

Changes to the Physical Environment

In subtle and not so subtle ways, the built environment impacts the way children and families get to school and beyond. Elements of the places children and their families walk, bike, or drive influence how they behave and what kinds of travel-based decisions they make. Physical spaces also contribute to how safe or unsafe walking or biking is, how easy it is to get from place to place on foot or by bike, as well as the kinds of interactions with other people they support.

This chapter will help you identify people who make decisions on what gets built and where, learn ways of working with these decision-makers in mutually beneficial manner, and discover a handful of key principles or safe, comfortable, and accessible designs for walking and biking to school.

Snapshot: Clearing the way for walkers in Johnston County

Just a handful of students used to walk to Cooper Academy. Sidewalks lined their route until the length of the car drop-off line forced them to walk in the street when they arrived at the school. To assess student travel conditions representatives from the town of Clayton and the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's Safe Routes to School Committee joined the Regional Active Routes to School Coordinator and the school principal and two teachers to conduct a walk audit.

The group developed a plan and proposed improvements to the physical environment. After discussing options with the school, the Town agreed to fund sidewalks and a crosswalk along a new route that allowed students to avoid the car drop-off line. The timeline to construction was notable in its speed; the group met in February and sidewalks were installed in August of that same year. Now, the school reports that the number of walkers has increased by seven times; what began as five or six walkers has ballooned to 35-40 students who walk on a regular basis since the improvements were made. This same energy has buoyed interest in biking as well. The school recently celebrated Bike to School Day and has a new bike rack.