



2021 ANNUAL REPORT

YEAR IN REVIEW

SEATTLE SCHOOL TRAFFIC SAFETY COMMITTEE stsc@seattle.gov

WHAT IS THE SCHOOL TRAFFIC SAFETY COMMITTEE?

The City of Seattle School Traffic Safety Committee (STSC) was created by Ordinance in 1975. This board of 11 members includes representatives of Seattle Public Schools (SPS), Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), Seattle Police Department (SPD), King County Metro, and 5 volunteer positions filled by interested members of the public including parents, grandparents, and neighbors.



WHEN DOES IT MEET?

Meetings are open to the public and are generally held 8:30 - 10:30 AM the third Friday of every month. During pandemic times, they are held online; contact SDOT for the link. When in person, STSC meets either at the school district administrative building, John Stanford Center for Educational Excellence (2445 3rd Ave S) or SDOT's offices at the Seattle Municipal Tower, 700 5th Ave, with occasional meetings at school sites. Meeting location and agenda information is here:

<https://www.seattle.gov/school-traffic-safety-committee>

stsc@seattle.gov

WHAT DOES THE COMMITTEE DO?

Connects the pieces of the transportation puzzle

- strengthens working relationships between the stakeholders
- provides a mechanism for any community member to raise school traffic safety issues

City of Seattle Lead Items

- recommends new school crosswalk locations and crossing guard assignments using intersection safety data provided by SDOT
- Fields parent and school traffic problem inquiries

Seattle Public School Lead Items

- reviews traffic circulation plans for new and renovated school buildings
- updates elementary school walk boundary maps
- works to improve crossing guard recruitment

Cross- Agency Coordination

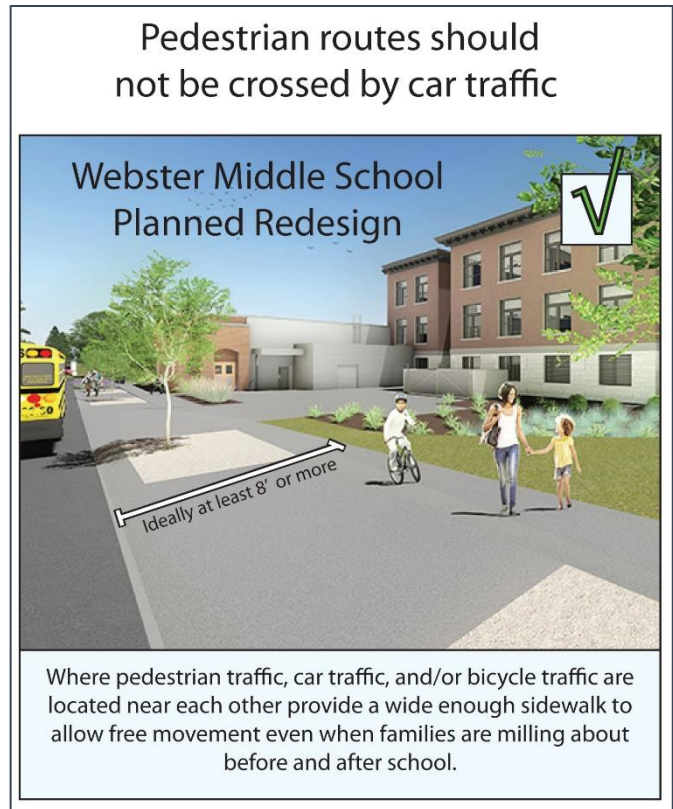
Locating Metro bus stops to best serve schools, advocating for funding Safe Routes to School Coordinator to serve the majority of Seattle students who don't qualify for yellow buses, police presence to dissuade harassment of crossing guards – there are an endless array of details that add up to ensuring our children and neighbors have safe routes to school. The STSC was created to make sure that the needed coordination happens.



A BIG WIN

In December 2020, the School Board adopted the STSC’s Best Practices for School Traffic Design as part of the District’s *Design Standards and Educational Specifications* or “Ed Specs.” This means that designers and contractors for projects that affect school sites will have an illustrated guide to putting the safety of children first in transportation arrangements. The guide was jointly developed by the School Traffic Safety Committee and SPS Capital Projects to assist designers in avoiding some common design pitfalls. Compiled from the School Traffic Safety Committee’s experience dealing with persistent traffic and circulation problems at a wide variety of schools, this guide will be used to provide direction early in the design process so that projects can avoid later design revisions and wasted effort.

While the Best Practices design guide is specific to local conditions, it has attracted attention beyond Seattle. The City of Tacoma’s lead for Safe Routes to School has requested permission to adapt it for use in Tacoma. STSC also presented the guide at the Iowa State Safe Routes to School conference in January 2021.

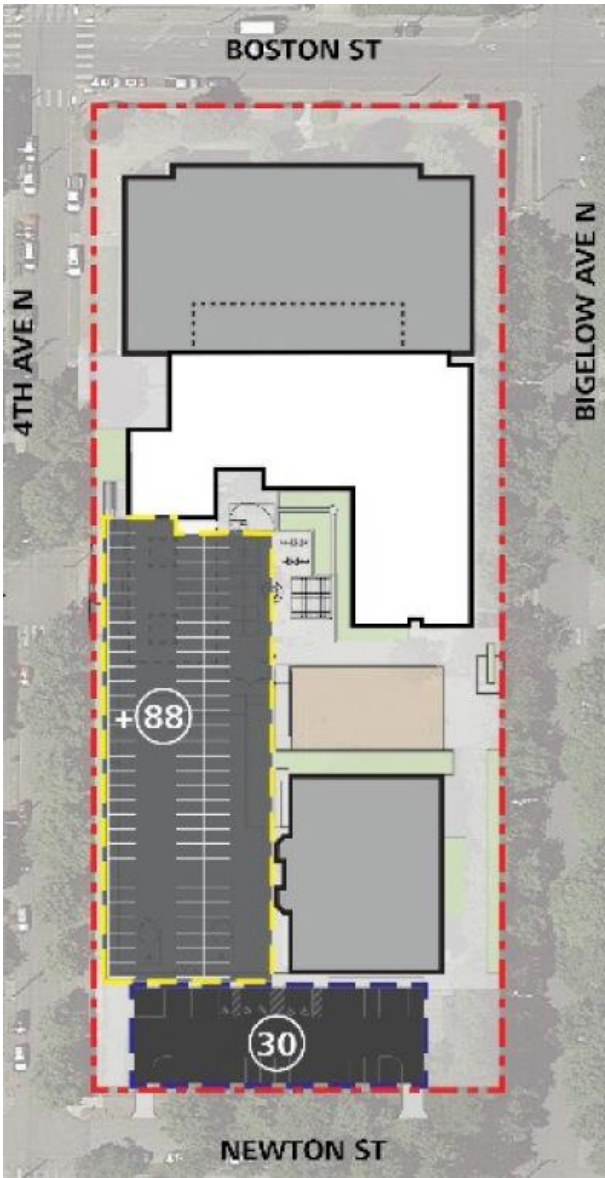


The next need

While the design guide helps push project designs to meet the needs of children walking to school, City of Seattle code pushes schools to devote excessive space to private vehicle circulation and parking (sections 23.51(b).002 and 23.54). City code requires parking based on the square footage of auditorium space in a building, resulting in unrealistically high parking requirements. Very few public school facilities have the space to meet these high parking requirements even if they were to trade playground space for car storage. Given that the City is moving to a multi-modal transit policy overall, it doesn’t make sense for SPS to spend space and budget on private car parking even if there was room. Instead SPS habitually seeks departures as a remedy for unrealistic code requirements, and these departures are habitually granted.

Although the unrealistic code requirements can be circumvented via departures, the departures process has significant costs to SPS. The average cost to support each departure process is \$50,000 in consultant fees not including the substantial staff hours that SPS devotes to shepherding nearly every project through multiple departures. But the bigger costs come from delay. A few local activists use departures as a pretext to habitually file appeals to slow school projects and demand unrelated concessions. The average appeal delay costs 1% of the project cost due to inflation. For reference, the upcoming Northgate Elementary replacement project

has a budget of \$90 million. A 1% cost represents a loss of \$900,000. This is money that could be spent making the building a better place for student learning, but instead is thrown away due to poorly considered City code.



STSC met with Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections (SDCI), Department of Neighborhoods (DON), and SDOT in December 2019 to discuss what benefits the lengthy departure process provides and if there are ways to achieve those benefits through a shorter, more cost effective, less complicated process. The consensus at that time was that the City staff have long agreed that these habitual departures do not make sense, but the City has just never gotten around to allocating staff time to fix this issue.

The cost of habitual departures comes out of capital project budgets and directly impacts student experiences. The current City code is out-of-line with the reality of how school buildings are built and needs to be updated to reflect our current reality and our goals for school sites. The current situation wastes about \$2.5 million each year on school projects.

Excerpt from the Queen Anne Elementary Departure Report showing that meeting the City's parking requirement would mean paving over the playground

For 2021 STSC asks City Council and the Mayor to direct SDCI to initiate code changes to eliminate the need for all of the most common school departures and correct this expensive oversight.

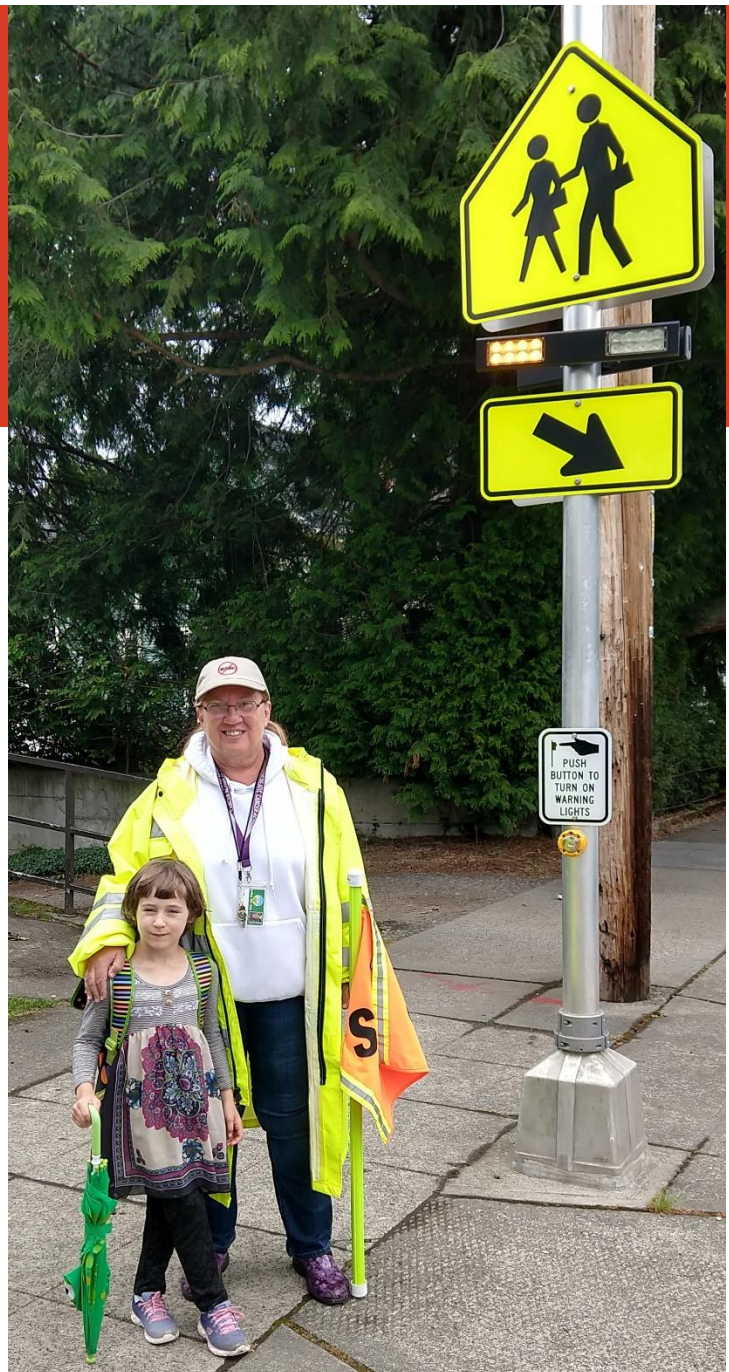
CROSSING GUARDS

There is a chronic shortage of crossing guards. When SPS shifted to online school in response to the pandemic they temporarily paused recruitment and onboarding of crossing guards. Return to in person school has revealed an even greater gap between the number of guards available and the number of risky locations.

40% of intersections deemed dangerous enough to need a crossing guard do not have a guard

One barrier to filling positions quickly is SPS's requirement that prospective guards pay for their own background check up front. This has proven to be a financial difficulty for many of the people who would like to serve their communities and frequently slows the application process as applicants wait for monthly social security checks or other revenue sources.

Not all hourly employees are required to pay for their background check up front. Some other types of district employees are allowed to have that fee taken out of their first paycheck. Extending this program to crossing guards would speed up the on-boarding process and help get these important positions filled. An even better option would be for SPS to recognize that crossing guards work dangerous jobs at odd hours with comparatively low wages and to waive the cost of background checks to applicants, instead paying for background checks out of bus paddle ticket revenue.



SCHOOL STREETS

Prior to the pandemic, the STSC advocated for SDOT to formally create a ‘School Streets’ program after having seen the concept successfully applied internationally, in a select few places in the U.S., and at Genesee Hill Elementary School in West Seattle.

As previously mentioned in this report, Governor Jay Inslee ordered schools across the state, including SPS, to close indefinitely in April of 2020. A little over a year later, SPS buildings began to reopen in April of 2021. As schools reopened, SDOT piloted a ‘School Streets’ program in anticipation that more students would be driven to school because of the pandemic and because yellow bus service is temporarily limited to special needs students in Seattle. According to SDOT’s website: “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, we offered schools an opt-in 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.”



Photo Source: Charlie Simpson

As of the writing of this report, eight schools have opted in to the ‘School Streets’ program. The City is working closely with SPS to advertise the program to schools and to address any issues and requests as they arise. SDOT has used the same set of materials--two traffic barricades with signage attached--as the other programs that arose in response to the pandemic such as the ‘Stay Healthy Streets’ program.



While the ‘School Streets’ program was initiated as a response to the pandemic, SDOT is evaluating making the program permanent if there is support and interest from schools.

The STSC applauds SDOT for the initiation of the ‘School Streets’ program and the quick roll-out in response to an unprecedented need. The committee, however, advocates for the ‘School Streets’ program to include the option to fully close the block adjacent to schools to motorized traffic during arrival and departure times, where that makes sense given adjacent land uses and accessibility for people with mobility limitations. Most other ‘School Street’ programs, such as Vancouver B.C., implement a full street closure during the pick-up and drop-off periods. The SDOT program, however, still allows local deliveries and traffic. To see the full benefits to children, parents, and administrators using the street, the ‘School Street’ program must fully close the street.

As SDOT considers making this program permanent they should also consider what kind of permanent intersection treatments would communicate the pedestrian-centered nature of these streets more clearly than a moveable sandwich board. These treatments could include chicanes, decorative pavement, colorful paint, planters, and more.

REMOTE MEETINGS

Although we miss meeting face-to-face, remote meetings during the pandemic have provided unprecedented ease of access to School Traffic Safety Committee meetings for busy parents and educators. We request that the City continue to support remote participation in all public meetings even as in person meetings resume. We request that the City make it clear that that is a supported aspect of Board and Commission transparency and accessibility.

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL COORDINATOR COMING SOON!

The City of Seattle has generously agreed to pay for a position based at SPS that will work to support students to safely get themselves to and from school. Developing this position has had some positive ripple effects on the district’s consideration and classification of other members of the transportation team, such as the crossing guard supervisor.

The majority of public school students do not qualify for yellow bus service, yet there are various neighborhood specific issues that may make walking or rolling to school tricky. Identifying the issues and ways to overcome them for families who would like to walk and roll is a goal that has hitherto fallen into the gap between the different official roles of the City, the County, and the State. Soon the Safe Routes to School Coordinator will tackle these challenges.

The position will be open for applications by the time this report becomes public. The Committee is grateful for the work by both the City and SPS to make this possible and looks forward to beginning what we hope will be a lasting shift in supporting student transportation to school.

POLICE REPRESENTATIVE

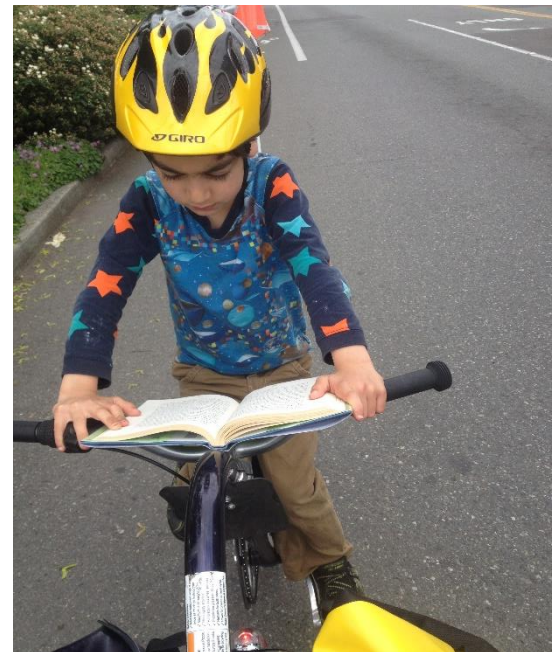
This year as part of changes to SPD’s organization and as a reflection of the lack of traffic around schools during remote schooling, SPD withdrew participation of their long-time committee representative, Kevin O’Neill. Now that in-person school has resumed, along with traffic issues related to school drop-off and pick-up, the committee has reached out to SPD to ask for a new police liaison - SPD has not yet responded. **We look forward to gaining a new partner and ask City Council to help us in making that happen.**

CROSSWALK POLICY

The STSC is advocating for an update to the City's current crosswalk warrant policy. The Committee would like to see a policy that allows for crosswalks to be marked preemptively in locations that do not currently meet warrants but that are expected to be high pedestrian traffic volume generators. The STSC is particularly interested in how this would allow for crosswalks to be installed around new and renovated schools prior to the school opening. The current policy often results in schools opening without marked crosswalks at heavily trafficked crossings.

SDOT drafted an updated crossing policy and is currently reviewing it internally. One of the goals of the new policy is to proactively install school crosswalks before new school buildings open. SDOT's Project Development Division is working to address concerns that were raised regarding maintenance implications of the proposed policy.

The STSC would like to reiterate the need for this policy update and urges the City to do everything to speed it along. Our students all deserve to have marked crosswalks at the main crossings leading to school.



We appreciate the opportunity to serve on this community. In 2021-2022 We look forward to continuing collaboration with Seattle Public Schools and the City of Seattle to help students get safely to school.