



It takes a village: Creating a culture for youth walking and biking in Minneapolis



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 an important role 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.

MINNEAPOLIS: 2025 VISION ZERO FOR YOUTH U.S. LEADERSHIP AWARD RECIPIENT

The purpose of the Vision Zero for Youth U.S. Leadership Award is to both 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 the FIA Foundation and the UNC Highway Safety Research Center. In 2025, the U.S. Award program was informed by the Award Committee with representatives from road safety organizations and government agencies including Atlanta Department of Transportation, Composing Mobility LLC/Freedom to Move Youth Movement, COMTO, FIA Foundation, Federal Highway Administration, National Center for Safe Routes to School, Institute of Transportation Engineers, National Association of City Transportation Officials, New York City Department of Transportation, Safe Kids Worldwide, the Safe Routes Partnership, Toole Design, and others.

Cities recognized with 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; Los Angeles, CA; New York City, NY; Fremont, CA.; Lincoln, NE; 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**](http://www.visionzeroforyouth.org/awards/us).



*Minneapolis Public Schools students biking.
Source: Minneapolis Public Schools*

IN MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, inviting the city's children and families to walk, bike, and roll in the city is not the result of a single project, program, or policy, but of nearly 20 years of collaboration and commitment. In 2006, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the City of Minneapolis launched an innovative partnership for Safe Routes to School.

What began as a school-focused initiative has since grown into a comprehensive, citywide approach that weaves together infrastructure, policy, education, and engagement to transform the way young people move through the city. As Mayor Jacob Frey stated, "Our kids need to be focused on what they're learning in school, not whether or not they're going to get there safely." The feeling is shared by Minneapolis Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Lisa Sayles-Adams: "Our student bike education programs combined with the city improvements like upgraded streets and reduced speed limits have a positive effect on our students' safety."

The cross-sector collaboration brings together different perspectives, each adding value in its own way. As City of Minneapolis Public Works

Senior Transportation Planner Bria Fast explained, "Public Works and MPS approach youth safety very differently. It's very interesting to have both at the table because you can cover so much more ground when you're coming through two different lenses."

"Education without safe access, safe access without education—it just doesn't work," said Jennifer Bordon, MPS Active Living Coordinator. The partnership has created more than safer routes; it has built a culture where youth safety is part of how Minneapolis operates. "At the end of the day we want kids to know: This is your city. You can go everywhere."

Minneapolis shows how to turn that inspiration into action, using partnerships to set priorities, design safer streets, empower students, and build a culture where walking and biking are part of everyday life.



Open Streets Lyndale/Uptown August 24th, 2024.
Source: City of Minneapolis

Setting priorities for impact

A central question guides Minneapolis's approach to youth safety: Where can we add the most value?

This mindset shapes how the City, schools, and community partners set priorities, ensuring every project, policy, and program advances safer, more connected streets for youth.

- For the City of Minneapolis Public Works Department, their SRTS work is guided by the **Transportation Action Plan** and the **Complete Streets Policy**. Public Works prioritizes projects that advance the City's two key networks, while also serving schools. The Pedestrian Priority Network maps nearly 300 miles of streets where people walk most often and directs improvements to crossings, lighting, and year-round maintenance like snow clearing. The All Ages and Abilities Bike Network connects schools, parks, and neighborhoods through protected bike lanes, trails, and neighborhood greenways. Together, these networks are making walking, biking, and rolling safer and more comfortable for everyone, especially youth. City of Minneapolis Associate Transportation Planner Victoria Halloran notes that, while SRTS is the most direct way youth needs are addressed, "There is a youth safety focus throughout our department's work. It's consistently a part of the conversation without needing to be the only focus."

- For Minneapolis Public Schools, the **Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan** guides how the district identifies, prioritizes, and implements strategies to make it safe, easy, and fun for students to walk and bike to school. While the plan includes a structured process for infrastructure improvements, it also emphasizes supporting non-infrastructure strategies. MPS, thanks in part to its long-time partnership with Minneapolis Health Department (MHD), directs resources to schools where staff capacity is limited, offering technical assistance, planning support, and help connecting to grants and partnerships. MPS also collaborates with the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) for grants to support non-infrastructure projects and create school SRTS plans. By focusing resources where they are most needed, MPS ensures SRTS becomes part of the school culture and not a one-time effort.

Across Minneapolis, the same value-driven mindset shapes other transportation initiatives. **Vision Zero** prioritizes investments that will save the most lives, focusing on safer street design, lower speeds, and infrastructure on the nine percent of city streets that make up the High Injury Network. Through the **Neighborhood Traffic Calming Program**, residents can request safety improvements directly using an interactive map that shows street types, eligibility, and existing requests. This transparent, community-driven approach gives residents a meaningful voice in slowing traffic and improving safety on their streets.

Walking and biking at school

The MPS Wellness Policy requires schools to support Safe Routes to School programs, framing walking, biking, and rolling not just as ways to get to school, but as key parts of student health, confidence, and learning. “Many of our students don’t know how to ride a bicycle,” says Bordon. “All these changes are happening on the routes to and from school and these great places in Minneapolis, and we want our students to have access.” Active transportation is integrated into the school day through three main strategies:

1. BIKE EDUCATION: Fourth and fifth graders in MPS learn to ride safely on the streets and trails of Minneapolis. Over 100 MPS teachers have been trained, and schools can request traveling bike fleets stocked with bikes of all sizes, adaptive cycles, helmets, and tools. The program increases safe travel, improves health, and builds independence. It has been so successful that MPS is working to expand it to middle and high schools. The effort reflects strong partnership: the Minnesota Department of Health Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP), Minnesota Department of Transportation SRTS program, Blue Cross Blue Shield Center for Prevention, and the City of Minneapolis Public Works each funded one of the four traveling bike fleets. The program is implemented by MPS educators using BikeMN’s Walk! Bike! Fun! curriculum and supported by Transition Plus (an MPS program to build job and life skills for young

people with disabilities) students who maintain the bike fleets. Many schools that begin bike education using the traveling fleets go on to build their own for use throughout the school year.

- 2. LET’S ROLL MPS:** Twice a year, MPS hosts Let’s Roll, a five-mile community bike ride that brings together hundreds of students, staff, volunteers, and families. Adaptive bikes and accessible routes ensure every student can participate. What began as a daunting idea has become a beloved tradition, offering a joyful opportunity for students and families to ride together and for partners to see their impact in action. “Talk about the power of lots of kids and elected officials and community members on bikes enjoying the city. Let’s Roll really gives visibility and momentum,” Jennie Mainz, Manager at the MHD.
- 3. WALKING AND BIKING FIELD TRIPS:** Walking and biking field trips give students a new way to experience their community while bringing learning to life. MPS created a [Walking and Biking Field Trip Guide](#) to help teachers connect trips with curriculum. For example, a class of fourth graders paired a biking field trip with a civics lesson when a nearby street closure was at risk of reopening to cars. Students wrote letters to City Council members and then biked to City Hall to attend a transportation committee meeting. Their advocacy helped keep the street car-free, giving students both a safer route and a powerful lesson in civic action.



*Students biking as part of school-based education.
Source: Minneapolis Public Schools*

Youth-centered street changes

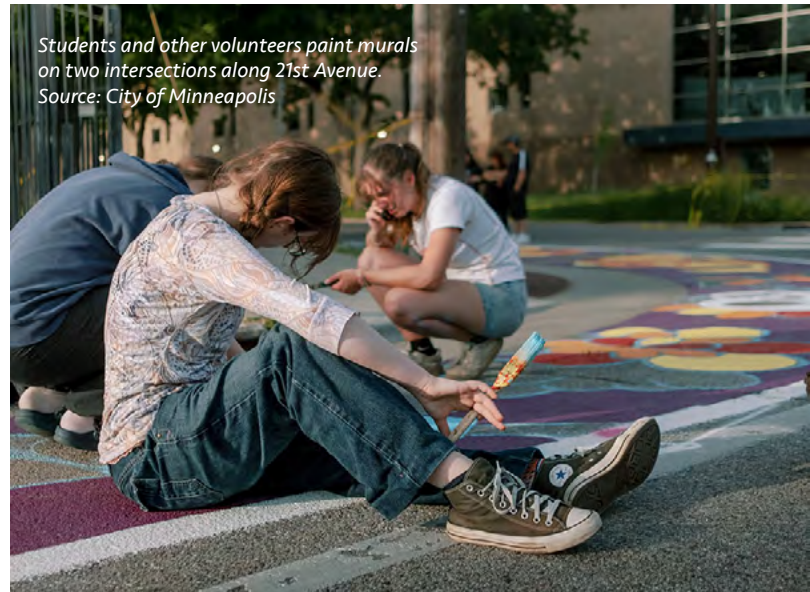
Students are more than participants in SRTS programs, they are partners in shaping their streets. “What if we created a world, a city in which walking and biking were easy, safe, comfortable and exciting for kids? What if we didn’t need to work on mode shift, because we have encouraged walking and biking from the beginning?” imagines Fast. Bringing youth voices into the Minneapolis Public Works Department planning process has led to more effective designs, elevated student perspectives as critical data, and fostered a deep sense of community ownership.

The City has installed several SRTS projects, such as a two-way protected bikeway serving Green Central Elementary. The South-Folwell Safe Routes to School project shows what this looks like in practice. The route connects three schools, nearby parks, and recreation centers in a neighborhood where nearly one in four residents are under 18. The project includes traffic calming along a network of five intersections. It aligns with the City’s Transportation Action Plan and both the Pedestrian Priority Network and All Ages and Abilities Bike Network. Data including speed studies, roadway conditions, and crash history identified the route as a top priority.

Students were asked to inform what came next:

- Transition Plus students conducted a bike audit focused on accessible biking and rolling.
- South High School’s student council provided feedback during design.
- Second graders shared designs that revealed what feels safe, fun, and welcoming.
- Local artists and students collaborated to create asphalt art.
- Youth helped install the asphalt art and demonstration projects.
- Community events like paint nights and bike decorating brought families into the process.

Student engagement directly influenced outcomes, from traffic calming locations to creative intersection art. It also built pride and ownership. One staff member recalled seeing children stop in the median after school just to stand on the artwork they helped create. That small act of claiming space reflects a powerful shift towards young people seeing their streets as theirs.



Students and other volunteers paint murals on two intersections along 21st Avenue.
Source: City of Minneapolis



South-Folwell SRTS Project.
Source: City of Minneapolis

These projects are met with what’s happening with partners, community members, and volunteers. Halloran says, “The infrastructure piece is huge, but it’s also the culture. I think we have so many different people and groups advocating and doing this work. Whether it’s a one-time partnership or an ongoing collaboration, they are making youth walking and biking such a success for our city.”

Looking forward

Even as Minneapolis celebrates progress, speeding remains one of its greatest challenges. It is consistently identified as a top community concern and a major factor in crashes, contributing to nearly two-thirds of fatal crashes in 2021. During engagement for the SRTS Strategic Plan, 85 percent of caregivers said speeding was the biggest barrier to walking and biking to school.

As part of its response, Minneapolis launched a **Traffic Safety Camera Pilot** in September 2025 after years of community engagement, planning, and legislative groundwork.

Five pilot locations were chosen from intersections within 2,000 feet of schools that had injury-causing crashes in the past five years. All are on the Pedestrian Priority Network, and most are near High Injury Streets—places where children and families travel every day.

The City made it clear from the start that this effort was about safer streets, not revenue. Cameras were never meant to be a quick fix. Locations where roadway design encouraged speeding were prioritized for infrastructure improvements instead. As the City explained, “We hope that the cameras are so successful at reducing unsafe driving that there is no excess revenue generated.”

Turning inspiration into action

Minneapolis’s nearly 20-year journey shows that lasting change doesn’t require starting big. It grows from small steps, strong partnerships, and a steady commitment to collaboration. The city’s approach offers practical, actionable lessons for others ready to take the next step in creating safer streets for youth:

■ BUILD PARTNERSHIPS EARLY AND KEEP THEM ACTIVE.

Bring together schools, city departments, and community partners regularly to align goals, share updates, and problem-solve together. Even two people working together can make progress.

■ PAIR DATA WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE.

Crash data, speed studies, race, income and transportation factors such as vehicle access guide where to invest, but the most meaningful outcomes come when those numbers are shaped by authentic community input. Listening to students, families, and residents ensures solutions reflect real needs, not just numbers.

■ INVITE YOUTH TO CO-CREATE SOLUTIONS.

Give students meaningful roles in planning, designing, and evaluating projects. Their ideas reveal how streets feel to use, insight that’s often missing from traditional planning processes.

■ START SMALL AND SHOW SUCCESS.

Focus your efforts where you can make an immediate difference. One school, one street, or one pilot project can demonstrate what’s possible and build the momentum for larger, long-term change.

■ BE TRANSPARENT AND BUILD TRUST.

Share goals, progress, and results openly with the community. Use simple language, visuals, and multiple channels to help everyone understand how and why decisions are made.

Together, these lessons show that creating safer streets for youth isn’t about having unlimited resources or the perfect plan, it’s about building relationships, listening deeply, and staying focused on the shared goal of helping every child walk, bike, and roll safely in their community.





Minneapolis high school students on their way to class.
Source: Nancy Pullen-Seufert

COVER PHOTO: Minneapolis Public Schools students biking. Source: Minneapolis Public Schools



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