



The Fort Collins formula: Commitment to active mobility = more students walking and biking



AROUND THE U.S. AND WORLD, communities are committing to eliminating traffic fatalities and injuries, often as part of Vision Zero initiatives. Many cities are focused on improving safety on school routes and other places where children and youth walk and bicycle. In some places, youth are actively working with cities and other partners to effect this change.

Vision Zero for Youth recognizes that starting with youth can be the catalyst to build community support for Vision Zero, that Vision Zero should include a focus on youth, and that youth voices can play important roles in creating safer streets.

Vision Zero for Youth supports a Safe System approach to reaching zero serious injuries and deaths on roads. The Safe System approach is a shift away from a focus on the behavior of individual road users to a focus on changing the system to provide safer environments for all road users. Identifying and addressing areas with greatest risk for young pedestrians and bicyclists is integral to all of the components of Vision Zero for Youth:

- **INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS** to calm traffic, improve crossings, and provide safe spaces for all users.
- **POLICIES AND PROGRAMS** focused on core issues such as slowing vehicle travel speeds.
- Use of crash **DATA AND PATTERNS** to identify problems, assess risk factors, and apply solutions in a systemic way.
- **PARTNERSHIPS** with education, transportation, law enforcement, local safety and health organizations, community members, elected officials, and advocates.
- **ENGAGEMENT** of the community around a culture of road safety, with an emphasis on youth empowerment.

FORT COLLINS: 2026 VISION ZERO FOR YOUTH U.S. LEADERSHIP AWARD RECIPIENT

The goals of the Vision Zero for Youth U.S. Leadership Award are to give recognition for noteworthy road safety practices and inspire other cities to take bold steps to reach zero traffic deaths among children and youth. It is presented by the Vision Zero for Youth initiative, led by the National Center for Safe Routes to School with support from General Motors and the UNC Highway Safety Research Center. The Award Committee includes representatives from road safety organizations and government agencies including the Atlanta Department of Transportation, Cherokee Nation Public Health, Composing Youth Mobility, COMTO, Federal Highway Administration, NACTO, National Center for Safe Routes to School, New York City Department of Transportation, Institute of Transportation Engineers, Safe Kids Worldwide, the Safe Routes Partnership, and Toole Design.

Places recognized with the Vision Zero for Youth U.S. Leadership Award have taken impressive action to improve walking and biking safety for their children and youth with the goal of building safer, healthier communities for everyone.

Past recipients include Arlington County, VA; Fremont, CA.; Lincoln, NE; Los Angeles, CA; Minneapolis, MN; New York City, NY; Pueblo of Jemez, NM; and Seattle, WA. The Milwaukee Safe Routes to School Program received an innovation award during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To learn more about the U.S. Award, visit: www.visionzeroforyouth.org/awards/us.



Source: City of Fort Collins

THE CITY OF FORT COLLINS, COLORADO, is living proof of what happens when a culture of promoting fitness and mobility, motivated leadership, and exemplary school initiatives come together to build support for active, safe school travel. The city's established safety programs resulted in high rates of students walking and biking to school. In recognition of these efforts, the National Center for Safe Routes to School honored Fort Collins with the 2026 Vision Zero for Youth U.S. Leadership Award.

"We are thrilled to receive this award, which highlights the City's long-standing commitment to helping young people travel safely and independently in our community," City of Fort Collins Mayor Emily Francis said in a press release about the award. "Through strong collaboration across City teams and programs like Safe Routes to School and designing our streets and trails to be safe for people of all ages, we're advancing City Council's priority to pursue Vision Zero."

Fort Collins has dedicated decades to improving accessibility to active transportation, especially for children and families going to and from school. The work has involved an impressive number of agencies, organizations, and local advocates promoting a wide variety of programs. Nancy Nichols, the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program Manager in Fort Collins, outlined three factors that frame the city's accomplishments: a culture of healthy, active, outdoor living; visionary and connected local leadership; and the city-managed SRTS program.



Students biking on city trail network.
Source: City of Fort Collins

An active way of life built into the landscape

"I believe it's a cultural value in our community that kids be able to be active and get around on their own," said Nichols.

Northern Colorado has a history of promoting and supporting physical fitness through active transportation. An article in *Ride* magazine's 2019 "Guide to Northern Colorado Bicycling Culture & Events" sheds light on how the region's biking scene emerged. It started with several Northern Colorado bike rides in support of the first Earth Day in April 1970, followed by a push to create bike lanes in Fort Collins just a few months after that. Then in 1971 in nearby Greeley, Colorado, there was a campaign to create bike paths.

"The concept for the trail system was envisioned in the early 1970s," said Dave "DK" Kemp, Senior Trails Planner, City of Fort Collins. "Recreation, access to nature (the Poudre River and Spring Creek) were important, and walking and bicycling were fun, traffic-free ways to enjoy it."

Kemp further explained that the trail system grew steadily over the years supported and promoted by numerous city councils. In the early 1990s, the State of Colorado introduced the Colorado Lottery, which

led to the creation of the Conservation Trust Fund, a funding opportunity for recreation projects like trails. Since then, the fund fueled the planning, design, and construction of trails in Fort Collins.

Decades later, the trail system impresses. Kemp said, "There are 46 miles of major trails in Fort Collins, which are supported by miles and miles of spur trails that connect to the main system."

Nichols elaborated on how this expansive trail network serves as paths to school. Grants totaling \$2.8 million from the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) SRTS program over the past 20 years provided targeted improvements to build off the existing infrastructure. Nichols said the SRTS program started in 2007 with its first CDOT infrastructure grant, before there was dedicated staff or operational funding. Then the formal SRTS program began in 2011 when the first SRTS staff member was hired and a small operating budget was funded.

Also, CDOT grants have continued to help with everything from educational programming to infrastructure improvements, some of which have addressed the "last gap" to schools. Such projects have, for example, installed concrete multi-use paths on school grounds or along adjacent streets.

Nichols also gives credit to the city's low-stress bike network, which incorporates wayfinding signage showing the distance to the closest schools and provides bicycle/pedestrian crossings over busy streets. In addition, she said that because of improved access to schools, students who may have chosen to attend schools in more distant locations can now more readily attend schools closer to home.

Leadership with drive and vision

Strong leadership in Fort Collins, buoyed by partnerships with area organizations, helped keep momentum from the early 1970s going through subsequent decades. And it continues to this day. One of only three platinum League of American Bicyclists Bicycle Friendly Communities in the United States (and home to platinum Bicycle Friendly University Colorado State University), the city's leaders and community organizers employ strategic planning, community engagement, adaptation, and innovation to blaze new trails for active travel to school.

Case in point: The Fort Collins Active Modes Plan, released in 2022, says the following: "Done right, improving the active modes environment can help our city become happier, healthier, more sustainable, safer, and people-first." Listed as one of the "Big Moves" in the plan is this action: "Increase active modes commute trips by advancing SRTS across all schools in Fort Collins and designing inclusive programs that support, educate, and encourage both

new and long-time active transportation users."

One of the city's former mayors, Karen Weitkunat, and the Fort Collins City Council were responsible for setting up the original funding for the SRTS program's formal establishment in 2011. The program is a driving force making the connections between the area's strong culture and leadership to the students and families needing safe ways to get to school. The city has shown its dedication to the cause by funding staff positions for the program and devoting resources to trail development. There are other city champions for safe school routes in places of influence, such as the engineering, traffic operations, and street maintenance teams. Still, while SRTS is a city program, many view it as a community effort. "It's owned by everyone," said Nichols.

Local partnerships are critical to the program, as well. Tim Han, Safe Routes to School Instructional Coordinator at Bike Fort Collins, a nonprofit bicycle advocacy and education organization, talked more about the importance of collaborations. "While Safe Routes to School is fully city-backed and funded, its success relies heavily on cooperation from Bike Fort Collins and the Poudre School District," said Han. For example, Bike Fort Collins manages all instructors for the Safe Routes to School program: "We are one of the few programs nationally where training and teaching are paid positions, and all of our street-ride instructors are League of American Bicyclists certified LCIs [League Cycling Instructors]," said Han.



Traffic garden. Source: City of Fort Collins

Other key partners who have contributed over the years to SRTS in Fort Collins include Safe Kids Northern Colorado, Athletes in Tandem, Bicycle Colorado, North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization, FoCo Fondo (a local gravel cycling event), health networks and organizations, Boys & Girls Club and other clubs, local bike shops, and a regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Education Coalition (which existed during a strategic foundational period for promoting active modes).

Centering around schools

Culture and leadership have built the framework. But working directly with children gets to the heart of any SRTS program. Teaming up with the Poudre School District and Bike Fort Collins, the city created a K-12 curriculum featuring bicycle and pedestrian safety education, after-school clubs and camps, bike rodeos, and biking and walking field trips. Different grade levels receive age-appropriate instruction. Participation in National Bike & Roll to School Day, National Walk & Roll to School Day, and Bike Week is encouraged, as well. While the focus is on the public schools, private schools can receive assistance by request.

As part of the learning, students receive opportunities to practice on bikes during the school day. Early in this program, Bicycle Colorado, the city's first SRTS contractor, would let the schools borrow bikes during school hours. After a few years, the focus shifted to asking families to bring in bikes from home. While many students do have their own bikes – 76 out of 78 riders on a recent field trip brought their own bikes – there are always city-supplied bikes and helmets for students to borrow when needed.

Once the in-school bike rodeos started, it became

Students practice bike skills at school with help from PE teachers and SRTS instructors. Source: City of Fort Collins



clear that some of the bikes-from-home needed repair; chains were falling off, tires were flat, brakes had issues, etc. All bikes get a thorough safety check and minor adjustments; approximately 10 percent of the bikes brought to school in the program need substantial repairs. To make these repairs happen, having spare parts available at school events became important. The program had access to a wholesale account for bike parts. Eventually, local mechanics were asked to get involved in checking and repairing the bikes. “I was recruited by SRTS when I was working in operations for the local bike share,” said Alex Hovorka, a local Fort Collins bike mechanic. “They asked if I'd be the mechanic coordinator; it fit well with my schedule maintaining the bike share. I also have a background working in a high-volume used-bike shop, so the skill set was there too.” Hovorka said he's involved in recruiting other mechanics to help check the bikes.

Another feature of the school program aims to include children with both mental and physical disabilities. Nichols said that the program initially worked with the organization Athletes in Tandem, which had adaptive equipment to support biking for people with disabilities. Additional support for the program has included specialized pre-visit information collection, early access to helmets and equipment to allow extra time for students to adjust, and allocating dedicated staff to support those students. Grants and local donors, such as FoCo Fondo, have been invaluable for starting and continuing to build a fleet of adaptive equipment.



SRTS-embedded bike mechanics help provide the bridge for biking at school to biking from home. Source: City of Fort Collins

Data and feedback

When Fort Collins was selected for the Vision Zero for Youth U.S. Leadership Award, the award committee noted the city's strength in quantifying its walking and biking improvements. Nichols said that the city had been collecting its own walking and biking data for 20 years, in part because data was required when applying for CDOT project grants. Much of the data helps document success; Nichols said that, for K-8 students, the rates of walking and biking to school are at almost 30 percent. Compared with the national average of 10 percent of students walking and biking to school, the rate in Fort Collins is remarkable.

But numbers don't tell the whole story. City Council members, the city manager, program leaders, and other advocates report hearing from community members on the safety programs. Han reported that Bike Fort Collins also hears from the community: "We receive feedback from students and parents in many ways. When we bring our program to schools, we ask parents to volunteer for both the bike rodeo course and off-campus rides. These parents often share how impressed they are with the comprehensive nature of our education program."

He added: "Students frequently tell us how much fun they have and note that they learn valuable skills and safety information they didn't know before. We also encounter former students months or years later who share how much they enjoyed the program. Most importantly, we often see these students on the streets and trails practicing the safety habits we taught them."

"I get a lot of 'thank you for doing this,' 'who do you work for,' 'my bike feels so much better,'" Hovorka said. "Memorable ones are when kids tell me they haven't ridden in a long time because their bike was broken and now it's not. It's great to hear."

Moving forward in Fort Collins and beyond

Fort Collins is working through its 2026 SRTS program priorities, which focus on such areas as education, encouragement, and engagement. Examples of specific goals include collecting annual data on active modes through mode-of-travel tallies at schools; partnering with city departments to ensure optimal design for youth in roadway projects; and offering safety events in historically underserved neighborhoods.

When asked how other places can replicate the Fort Collins approach, Nichols remarked first, "Work with teachers and schools." She elaborated, saying that it helps to show school officials and local leaders that programming encouraging safe travel to school can also help achieve educational standards. Further, Nichols suggested that having a staff person focused solely on safe school routes was key for Fort Collins, and recommends other cities aim to budget for such a position.

Finally, she suggested building off the momentum of programs and activities like bike buses and Walk/Bike & Roll to School Days, which often serve as launching points for inspiring local change. Nichols summed it up well: "Make it fun."

Mayor Emily Francis (in blue blazer), city staff, and SRTS partners at the Vision Zero for Youth Leadership Award presentation. Source: City of Fort Collins





COVER PHOTO: Source. City of Fort Collins



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