating School Streets and Stay Healthy Streets that prioritize people rather than cars; and assuring that every elementary and middle school student receives walking and biking safety education every year. Since 2014, there has not been a child under 18 killed while walking or biking on Seattle's streets.

Equity-driven framework

The city of Seattle is committed to equity and serving communities of color. In 2004, the City established the Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) to eliminate racial disparities and advance social justice through equitable policies, programs, and planning practices. Today, [SDOT's Transportation Equity Program](#)¹ provides department-wide policy and strategic advisement on equitable, safe, environmentally sustainable, accessible, and affordable transportation systems.

The RSJI informed the department's Safe Routes to School Racial Equity Analysis that began in 2018. The analysis process included developing a racial equity vision for the Safe Routes to School program, conducting extensive community outreach over two years including a citywide survey, focused outreach at schools and community groups, and co-developing strategies to address the barriers that many students of color face when walking and biking to school. The SRTS team partnered with 10 schools serving at least 85% students of color to promote the Safe Routes to School survey and conduct in-depth conversations and focus groups with students and families about their lived experiences and challenges getting to and from school. The team also attended over 50 community events focused on communities of color, immigrants, and refugees and conducted focus groups and coffee chats with 10 community organizations.

The survey responses informed the update to the [Safe Routes to School 5 Year Action Plan](#)². For example, the plan included new strategies such as supporting schools and community groups to engage in community asset and route to school mapping exercises, installing physical markers along routes to school in communities of color, providing outdoor clothing to support students walking and biking to school in Seattle's wet and cold climate, bringing stories from people of color to the forefront to highlight their positive experiences walking and biking to school, and finding opportunities to install pedestrian lighting on routes to schools. The updated plan continued to prioritize program resources within communities of color.

The City also modified its approach to supporting programmatic activities at schools. The Mini Grant program provides up to \$1,000 to schools

and community groups for activities that increase safe walking and biking to school. Applying for, receiving, and administering a grant, even a small one with funds provided up front, can be a barrier to many communities. To remove this barrier, the Safe Routes to School program began offering free packages that schools can request through an online ordering system. Packages include Safe Routes to School incentives, prizes for walk or bike to school campaigns, walking school bus supplies, bike train supplies, school safety patrol supplies, rain gear, walking and biking themed books, and crosswalk flags. The Mini Grant program continues to be available for non-standard requests up to \$1,000.

SDOT staff described the program as based on balance, serving all schools with an equity lens. They prioritize staff resources and larger amounts of capital project funds for communities of color, but still meet their "Move Seattle Levy" funding commitment to make infrastructure improvements at every public school. Programmatic resources are available to all schools, including Mini Grants, free Safe Routes to School packages, the Let's Go education program, School Streets program, and resources like walk maps, SRTS Guide, Activity Books, and yard signs.

SDOT was able to hire a new Safe Routes to School Program Coordinator position embedded within Seattle Public Schools in 2022 to further connect these resources to higher equity-need schools.

After the Safe Routes to School Racial Equity Analysis was complete in 2019, the Transportation Equity Program conducted a multi-year process to co-develop the Transportation Equity Framework with an external Transportation Equity Workgroup. The Transportation Equity Framework is a roadmap for SDOT decision-makers, staff, stakeholders, and greater community to collaboratively achieve an equitable transportation system. It includes over 200 tactics to implement between 2022 and 2028.

Prioritizing walking and biking

"School Streets" are open for people walking, rolling, and biking to school, and closed to pass-through traffic, including parents dropping off students. In response to schools re-opening in person during the Covid-19 pandemic with two daily start

and end times and no general education bus service, SDOT offered schools the option to close a non-arterial block adjacent to the school to pass-through traffic and open the block up to people walking, rolling, and biking. These School Streets provide social distancing space, reduce traffic congestion and air quality in front of schools, and encourage families to walk or bike to school or park a few blocks away and walk. While the School Streets program began as a response to the pandemic, the program has become permanent with twelve schools now participating and additional schools joining the program each year.



School Street signage. Source: SDOT.

“Stay Healthy Streets³,” like School Streets, are open for people walking, rolling, biking, and playing and closed to pass-through traffic. The goal is to open more space to people rather than cars to improve community and individual health. This initiative, as with the School Streets program, began in response to the pandemic, when over 25 miles of Neighborhood Greenways were upgraded to Stay Healthy Streets. Enhanced safety features include speed humps, stop signs, and crossing improvements at major streets. Neighborhood selection considered Seattle’s Race and Social Equity Index, where existing neighborhood greenways serve areas of dense housing or limited public open space, geographic coverage, and access to essential services and open businesses. Seattle plans to continue Stay Healthy Streets and committed to making 20 miles permanent.

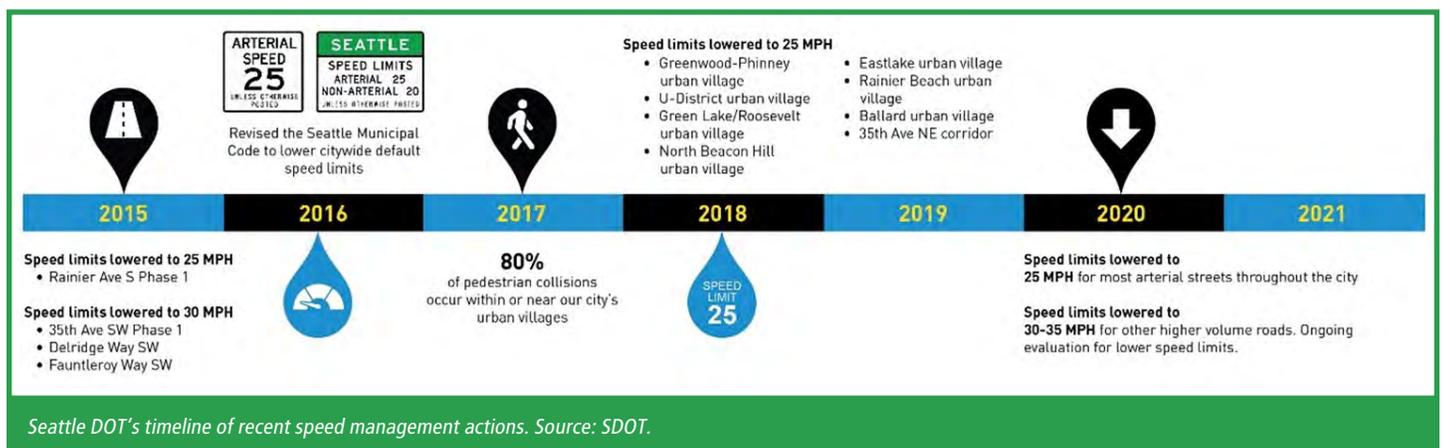


School Street at Genessee Hill Elementary School. Source: SDOT.

Managing speeds

Seattle has made an impressive commitment to managing speeds throughout the city and with a priority around schools. Since Seattle adopted Vision Zero in 2015, the City has made strides lowering speed limits across the city (see timeline), prioritizing the safety of people over the throughput and speed of vehicles. In 2016, the City changed the city-wide default speed limit from 25 to 20 mph for non-arterial streets, and arterials were reduced from 30 mph to 25 mph, although 76% of arterials maintained signed speed limits higher than the default. In 2020, speed limits were reduced to 25 mph for 90% of arterial streets.

Seattle is one of the first cities in the country to study how reducing speed limits and increasing speed limit sign frequency improves safety for everyone. The [study⁴](#) provided evidence that the combination of reducing speed limits and increasing speed limit signs prevent crashes. Those locations experienced a 22% reduction in crashes and a 54% reduction in drivers traveling 40+ mph.



Seattle DOT's timeline of recent speed management actions. Source: SDOT.

In 2020, the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) released [recommendations](#)⁵ that highlighted Seattle's speed reduction achievements as a national best practice to prevent crashes and save lives.

Every spring, the City collects data on driver speeds and volumes on arterial streets near schools to prioritize traffic calming measures and enforcement. Seattle uses a [toolkit](#)⁶ with many options to reduce speeds on arterial streets near schools, including 20 mph flashing beacons, speed cushions (speed humps with breaks to allow emergency vehicles to pass through unimpeded), reducing the number of general-purpose lanes from two to one in each direction with a center turn lane, bike lanes buffered with delineator posts or parking protected bike lanes to narrow the street, reducing lane widths, and narrowing the street at crossings with curb bulbs or median islands to slow speeds.

- Flashing beacons have been found to reduce the 85th percentile speeds down to an average of 27 mph on two lane streets and 28 mph on 3 lane streets when the beacons are flashing.
- Speeds on streets with 4+ lanes reduce to 31mph on average with flashing beacons and down to 28 mph on average with photo enforcement.
- Seattle found an average reduction in 85th percentile speeds of between 10-15% during school arrival and dismissal time periods after installing buffered bike lanes in two school zones with flashing beacons.
- Speed cushions have been found to reduce speeds to 28 mph on average and are effective at all times.

Enforcement actions include photo enforcement within school zones. Seattle has 35 cameras near 14 schools to enforce the 20 mph speed limit in school zones, and speeding drivers face a \$237 fine with the revenue helping to fund the Safe Routes to School program, new sidewalks, curb ramps, neighborhood greenways, and Vision Zero programming. Since the program began in 2012, data has shown a low recidivism rate and a reduction in the number of people speeding. Based on the success of the program, in 2022 Seattle City Council instructed SDOT and the Seattle Police Department to double

the number of school zone safety cameras by the end of 2024. Staff are using a Racial Equity Analysis to inform where new cameras are placed.

Learning to ride a bike

Since 2015, SDOT has funded the [Let's Go walking and biking education](#)⁷ program at Seattle Public Schools. This program gets all 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders on bikes in their Physical Education classes, including students with disabilities. Students learn walking and biking safety, and for many it's their first chance to experience the joy and freedom of riding a bike.

Starting in 2022, SDOT is working with partners at Seattle Public Schools, Cascade Bicycle Club, and Outdoors for All to expand the program to middle schools, which extends the programming to provide six consecutive years of safety education for every public-school student.

Applying an equity lens, Tier 1 and Tier 2 equity schools (ranked by Seattle Public Schools based on demographics) receive extra staffing support in delivering the curriculum. In addition, students with physical disabilities ride adaptive bikes that suit their specific needs.

Based on the success of Let's Go, Seattle Public Schools is procuring State funding to bring balance bikes and adaptive bikes to all Kindergarten Physical Education classes. Depending on funding, this initiative will launch in fall 2023.

Building on successes

Perhaps one of the most sustaining aspects of Seattle's work to prioritize safe walking and rolling for youth is its continued willingness to build on past successes and its commitment to achieving zero traffic deaths.

"I am thrilled the National Center for Safe Routes to School has recognized Seattle's work to improve safety for students walking, rolling, and biking to school," added Seattle Department of Transportation Director Greg Spotts. "Since coming to Seattle, I have joined families and teachers on neighborhood walks and bike rides around schools. While people appreciate the safety upgrades we've built so far, they've also shown me that there is still a lot of work to do so that every family has a safe path to school."

“While I’m proud of the improvements we’ve built so far, you can be assured that we will not be resting on our laurels when it comes to safety,” said Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell. Tragically, the number of people killed in car crashes has increased in recent years, and we must redouble our commitment to the goal of ending traffic deaths and serious injuries on city streets by 2030. While some say that this goal is too ambitious, there is no number of deaths which we can consider an acceptable goal, other than zero.”

In late 2022, Mayor Harrell signed an [Executive Order on climate justice](#)⁸ and included a provision that will “expand our School Streets program and ensure an all ages and abilities bicycling facility serves every public school.”

Summary

Seattle’s work is sustainable, can be replicated, and has a major focus on speed reduction and equity. The City’s creativity during the pandemic led to programs that will permanently benefit youth and their neighborhoods. The program recommends prioritizing schools for program resources using metrics that include race and ethnicity as well as safety and, from there, working with schools by meeting families where they are to identify their concerns and needs and to co-create strategies to address those needs.

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