

Colorado Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan

Five-Year Strategic Plan Update
March 2024

Acknowledgments

The past and future success of the Colorado Safe Routes to School is founded on collaboration. This update to the Colorado Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan wholly embodies this essential collaboration. We appreciate the meaningful participation of many who contributed.

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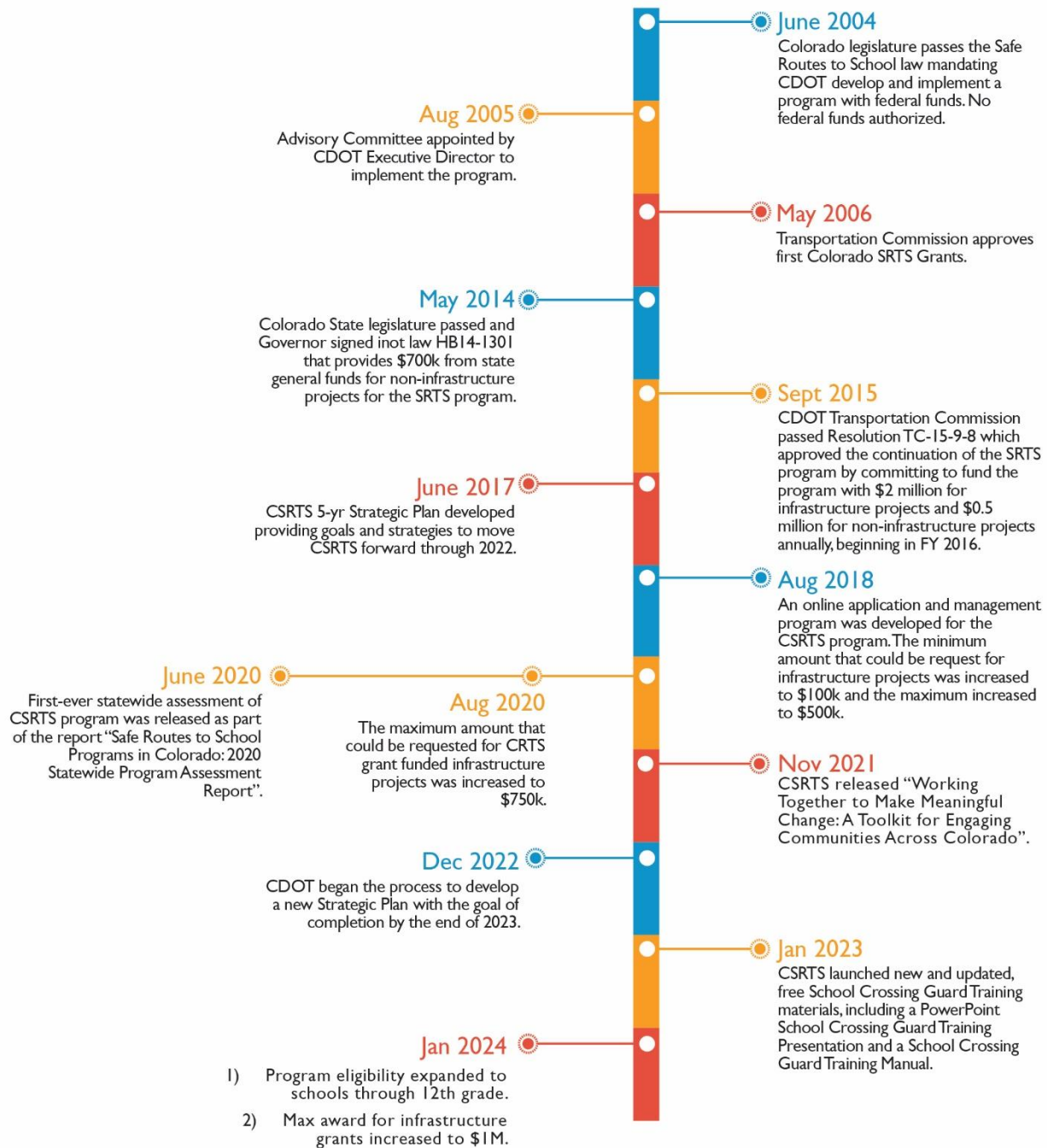
Introduction

In late 2022 the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS) started the process of creating a new five-year strategic plan (2024 - 2029). The SRTS Advisory Committee created an ambitious plan that included first a reflection on the previous five-year plan, and next, an examination of data followed by extensive outreach to listen and learn from community members and partners throughout the state of Colorado. All this resulted in the development of the new SRTS Strategic Plan. This plan is accompanied by an Appendix that provides additional details and background information. **We hope that this plan finds you as inspired as we are.**

Fifty-five years ago, walking and biking to school were commonplace – in 1969, roughly half of all students (nationally) between the ages of 5 and 18 either walked or biked to school. Over the last 30 years, these rates have decreased from 49 percent to less than 15 percent, while rates of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases among youth have increased. **Many communities across the United States recognized the connection between these increases and a precipitous drop in rates of students walking and biking to school.** Largely in response to these trends, the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) movement was launched in the United States at a national level.

As shown in Figure 1, Colorado's program was codified through state legislation in 2004. In 2005, Congress passed the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient, Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which authorized funding for local programs. One year later, in 2006, the first Colorado SRTS Grants were approved. Since then, several other notable milestones have been achieved.

Figure I. Colorado's SRTS Program Historical Timeline



Why Safe Routes to School in Colorado?

Each school day, thousands of Colorado's K -12 students travel to and from school. It is of the utmost importance to provide students and their families safe and reliable options for walking and biking because it has multiple benefits for them, their communities, and Colorado overall. **Colorado's SRTS Program helps to provide these options and in doing so, can improve students' safety, physical and mental health, and academic performance.** The range of benefits underscore that continued investment in the program is warranted and an update to the five-year strategic plan is an

important undertaking to maximize the reach and impact of SRTS throughout Colorado. These benefits, and several others provided through safe routes investments, are listed below.

Traffic Safety

- > Reduced traffic injuries & dangers for students and community members at arrival & dismissal through street improvements near schools.
- > More chances to learn & practice road safety for students.

Cost Savings

- > Household savings from reduced gas & car use.
- > Education budget savings through reduced student busing costs.

Safety from Crime

- > Increased safety from crime & violence due to more people on the streets, good lighting & better street design.
- > Less harassment, bullying, or violence when students walk or bike together or with adults.

Climate Benefits and Cleaner Air

- > Fewer student asthma attacks due to less driving & reduced air pollution results.
- > Cleaner air & reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Community Connectedness

- > Stronger student friendships & relationships through walking & biking together.
- > Positive social connections for families & neighbors.

Healthier Students

- > Better health & stronger bones, muscles & joints through more walking & biking.
- > Reduced risk of chronic disease, diabetes, & obesity.

Better Academic Performances

- > Better focus, improved concentration & less distraction for students who are active before school.
- > Fewer absences and less tardiness when students walk or bike in groups.

School Transportation Fixes

- > Solutions to reduced or nonexistent bus service through Safe Routes to School.
- > Reduced traffic congestion at pickup/drop-off times.

Source: National Safe Routes to School Partnership, *Safe Routes to School Programs in Colorado, 2020*

Reflecting and Evaluating

In 2025, Colorado Safe Routes to School will celebrate 20 years since its creation and has achieved several notable accomplishments over that time. Colorado was the first state in the country to implement SRTS with federal dollars¹. Since then, funding from federal sources stopped; to fill that gap the Colorado Transportation Commission continues to allocate \$2.5 million per year for both infrastructure and educational grants. In addition to being an important funding source for safe routes to and from school, the program has taken continued action through creation of toolkits including a Community Engagement Toolkit and a School Crossing Guard Toolkit. Colorado SRTS also produced

¹ Safe Routes Partnership, 2020 Statewide Program Assessment Report, *Safe Routes to School Programs in Colorado; 2020*

several important bodies of work contributing to the national conversation on SRTS that include the Colorado Census Report and a School Siting Policy paper.

Current Conditions

SRTS in Colorado can be aptly described as an exciting and important work in progress, and while considerable progress has been made, the program is still in route to achieving its full potential. An overview of the current conditions is included below, and additional detail is included in the Appendix.

Infrastructure & Education. Over the last 18 years, the Colorado Safe Routes program made several infrastructure projects possible to improve conditions for walking and biking to school. These included, but are not limited to, sidewalks, bike lanes, multi-use trails, crosswalks, curb ramps, and new signage. Tracking the number of miles within these infrastructure investments is recommended as part of this new plan.

In addition, using SRTS funds, communities made robust investments in education programs including bicycle rodeos, walk-bike focused education assemblies, and walking and biking school buses. These programs helped Colorado students, their family members, teachers, and administrators experience the benefits and fun associated with walking and biking to school.

Overall, 148 different communities and organizations throughout Colorado have received SRTS grants for infrastructure and programs, including a combination of cities, towns, and counties.

Encouragement Programs. The continuance of and growth in the number of Walk to School Day (WTSD) Events is another indicator of program progress. In the first year of tracking (2006), 55 schools participated in WTSD events. By 2017, 197 schools throughout Colorado registered for WTSD events. That number declined to 178 schools in 2019. Participation notably declined during the pandemic due to remote learning and social distancing, however it started to rebound in 2022 when 109 schools registered. That level held steady in 2023 with 109 schools registered.

In 2013 Colorado also began promoting Bike to School Day. Eighty-one (81) Colorado schools registered for the inaugural event that year. Participation grew and peaked in 2018 with 173 schools registered for the event. Like WTSD events, the pandemic also triggered a decline in Bike to School Day events. In 2022 and 2023 there were 95 and 81 registered events, respectively. Although a decrease from preceding years, **81 events in 2023 placed Colorado 4th in the nation among participating states.**

Taken together, these translate to thousands of Colorado's students, families, teachers, and administrators taking part in events that encourage safe walking and biking to school. CDOT's continued promotion and support of these events will be key to the program's future.

Funding. From 2005 through 2023, 573 grant applications were received from throughout Colorado requesting \$80,008,837 million in funding. One hundred forty-one (141) infrastructure projects and 147 non-infrastructure projects, including 3 statewide projects, have been awarded \$36,303,9322. While the

² Colorado Safe Routes to School Fact Sheet, August 2023.

level of demand for program funds is positive, **the variance between requests and awards reveals a notable funding gap.**

The program, currently funded through state funds, awarded \$2.5 million to grantees each year or a total of \$5 million per two-year funding cycle. As learned, in part, through the stakeholder engagement process for this plan, grants provide critical capital to make several projects possible. Several stakeholders noted that cost escalations for materials and labor impact the local project scopes and reduce the number of projects awarded. **Thus, maintaining or increasing program funding will be a key to its success in the years ahead.**

Completed Projects. SRTS grantees have successfully completed numerous projects over the last five years. Highlighted below are projects that exemplify the achievements of engaging with youth and partnering with stakeholders to advance the SRTS vision. Like other funded projects, these examples illustrate that grants not only benefit Colorado's students but also parents and local communities through bolstering retail activity and creating construction jobs.

- **City and County of Denver's Advancing a Culture of Active Transportation in Schools (ACATS):** Paired active transport infrastructure priorities with safety education modules delivered by trainer teacher "champions". Building off relationships with school communities, bike shops, and community partners to support SRTS on a citywide scale, Denver gave away 37 bikes with locks and helmets to beaming kids during Bike and Roll to School Month. ACATS also hosted multiple educational opportunities, including bike rodeos, group rides, repair stations and more.
- **Boulder County's Trip Tracker:** Trip Tracker is a community-based, collaborative program run through Boulder County Transportation Department, and they partnered up with Boulder County Farmers Markets to encourage eco-friendly, active, and nutritious choices. Participants in Trip Tracker earn "Tracker Bucks" which can be spent at locally owned businesses throughout the school year, and businesses are reimbursed fifty cents on the dollar for all bucks collected.
- **Town of Lyons 4th Avenue Pedestrian Bridge:** Lyons Elementary School and Lyons Middle/Senior High School are located on opposite sides of the Town, separated by the North Sain Vrain Creek, which can only be crossed using heavily congested streets that lack bike and pedestrian connections. Funding supported the building of a pedestrian bridge at 4th avenue while also enhancing bike and pedestrian improvements to help create a safer route for children to get to and from school.

Program Report Card. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership completes biennial state report cards that provide a snapshot of how supportive each state is of walking, bicycling, and physical activity for children and adults. Each state is scored in four key areas, which add up to an overall score. In the 2022 Report Card, **Colorado achieved a score of 130 / 200, which puts Colorado in the top third of all states and at the higher end of the *Making Strides* category.** A copy of the report card, including the scoring criteria and how Colorado scored for each, is provided in the Appendix. This score demonstrates that Colorado supported meaningful steps that enhance walking, bicycling, SRTS, and active communities not only in the SRTS program but in other CDOT programs such as the Multimodal Transportation and Mitigation Options Fund (MMOF) designed to make accessibility and safety improvements in Colorado and in the Revitalizing Main Streets (RMS) program

developed as part of Colorado's COVID-19 Recovery Plan that aims to enhance active transportation safety³.

Opportunities for consideration and inclusion in this plan in part and that fall within the purview of CDOT and the SRTS program that could lead to an increase in Colorado's overall score on a future report card include:

- Adopting a statewide goal to increase walk and bike mode share (potential to gain five points)
- Providing support to TAP applicants; (potential to gain five points)
- Increasing the amount of state funding for active transportation; (potential to gain five points)
- Providing Safe Routes to School planning grants or mini-grants; (potential to gain three points)

It's worth noting that CDOT's score will increase in the 2024 report card by at least five points in that it now provides (waives requirements for) the local matching funding for high-need, qualified communities.

National Assessment Report. The Safe Routes Partnership conducted a 2020 Assessment Report for the state of Colorado, which provided a high-level assessment of challenges, innovations, and opportunities. While the results of this report are discussed in more detail in the Appendix, one of the key takeaways is that **there is room for considerable growth in SRTS in Colorado with the help of state level leadership and resources**⁴.

Key takeaways from the report that informed the development of goals, objectives, strategies for this plan include, but aren't limited to, the following:

- State funding for Safe Routes to School could be expanded to provide more significant support for Safe Routes to School programs and for improved street safety in school zones around the state;
- Explore a Safe Routes to School program mini-grant fund as a low barrier to entry method to provide Safe Routes to School funding to interested communities;
- Encourage communities to explore financing mechanisms at the local level to fund Safe Routes to School coordinators and local activities.
- Conduct regular state evaluations of levels of walking and biking to school; and
- Expand program partners and secure commitments to ongoing participation by developing multi-sector task force, advisory team, or other Safe Routes to School committee.

Health and Safety. Analysis of several health and safety factors to inform the development of this strategic plan and to give context to the current state of student and caregiver health and priorities occurred as part of this plan creation. This included safety & crash data, obesity rates, school smart choice data, and parent survey data. More details about these health and safety factors, and their results,

³ Safe Routes Partnership, 2020 Statewide Program Assessment Report, Safe Routes to School Programs in Colorado; 2020

⁴ Safe Routes Partnership, 2020 Statewide Program Assessment Report, Safe Routes to School Programs in Colorado; 2020

can be found in the Appendix. Some of the key findings from the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS)⁵ include the following:

- Almost 55 percent of student respondents could get to school by an active mode, however only 21.7 percent (age 15 years and younger) indicated they do walk or ride one or more days in an average week;
- Nearly 49 percent of respondents **indicated they were not physically active for more than an hour each day**, which is the recommended, minimum amount of physical exercise each day or per week;
- Nearly 15 percent of youth ages 10 to 17 have obesity and while these rates are lower in comparison to 35 other states with higher rates, **thousands of Colorado's youth are obese and lack of sufficient physical exercise is a common contributing factor.**⁶
- Thirty-two (32) percent of parents surveyed who have student-aged kids recognize that traveling to and from school by an active mode is a healthy choice and fun; and
- Half of schools don't encourage walking or biking as a regular mode of transportation and yet the majority of parent respondents said they would be comfortable with their child walking to / from school without an adult by the 7th grade.

Providing K-12 students throughout Colorado with safe and reliable means of walking and biking to school can play a critical role in improving physical, mental, and emotional health among our state's youth.

Summary. As the current conditions analysis reveals, the program made meaningful progress in the last five years, benefiting students and communities throughout Colorado. However, gaps and opportunities remain. As reflected in this plan's goals, objectives, and strategies.

- In part because of inflationary pressures, current funding levels of \$5 million for the whole state for a 2-year period are limited and the next five years should include strategic conversations on how program funding can be increased.
- More robust quantitative tracking of infrastructure improvements made and reporting of accomplishments could strengthen the program's brand and impact throughout Colorado.
- Walk and Bike to School Day events present a low barrier to entry opportunity to build on and CDOT should continue its education, promotion, and technical support around these events.
- Continuing to share out project case studies and highlights across peer and grantee networks is an excellent way to build buy in, excitement, and capacity across the state.
- Regular tracking and reporting out on rates of walking and biking to school, especially for grant funded schools and districts, needs to be integrated into the program's procedures so that effectiveness and impact can be measured.
- Collaborating with grantees on reporting and tracking trends at the state level is a great way to gauge the impact that Safe Routes program and projects are having in Colorado.

⁵ The Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS) is administered every other year to Colorado's public middle and high school students. Data used to support this plan was extracted from the 2021 survey responses.

⁶ State of Childhood Obesity. *Explore State Data: Colorado*. <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/state-data/?state=co>

- Expanding the reach of the program can have notable health benefits for K-12 students. Existing partnerships with the State Health Department should be continued and, where possible, expanded.

Evaluating Performance (2017-2022)

CDOT and its program partners made notable strides in the last five years, which sets a positive foundation moving forward. Specific accomplishments that CDOT made in relation to the goals from the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan are summarized below while a comprehensive summary of accomplishments is provided in the Appendix.

Goal One: Demonstrate that more children are walking and bicycling to and from school as a result of CSRTS.

- > **Achievement:** CSRTS conducted a full analysis to discern what data is available, understand the current baselines, and establish bold and specific targets.⁷

Goal Two: Establish a user-friendly grantmaking approach that makes it easier for more agencies to apply and compete for funding.

- > **Achievement:** CSRTS revised their grantmaking approach by moving the application to an online, digital experience. Additional efforts to create a streamlined process leading to a more efficient and transparent process were also employed. One on one grant consultations were implemented. Criteria was established and implemented that allowed communities that qualify to receive 100% funding (local match of 20% waived).

Goal Three: Raise awareness of the effectiveness of CSRTS in getting more children walking and bicycling to and from school.

- > **Achievement:** Colorado SRTS produced the first ever Colorado Census Report that provided an overview of the status of SRTS in Colorado.

Goal Four: Influence policy decisions that promote and support more children walking and bicycling to and from school.

- > **Achievement:** SRTS developed the Supporting Safe Routes to School Through Smart School Siting report to identify how local stakeholders can site (locate) schools to better support walking, biking, and rolling to school.

Goal Five: Develop capacities of communities to launch, maintain, and sustain Safe Routes to School initiatives.

- > **Achievement:** CDOT developed and disseminated a broad range of resources, including free webinars, newsletters, and toolkits, to help communities throughout Colorado start, sustain, and grow Safe Routes to School efforts.

⁷ CDOT, Colorado Safe Routes to School: Its Impact, 8/20/2018

Looking Ahead to the Next Five Years

The data reveals potential and suggests that over the next five years, the SRTS program can play a significant role in empowering more K-12 students (and families) to safely walk and bike to school.

Plan & Policy Integration

Integration of CDOT's Safe Routes program into other plans and policies, where appropriate, can help deepen awareness of the program across the state and aid in the implementation of goals and actions over the next five years. Looking ahead, updates to or development of relevant plans and policies present important opportunities for integration of the Safe Routes program and implementation of the strategic plan. More detail on the relevant plans and policies is provided in the Appendix.

Stakeholder Engagement

The Colorado Safe Routes to School program sought input from a wide range of stakeholders including community members, practitioners and partners when developing this new strategic plan. Outreach efforts conducted during the summer and fall of 2023 focused on gathering a broad range of perspectives on how the program has done over the last five years and what opportunities exist for the next five years. Engagement primarily consisted of an online survey, focus group meetings, and several 1 - 1 and small group interviews. The survey was sent to over 418 individuals and more than 160 people responded. Two virtual focus group sessions were conducted and included eleven stakeholders. Eleven interviews were conducted with 16 stakeholders who answered questions related to capacity, communication, and refinement of the program's goals. In addition, a notification about the plan update was posted on the program webpage as well as through the e-newsletter, where interested parties were invited to share input. Details about each of these engagement activities are included in the Appendix.

Some of the recurring themes that emerged through the engagement activities included:

- Provide promotional and educational materials and resources in more than just English. Ensure information is available in the format/language that is most accessible to that community/school and utilize local leaders that match the identity of the community.
- Identify and target schools with highest need (due to lack of infrastructure, socially vulnerable demographics, etc. or those that are Title I schools) and prioritize outreach and investment to these schools or underserved communities.
- Continue to provide technical assistance to communities without access to technical expertise. This could include staffing and/or training support for schools, municipalities or community partners.
- Peer learning, success stories, and a formula for how to start the programmatic aspects of a SRTS program are all important.
- Utilize community connectors/liasons to get the message out. Often there is mistrust with state government, so build connections with local leaders to communicate the SRTS program and its benefits. Be sure to identify liaisons that match the culture/character of the community.
- School choice has a big impact on students being able to walk/bike to school.

These informed the plan's goals, objectives, strategies, annual action planning considerations, as well as ongoing (current) program activities that will be continued into the next five years.

Vision

Looking ahead, an overarching vision that CDOT program staff, program partners, and grantees can strive for is an important element in moving SRTS in Colorado forward. The vision serves as a guide to help steer the program towards achievement of its goals, objectives, and strategies. This vision was developed through consideration of accomplishments made in the last five years as well as the valuable input received from a broad range of stakeholders engaged during the plan's development.

Vision: Colorado is a safe place for all kids K – 12th grades to walk, bike and roll to and from school regardless of where they live.

Goals, Objectives, Strategies

Opportunities to achieve the program's visions are found in the cross cutting, evidence-based goals and strategies contained with this plan. These also reflect concerns, priorities, and varied perspectives expressed by SRTS partners and stakeholders engaged during the plan's development. The goals, objectives, and strategies developed for this plan seek to make the program even stronger. These are intended to broaden the reach and impact of the program throughout the state by 2029; to further propel communities or schools that already have Safe Routes programs in place and welcoming new communities, schools, and coalitions into the program.

Goal One: Continue to grow the capacity of all Colorado communities related to Safe Route to School.

Objective: Provide opportunities for learning and education to increase the capacity of community members, partners, and grantees.

- > **Strategy 1A:** Host regular trainings on topics relevant to the SRTS Community.
- > **Strategy 1B:** Provide toolkits and other downloadable resources on the CDOT website.
- > **Strategy 1C:** Provide technical assistance on SRTS grant funding to interested communities.
- > **Strategy 1D:** Determine and develop an approach regarding program expansion to 9th - 12th grades.

Goal Two: Advance the Safe Routes Program to meet the diverse needs and varying capacities of Colorado communities.

Objective: Ensure that disproportionately impacted communities are represented within the SRTS program.

- > **Strategy 2A:** Identify disproportionately impacted communities within Colorado through use of evidence-based tools.
- > **Strategy 2B:** Create a comprehensive approach for identified impacted communities that includes technical assistance on SRTS grant funding, incorporation of an equity scoring matrix or its equivalent, communication strategies and strengthening partnerships.

Goal Three: Expand collaborative partnerships to advance the SRTS program.

Objective: Cultivate new and expand existing partnerships with agencies and organizations that share similar goals of the SRTS program.

- > **Strategy 3A:** Expand partnership with CDPHE through collaboration on mutually reinforcing activities that could include evaluation, technical assistance, toolkit development and/or mapping projects.
- > **Strategy 3B:** Due to the closure of the National Evaluation System Database, create and develop national, state and/or local partnerships with a shared goal of elevating evaluation efforts throughout the Safe Routes Program.

Conclusion

Together, with SRTS partners and advocates, CDOT will advance the goals, objectives, and strategies identified in this strategic plan, ensuring the program is successfully guiding Colorado's K-12 students to a safer, healthier, and more equitable future. Fundamental to this success will be the continued partnerships with other agencies and local leaders, working with funded communities to elevate their voices, and an ongoing commitment to broadening the reach of the program. CDOT and its SRTS partners reflect on the positive accomplishments made to date and look forward to addressing the identified challenges and opportunities over the next five years. **Through a commitment to implementation of this strategic plan, the positive impacts of the program will only increase in the years to come.**