

Walking the Talk: National Walk & Roll to School Day and Transportation Safety

October 2023

October 4th, 2023 is the [27th annual National Walk & Roll to School Day](#). This event began in 1997 as a one-day event aimed at building awareness for the need for walkable communities. It has since grown into an international movement benefiting everyone through less traffic congestion, safer streets, a cleaner environment, and improved personal health. By participating in events like Walk and Roll to School and taking inspiration from them, we can benefit from the transportation choices we make right now—and so can our kids. Choosing to get to school by walking, biking, or using a scooter or stroller contributes to a better world for our children, the environment, and our community.

Kids need regular physical activity to develop healthy bodies and healthy lifelong habits. A lack of physical activity (for kids and grownups alike) can contribute to chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and even cancer and stroke. And yet the great majority of kids ([around 68%](#)) in California get a private car ride to school each day, missing out on an opportunity to get some exercise in and build community. Events like National Walk & Roll to School Day offer the opportunity to do something fun and healthy while learning about traffic safety and building community.

Why aren't more kids already walking or riding to school? In 1969, [48 percent](#) of children 5 to 14 years of age usually walked or bicycled to school, but by 2009, only 13 percent of children 5 to 14 years of age did. Even accounting for distance (looking at total proportion or proportion of kids who live within a mile of school), there is an obvious decline. Research from [The National Center for Safe Routes to School](#) (the coordinating organization for Walk & Roll to School Day), parents most often cited one or more of the following as primary barriers that keep their kids from walking to school: distance, traffic-related danger, weather, crime danger, or opposing school policy.

Over a third of parents listed “traffic-related danger” as a barrier, and this concern is real. However, being inside a vehicle does not always mean safety—in fact, the most recent Center for Disease Control data shows that in 2021, [711 child passengers](#) ages 12 and younger were killed in motor vehicle crashes in the United States, and in 2020 over 63,000 were injured. The more parents decide to drive their children to school, the more vehicle traffic there is. But many parents aren't sure where to start.

Last year, there were 3,235 Walk and Roll to School events across the country, including 509 in California. Why walk, bike, or roll? For kids, a lot of the draw is simply the fun. It's interactive and encourages community and independence. For parents, it might help them “try on” a regular non-car way to school within the increased safety (and fun and support) of a large group. Kids can learn how to walk and ride safely and begin building life-long habits.



To encourage these same habits around transportation and safety, MTI's workforce development competitions this year center on the theme of Vision Zero. The MTI [Elementary Poster Contest](#) allows students grades 1-6 to convey their knowledge of safe, affordable, and sustainable alternative transportation modes through an artistic, visually compelling image. For middle school students, MTI sponsors the [Garrett Morgan Sustainable Transportation Competition](#), in which students explore solutions to transportation issues. High school students can participate in MTI's [Essay Contest](#). All three of these competitions provide opportunities for students to develop and show off their STEAM skills—and maybe earn prizes! Essay contest winners can be awarded up to \$1,000! These competitions, and events like National Walk & Roll to School Day, engage youth and get them excited about transportation. Learning about STEAM and transportation issues helps increase traffic safety and empowers kids to pursue educational and career opportunities in the field of transportation.

National Walk & Roll to School Day and similar events are a crucial part of making our communities safer and our futures more sustainable. This annual event reminds us of the tremendous benefits of choosing to leave our cars behind and embrace alternative modes of transportation. It's not just about reducing traffic congestion; it's about nurturing healthy lifelong habits in our children, creating safer streets, fostering a sense of community, and protecting the environment. The decline in the number of kids walking or biking to school over the years is not going to shift without action. Events and activities like National Walk & Roll to School Day and MTI's transportation competitions can begin to guide us toward solutions. They highlight the importance of alternative transportation modes and the Vision Zero safety goals, and they inspire young people to become future leaders.

As we celebrate National Walk & Roll to School Day this October 4th, let's remember the choices we make not only impact our children but also pave the way for **a healthier, more sustainable, and safer tomorrow.**

MTI Executive Director, Karen Philbrick, PhD