SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School

Student-Centered Walk Audits

A Guide to Partnering with High School Students with Disabilities to Address Barriers to Mobility

Walking to school in Washington, DC. Source: Nancy Pullen-Seufert

Executive Summary

Every day, high school students with disabilities navigate transportation systems that are not built with their full experiences in mind. Many rely on walking, biking, or public transit to reach the places they live, learn, work, and play. While some face physical mobility barriers, others encounter cognitive, sensory, social, or psychological challenges that influence how they travel.

Most efforts to improve transportation for students with disabilities have focused on physical accessibility through ADA compliance, assessments, and walk audits. Broader cognitive, sensory, and behavioral barriers are typically addressed only through individualized approaches, such as travel training. These barriers, often shared by multiple students, are rarely captured in planning processes and remain invisible to decision-makers. As a result, environments may be technically accessible but remain difficult to navigate.

This guide is for teachers, travel trainers, Safe Routes to School coordinators, transportation professionals, and others who want to work together to bridge that gap. It offers a step-by-step approach to conducting student-centered walk audits that translate lived experience into meaningful change. Each step includes an overview, a real-world example, and an opportunity to apply what you learn.

How This Guide Is Organized: 9 Steps for Student-Centered Walk Audits

Before You Begin

Starting can feel overwhelming, but this section helps you take the first step with confidence. It encourages a thoughtful, team-based approach and offers guidance on learning about disabilities from people with lived experience.

Step 1: Start with the Purpose	Begin by getting clear on why you are doing a walk audit. This section helps you define a purpose that reflects student needs, school goals, and local context.
Step 2: Plan With Students	Students are more than participants. This section shows how to involve them as co-researchers in ways that build trust, ownership, and meaningful engagement.
Step 3: Capture the Right Information	Learn how to document both physical and invisible barriers that affect how students travel. This includes emotional, sensory, behavioral, and social factors.
Step 4: Integrate Cognitive Accessibility	Design tools and activities that support different ways of thinking, learning, and participating. This section provides ideas for structuring the process to meet a range of needs.
Step 5: Plan the Route	Choose a route that reflects students' real-world destinations. This section helps you design a path that encourages student-led observation and discussion.
Step 6: Invite Key Partners	You do not have to do this alone. This section helps you identify people who can support the walk audit and offers ideas for building strong, collaborative partnerships.
Step 7: Conduct the Walk	Facilitate a walk that is safe, respectful, and centered on student voices. This section offers tips for supporting participation and creating a positive group experience.
Step 8: Reflect to Understand	Reflect on what students noticed and felt to uncover patterns, needs, and priorities. This section helps you make sense of the experience together.
Step 9: Turn Insights into Action	Use what you've learned to create clear next steps. This section shows how to turn student insights into practical recommendations for advocacy, planning, and long-term change.

Resources

At the end of the guide, you'll find a resource section with tools, templates, and examples. Resources are organized by step, making it easy to find what you need before, during, and after your walk audit.

Introduction

Every day, high school students with disabilities navigate transportation systems that were not designed with their full experiences in mind. Many walk, bike, or use public transit to get to school, jobs, and activities. Disabilities are diverse, and so are the experiences of students. There are many different types of disabilities, such as physical, intellectual and developmental, sensory, and emotional disabilities, that can be visible or invisible.[1,2] Many students experience multiple disabilities that interact with each other, life experiences, and other identities. The challenges students face with transportation arise not just from their disabilities, but from how the environment does, or does not, respond to their needs.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the built environment must meet standards for physical accessibility including sidewalk width, curb ramps, lighting, and pedestrian signal timing.[3,4] As a result, design guidelines, funding, and assessment tools exist for identifying and correcting barriers. These standards are supported by the Public Rights-of-Way Accessibility Guidelines (PROWAG), which offer technical guidance for designing and evaluating pedestrian infrastructure.[5] While these tools have led to important improvements, they tend to focus only on physical barriers that are easy to observe and measure.

Beneath the surface, many students with disabilities experience another layer of challenges that affect how they perceive, interact with, and navigate their environments.[6] These cognitive, sensory, behavioral, and emotional barriers are often not addressed in accessible transportation audits, policy, programs, and design. As a result, the built environment may meet ADA requirements but still feel overwhelming, confusing, or unsafe.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to provide services to help students with disabilities prepare for life beyond high school.[7] This includes the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and transition plans that address academic, vocational, and community living goals, including the ability to navigate transportation systems.[8,9]

Travel training and other transition services help students build practical travel skills including planning routes, managing disruptions, and asking for help when needed.[10,11] These services address cognitive, sensory, social, and psychological barriers that impact travel. However, because travel training typically occurs one-on-one, recurring issues that affect multiple students may go unrecognized and remain unaddressed.

Student-centered walk audits offer a way to bridge that gap. A walk audit is a structured activity where participants observe and evaluate

Barriers to Student Travel

Visible Barriers

- Sidewalk width
- Curb ramp
- Drivers speeding
- Not enough time to cross the street
- Obstructions on sidewalk
- Cracks in sidewalk
- Lighting

Invisible Barriers

- Gauging the speed of oncoming traffic
- Staying focused on one task (like crossing the street)
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Time management
- Sensory overload
- Communication preferences
- Paths that are not intuitive

how walkable an area is, noting factors such as street design, infrastructure conditions, and environmental cues. While many walk audit tools and best practice guides exist, few account for the lived experiences of students with disabilities beyond physical mobility barriers.

This guide is designed for special education and transition teachers and staff, travel trainers, Safe Routes to School (SRTS) coordinators, transportation professionals, and other community stakeholders. It presents a step-by-step approach for conducting student-centered walk audits that turn students' lived experiences into actionable improvements.

Before You Begin

Student-centered walk audits can be powerful tools for change, but they can also feel intimidating and overwhelming. Planning a walk audit that truly centers students with disabilities takes time and care. It involves preparing students, navigating school and transportation systems, and addressing a wide range of needs, many of which are invisible.

Team Up

One way to ease the pressure and strengthen your process is to find someone to plan and lead the walk audit with you. A shared approach brings balance, sparks creativity, and helps bridge knowledge gaps between education and transportation. Strong partnerships might include both:

- Someone who knows the students well: a transition teacher, classroom assistant, or special education staff member.
- Someone who understands transportation systems: a SRTS coordinator, city planner, or travel trainer.

See Step 6 for more ideas on who to get involved and how to work together.

Learn About Disability

Every student brings unique ways of communicating, navigating the world, and engaging with others. Cognitive, sensory, social, and emotional needs shape not only their transportation experiences but also how they participate in the walk audit process.

This guide offers foundational strategies for student-centered planning. However, it does not and cannot cover every aspect of supporting students with disabilities. Many educators, advocates, and practitioners bring deep expertise in accessible education, communication access, trauma-informed care, and behavior support. Their insights, along with the lived experiences of students, are essential to creating meaningful and informed experiences. This guide should be used alongside those resources and the expertise of people who already work closely with students. See the Resources section for more information.

Whether you're a teacher who knows your students well or a transportation professional just starting to learn about students with disabilities, it's valuable to approach a walk audit with humility, curiosity, and collaboration. Although every person is different, there are a few core ideas that people with disabilities consistently highlight.

The quotes below, from disabled people and advocates, offer guidance for creating a student-centered experience.

"I don't want people to think that engaging with me or any disabled person requires learning a comprehensive set of rules and regulations. Really, disability etiquette comes down to one simple piece of timeless wisdom: the Golden Rule. Treat others as you want to be treated. You don't need to start overthinking everything you say or do. That just makes things weird. Disability etiquette isn't about tiptoeing around us and treating us like strange delicate flowers (in fact, that's pretty ableist in and of itself.) It's about treating us like full and equal human beings."

– Emily Ladau from Demystifying Disability[12]

"The reality is that people with developmental disabilities, including people with the most significant disabilities, have rich and complex inner lives. No matter how significant our disability is, we can and do learn, think, and feel. We might do these things differently, or more slowly, or with more effort compared to other people. Our complexity and competency may not be obvious in ways that people expect. We might need a lot of support. Presuming competence is the idea that, regardless of these things, we are fully human with the same rights as everyone else and, with the right support, we can express ourselves, participate in our communities, and make our own decisions."

– Julia Bascom, former Executive Director of Autistic Self Advocacy Network[12]

"Stay clear of cutesy euphemisms like "handicapable" or "differently-abled." Nondisabled people have taken to the terms in recent years, but they're patronizing and tend to reinforce stereotypes about disabilities. Disability is not a bad word."

– Dr. Amy Kavanagh, disability rights activist[13]

"Speak directly to the person with a disability. It seems like common sense, but since it's not always common practice, it serves as another important tip. I have often encountered situations in which someone asks the person with me a question about myself instead of asking me directly."

– Megan Hart, Director of Tennessee Disability Pathfinder at Vanderbilt Kennedy Center[14]

"The most common example of condescension is the habit some people can't seem to break, of speaking to disabled people of any age like they are immature children. It's using an uncharacteristically soft, slow, high-pitched, cooing voice when speaking to disabled youth and adults. But it's not just about tone of voice. It's also the assumption that disabled people are less self-aware, less able to know and manage their own needs, less able to understand things."

– Andrew Pulrang, writer and disability advocate[15]

"When I'm overloaded (or under-stimulated), I might forget things. I might say things that don't make sense. I might repeat information, ask more questions than usual, ask you to confirm things, or sound confused. Please bear with me until I'm in a better space sensory-wise."

– Alaina Leary, disability advocate[16]

Step 1: Start With The Purpose

Creating systems that work for everyone requires intention, collaboration, and a clear sense of direction. Before planning the walk, get clear on "why." A clear purpose keeps the walk audit focused, ensures student experiences guide the process, and leads to more meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities.

Walk audit in Saint Paul, MN. Source: Sarah Stewart

Walk audits can be done for a variety of purposes, such as:

- Investigating a specific route concern identified by a student, teacher, or caregiver.
- Informing school and community efforts to support travel training and transition services.
- Raising awareness among decision-makers about invisible barriers and student experiences.
- Creating a SRTS plan.
- Informing the design of a street, sidewalk, or transit project.
- Guiding funding proposals, policy work, or planning efforts.

The purpose of the walk audit will shape each decision in the process: who is invited, the questions asked, and how the findings are analyzed and acted on.

Example: Purpose Shapes the Process at Focus Beyond

In Saint Paul, Minnesota, staff from Focus Beyond Transition Services and the SRTS program partnered on a walk audit with a clear goal: document recurring barriers on students' most-used walking routes to bus stops to advocate for systemic change.

Focus Beyond is a district-wide special education transition program serving students ages 18–22, most of whom rely on walking and transit to access jobs, community services, and learning opportunities. Staff had already identified many barriers through one-on-one travel training and regularly walking with students to and from transit stops during the school day. However, they needed a way to elevate these concerns beyond individual support and make them visible at a systems level.

Together, the SRTS coordinator and a Focus Beyond travel instructor used that shared purpose to shape every part of the walk audit, including:

- Selecting two high-use routes between the school and nearby transit stops.
- Inviting city, county, and state agency staff to observe barriers firsthand.

- Empowering students to co-lead the audit, using maps and real-time observations to highlight challenges and propose solutions.
- Translating findings into a SRTS plan, funding proposals, and recommendations for corridor and transit improvements.

This experience demonstrates how a clearly defined purpose can move a walk audit from insight to impact.

Apply It: Define Your Purpose

Write a one- to two-sentence statement that summarizes what you want to understand, improve, or influence through this walk audit. Refer back to it as you move through the next steps to plan, gather data, and develop recommendations.

- What are we hoping to learn, change, or highlight?
- Who will use the information we gather?
- What decisions or processes will this support (e.g., funding, planning, policy)?

Step 2: Plan with Students

Students are experts in their own experiences. Involve students early and consistently as co-researchers, not just participants. This is especially important for students with disabilities, whose perspectives are often overlooked in traditional transportation planning.

Engaging students as partners helps build trust, encourages ownership, and creates a more accurate and complete picture of the transportation challenges they face. It also allows students to practice real-world skills related to self-advocacy, problem-solving, identifying barriers, and communicating needs, many of which are central to their IEP or transition goals.

Collaborating with students with disabilities improves walk audits by:

- Choosing routes that reflect students' actual travel patterns and priorities.
- Selecting tools and methods that help support meaningful participation.
- Preparing students through clear explanations and practice with observation tools.
- Planning for supports that ensure full participation before, during, and after the walk.
- Creating reflection and follow-up opportunities that center student voices and lead to action.

Example: Centering Students Using Photovoice at CarolinaLIFE

Staff at CarolinaLIFE, the non-degree program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities at the University of South Carolina, set out with two goals: 1) understand the transportation experiences of college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), and 2) capture how these students view and describe the societal and personal barriers and supports to transportation.

With these goals in mind, the team chose to use photovoice, a participatory method that puts cameras in the hands of the experts. This approach invited students with IDD to document their daily experiences through photos and use those images to share meaningful insights, challenges, and ideas for change.

Students took at least 15 photos in response to prompts about their transportation experiences. They then gathered to reflect on their images and identify common themes using the SHOWED method:

- S – What do you see here?
- H – What's really happening here?
- O – How does this relate to our lives?
- W – Why does this problem or situation exist?
- E – How could this image educate others (e.g., community or policymakers)?
- D – What can we do about it?

This process gave students a powerful way to express thoughts and emotions that might not have surfaced through words alone. It also positioned them to lead conversations about transportation barriers and solutions based on their lived experience. As CarolinaLIFE staff shared, "When the power dynamic is dismantled and research is conducted with as opposed to on participants, we can take the first steps toward acknowledging ableism and addressing the inequities in societal structures such as transportation access."[17]

Photovoice can be a powerful addition or first phase for a walk audit. See the photovoice resources for tips and tools to get started.

Apply It: Engage With Students

New to the students? Connect with someone who works closely with the students, such as a transition teacher, classroom assistant, or special education staff member. Their insight can help you build trust and create an environment where students feel supported and able to participate fully.

- Who can help me understand each student's communication preferences and support needs?
- How can I invite students into the planning process in ways that feel accessible and empowering?
- What helps students feel safe, comfortable, and engaged in group settings?

Know the students well? Use your insight to advocate for student engaged planning practices and to elevate student perspectives in every phase of the audit.

- How can this process support existing IEP or transition plan goals?
- How can I communicate students' needs and strengths to external partners so they can support students effectively?
- What routes and activities will be meaningful and motivating for students to explore during the walk audit?

Step 3: Capture The Right Information

To understand the lived experiences of students with disabilities, it's important to capture more than just what the environment looks like. Focus on the full experience of travel, including how it feels, what students notice, and how they move through the space.

By observing what students see, feel, and do in real time, you can uncover barriers that are not immediately visible, such as:

- Emotional and sensory experiences, like feeling overwhelmed by noise or anxious at intersections.
- Behavioral patterns, like avoiding certain routes or preferring familiar crossings.
- Supports or strategies that help students feel safe and independent.
- Interactions with others along the route, including moments of stress or comfort.

These insights can add depth to other tools, such as ADA audits, Project Sidewalk, and traditional walk audits, to connect the "what" to the "why."

Example: Walking While Autistic

Innes Walker, a person with autism, describes the experience of crossing a busy roadway.

> *"Here is how I experience the four (or five or six) lane intersection I have to cross twice to get to most buses. I know what all the parts of an intersection are, but my ability to hold it all together in my head and simultaneously check for any changes is limited, which makes the process fatiguing. There are cars moving at near-highway speed not 10 feet away, cars that may choose to move at any point in front of me, and all the lights and sounds associated with them. Not to mention the traffic light I'm supposed to focus on, plus the other approximately seven lights I'm meant to ignore. Except I can't make any of them out clearly because everything is drenched in sun. Night poses the opposite problem: I can see the lights, but I can't make out the cars or drivers. The more factors I have to process, the less I can process at all. In complex environments, even small obstacles—like a jangly piece of debris on the crosswalk—become majorly disruptive to my ability to think."* – Read Innes's full story on RootedinRights.org.[18]

While Innes Walker's story is unique to them, the broader issue is not. As you plan your walk audit, consider how you might capture these perspectives. What would it look like to understand what transportation feels like for students with disabilities in your community?

Example: Letting Lived Experience Lead in the United Kingdom

To inform their transportation strategy, the United Kingdom's Department for Transport (DfT) set out to better understand the everyday travel experiences of people with invisible disabilities. As they noted, "without this knowledge there is a risk that policy decision-making will be misinformed."

Researchers began by identifying key topic areas they wanted to explore, such as feelings, comfort, confidence, barriers, and behaviors across the different stages of travel: getting to transit, arriving, boarding, the journey itself, and reaching the destination. These topics were guided by both the goals of the project and the needs of the participants, including individuals with autism, Down's syndrome, anxiety, depression, and memory impairments.

Rather than using a set list of questions, they developed a flexible discussion guide with prompts and probes designed to explore each topic in a way that was responsive to the participant. Prompts included:

- What makes this part of the journey easier or more difficult for you?
- What words would you use to describe this part of the journey? Why?
- Are there times when you feel anxious or less confident on the journey than you would like? Why?
- What type of things make you feel confident when you are on the journey?

This structure allowed researchers to collect the information they needed while letting each conversation follow the participant's lead. It also made space for unexpected insights to emerge. The DfT emphasized that the findings were descriptive and illustrative, offering rich emotional and behavioral context that strengthened the impact of other data sources.[19]

This example shows how identifying key topics based on your goals and participants can help you design flexible, student-centered methods that uncover real experiences and reveal hidden barriers.

Apply It: Identify What Information to Capture

Make a list of key information to capture. Work with students and teachers to identify the information that matters most.

- How will we use what we learn (e.g., for funding, planning, advocacy)?
- What barriers, behaviors, or experiences are most important to document?
- What does safety, comfort, or independence mean for these students?
- What invisible barriers – emotional, sensory, social – may be at play?
- Who can help address the barriers we identify?

The environment is dynamic and can change throughout the year due to things like winter weather or harvest season. If these conditions affect the route or impact student travel, consider asking students about their experiences or using photos and videos to prompt discussion.[20,21]

Step 4: Integrate Cognitive Accessibility

> "We approach any situation with a combination of our capabilities, motivations, emotions, and environmental demands. Those factors can help us succeed, or they can work against us."
>
> – *Microsoft Inclusive Design*[22]

The cognitive, sensory, social, and emotional needs that influence how students move through their communities also impact how they participate in the walk audit. Without thoughtful planning, the language, tools, or pacing of the walk audit can unintentionally create barriers or limit students' ability to share meaningful insights.

Cognitive accessibility means presenting information clearly, supporting participation, and offering students different ways to express their experiences in ways that match their strengths. Embedding cognitive accessibility into the walk audit helps reduce barriers and creates a better experience for all students.

While this guide focuses on students with disabilities, many noted strategies are informed by practices used with a wide range of individuals. Exploring approaches from different groups, such as English language learners or age-friendly communities, can offer useful ideas for making the walk audit more accessible for all students.

Make Information Easy to Understand

- Ask one question at a time, using concrete and simple language.
- Be clear and direct, avoid metaphors, sarcasm, or jargon.
- Rephrase (don't repeat) if something isn't understood.
- Provide visual supports (e.g., icons, images, or diagrams) alongside text.

Set Students Up for Success

- Preview the route with students using photos, maps, or walkthroughs to build familiarity.
- Use student input to flag spots that may be overwhelming.
- Make sure assistive technology and communication tools are available and ready to use.
- Share materials like worksheets or questions ahead of time to allow extra time for processing.
- Plan pauses along the route for reflection rather than asking questions while walking.

Let Students Share in Their Own Way

- Keep tools simple and intuitive.
- Never assume a student who doesn't speak doesn't understand, offer options that use something other than speaking to share ideas (Augmentative and Alternative Communication [AAC]).
- Let students choose how they want to share their observations (e.g., photos, drawings, gestures, writing, AAC devices, or conversation).
- Celebrate different forms of expression equally. There are no right or wrong answers; every student's insight is valid and valuable.
- Allow students the time they need to respond, avoid rushing or completing their thoughts.

Example: Framing Feedback in Boulder, Colorado

The City of Boulder's Transportation Department partnered with Growing Up Boulder and the Family Learning Center to lead a walk audit with students and caregivers along 30th Street, a known hazard busing location for students walking and biking to school.

While the group was not specifically focused on individuals with disabilities, the organizers used strategies that made the walk audit more cognitively accessible for participants with a variety of communication styles and backgrounds. The event was conducted in both English and Spanish, and the team introduced colored photo frames as a simple, visual tool to help participants express their experiences. Green frames were used to capture things participants liked and red frames were used to show what didn't work or needed change.

Small groups explored the blocks around the 30th and Valmont intersection, taking photos through the colored frames and using a worksheet to capture their observations. After the walk, everyone came together to share their findings and compare perspectives from different areas.[23]

The Growing Up Boulder team shared that while most participants were new to walk audits and participatory planning, the use of the colored frames made the process engaging and accessible for all community members of all ages and backgrounds. The visual tools removed the pressure to explain complex ideas and gave participants a clear, approachable way to share their lived experiences.

Participants from the Family Learning Center using red and green frames to take photos during the walk audit. Source: Growing Up Boulder

Apply It: Make Your Walk Audit Cognitively Accessible

Think about how you can embed cognitive accessibility into your walk audit to minimize barriers and invite participation in multiple ways.

- How can we present key details in a clear and accessible way?
- Are there any transportation terms or jargon that should be explained in plain language?
- What tools will help students participate meaningfully (e.g., worksheets, drawings, photos)?
- Have communication needs been accounted for (e.g., AAC devices, visuals)?
- Who can help us plan for and support cognitive accessibility throughout the process?

Step 5: Plan The Route

The route used during the walk audit should reflect the places students actually need or want to go, whether it's between school and home, to a transit stop, or to community destinations like a grocery store, job site, or library. Collaborate with students, teachers, and travel trainers to identify locations that are meaningful and regularly used.

The route should align with the audit's goals, be manageable for the group, and support purposeful observation and discussion. Key considerations for route planning include:

- Build in time: A walk audit takes longer than simply walking the route. Expect one hour to cover a half-mile route with stops.
- Walk the route during the planning process: Go out with a teacher or a small group of students to plan pacing, stopping points, and identify potential barriers.
- Use small groups: Smaller group sizes can reduce sensory overload and give students more space to share their thoughts.
- Offer flexible options: Provide route choices with varying lengths or difficulty levels to accommodate different needs.
- Schedule intentional stops: Plan points along the route where students can pause, reflect, or engage in discussion without distractions.
- Consider scheduling constraints: Choose a route and structure that fits within the school scheduled class time.

Example: Building Confidence with Photographic Maps in Scotland

Even when a route is familiar, the added dynamics of walking with a group, answering questions, or participating in unfamiliar activities, can feel unpredictable and overwhelming for some autistic students. What may seem like small changes to others can create a sense of uncertainty that makes it difficult to focus, communicate, or stay regulated. Students might become quiet or withdrawn, seek reassurance through repeated questions, or show physical signs of distress. These responses are ways of navigating an experience that feels out of their control or emotionally demanding.

Recognizing these needs, Walking Scotland (formerly Paths for All) developed Step by Step: Creating Autism-Inclusive Health Walks to support participation in community walking programs.[24] One of the impactful strategies was the use of visual tools to help make walks feel predictable, intuitive, and welcoming. These included photographic route maps, virtual walk-throughs, and images of walk leaders to create familiarity before the walk began.

Community Voluntary Services in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland, created Walking-Friendly Photographic Route Maps with photos and videos that showed clear visual sequences of landmarks, paths, and rest points along the route. These maps allowed participants to preview what they would see and where they would go, helping to reduce anxiety and build confidence.[25]

These simple but powerful tools helped participants understand what to expect, prepare in ways that matched their needs, and engage in a more confident and meaningful way.

Apply It: Make Your Plan

Thoughtful planning ensures that students feel prepared, supported, and ready to meaningfully engage in the walk audit process.

- Is the route realistic and relevant to students' daily routines?
- Have you walked the route in advance with a teacher or small group to identify pacing, stopping points, and barriers?
- Can you identify potential stressors along the route (e.g., loud intersections, construction) in advance?
- When and where will students be invited to reflect?
- Have you created and shared a visual map showing the route, stopping points, and key features to help students stay oriented?
- Have students previewed the route (e.g., map, images, or walking it beforehand)?

Step 6: Invite Key Partners

At this stage, the focus shifts to engaging partners who can influence decisions about school policies, transportation planning, or community infrastructure. Including the right people can strengthen the walk audit's impact and help turn student insights into meaningful improvements. Because transportation challenges often span multiple systems, collaboration is essential.

The table below outlines potential partners based on the systems and environments that shape travel. Some may already be involved in planning. Others can be invited based on the route, student needs, or the audit's goals. Group size should remain manageable, as too many adults may limit student comfort and engagement. A small, focused team is often enough to start, with additional partners brought in later for reflection or action planning.

Partner	Value and Expertise
School	
Classroom teachers and staff (e.g., special education teachers, transition teachers, paraprofessionals)	Understand students' unique learning, behavioral, and sensory needs and can help tailor walk audit activities to be accessible and meaningful. Provide continuity between the audit and classroom goals, such as IEP or transition plan objectives.
Specialized teachers (e.g., orientation and mobility teachers, travel trainers)	Provide expertise in mobility, wayfinding, and safe travel skills for students with disabilities.
Safety personnel (e.g., crossing guards, resource officers)	Familiar with daily traffic patterns, student behaviors, and common safety concerns near the school. Can support planning, manage logistics, and help implement on-the-ground changes.
School principals and administrators	Provide leadership and coordination within the school, helping to align the walk audit with school-wide priorities and schedules. Can authorize staff participation, support student involvement, and champion follow-up actions that improve school travel conditions.
School district staff (e.g., transportation, facilities, operations, or school safety departments)	Oversee policies related to student transportation, safety, and accessibility across multiple schools. Support systemic implementation of walk audit findings, coordinate with district level transportation and facilities to address barriers on school property, and connect to district-wide goals and compliance requirements.

Partner	Value and Expertise
Community	
Families and caregivers	Offer firsthand insight into students' daily travel routines, strengths, and safety concerns. Can share what supports work best for their children and help identify barriers that may not be visible to others.
SRTS programs and coordinators	Bring expertise in improving walking, biking, and rolling conditions through infrastructure, policy, and education. Can connect school-based efforts to city/state plans and funding opportunities that support safe, accessible travel.
Local disability organizations	Offer insights from the disability community and advocate for good practices. Can help build trust with families, connect with self-advocates, and ensure the audit reflects diverse lived experiences.
Government	
Transportation (e.g., engineers, planners, public works)	Bring technical knowledge of streets, sidewalks, and infrastructure. Can assess feasibility of improvements and recommend changes to support safe and accessible routes.
Departments (e.g., public health, law enforcement, parks & recreation, social services)	Offer cross-sector perspectives on safety, health, recreation, and community access. Can support broader planning goals and connect walk audit findings to public programs and services.
Elected and appointed government officials (e.g., city council, mayor, town manager)	Hold decision-making power and can champion walk audit findings. Can help secure funding, direct staff to act, and integrate findings into local plans or policies.
Transit agencies	Understand policies and logistics for bus stops, routes, and paratransit services. Can support improvements that make fixed-route and demand-response transit more accessible to students.
Regional planning agencies (MPO, RPO)	Coordinate long-range transportation plans and regional investments. Can help align school and community efforts with regional priorities and funding opportunities.
State DOT	Responsible for state-managed roadways and policies that impact school travel. Can integrate walk audit findings into state plans, address infrastructure needs, and identify funding sources.

Example: Utilizing Real-Time Project Maps in Huntersville, North Carolina

City and local government websites are valuable tools for identifying upcoming transportation projects that may impact students on their way to school. The Town of Huntersville, North Carolina, maintains a publicly accessible Development Projects Map that tracks active and planned transportation improvements.[26]

By referencing real-time maps of projects, walk audit leaders can identify future changes to school-area infrastructure and provide timely feedback to town staff based on students' lived experiences along those routes. This is one way to ensure that student voices inform the design of sidewalks, streets, and other key projects.

Not sure where to start? Many towns, cities, regions (through Metropolitan Planning Organizations or Rural Planning Organizations), and state Departments of Transportation publish interactive maps, transportation plans, and project lists on their websites. These tools often highlight current and upcoming projects and include opportunities for public input.

Even if a project is already underway, student feedback can still inform design decisions or influence future phases.

Apply It: Identify Key Partners

Whether you're working at the school, city, or district level, bringing together a multi-disciplinary team helps distribute responsibility, strengthen community buy-in, and build momentum. Stop and think about who is important to invite based on your goals and the information you want to capture.

- Who already has experience or insight into this issue?
- Who has the power to make or influence decisions?
- Who will benefit from this work—and should be included in shaping it?
- Who is involved in other planning efforts for the area or issues you are exploring?

Step 7: Conduct the Walk

Now it's time to bring the planning to life. Students have been prepared to act as co-researchers and this is their moment to observe, reflect, and lead.

Walk audit in Saint Paul. Source: Sarah Stewart

While strong preparation lays the foundation, how the walk is facilitated shapes the overall experience. A well-run walk audit should center student voices, promote comfort and safety, and support meaningful engagement with the environment.

Strategies to help facilitate a successful walk audit include:

- Begin with a brief welcome and review the purpose, route, and what participants can expect.
- Introduce any adults who are new to the students.
- Ensure all adult participants are clear on their roles (e.g., facilitating, documenting, supporting students).
- Be flexible and responsive to students' energy levels, weather, and unexpected needs during the walk.
- Provide clear cues and reassurance during transitions, such as moving from indoor to outdoor spaces or crossing busy intersections. Allow extra time if needed.
- Support students in high-traffic or overstimulating areas.
- If taking photos, only do so with prior permission. When in doubt, limit photos to students' backs or images without identifiable features.
- Celebrate student experiences, curiosity, and creativity throughout the walk.
- Have fun!

For additional walk audit resources, prompts, and best practice guides, see the Resources section.

Example: Flexibility is Key During Minneapolis Bike Audit

Students from the Minneapolis Public Schools Transition Plus program didn't let the rain stop them from participating in a bike audit led by the City Transportation Planner and SRTS Program Manager.

Before the audit, a Transition Plus teacher led a classroom session to review safety tips and the planned route. On the day of the ride, the audit leader, students, and staff biked a four-mile roundtrip route, stopping at designated points to gather input. The leader used open-ended questions — for example, "What do you feel at this intersection?" — to prompt reflection at the planned stops.

As the ride progressed, the leader noticed that students were offering valuable feedback between scheduled stops. These spontaneous insights revealed that conversation, not a structured form, was key to capturing lived experiences. The team set aside the paper feedback form, not just because of the rain, but more importantly because it didn't fit the dynamic nature of the audit.

This experience highlighted the power of pivoting and flexibility. When facilitators adapt to student needs and the environment, they create space for genuine participation. Letting go of structured tools allowed student voices to lead the way.

The leader noted, "Whatever you do, make it fun. Building relationships with students, and helping students build confidence with active transportation, will yield more authentic feedback than any questionnaire or survey ever could."

Apply It: Lead a Meaningful Walk Audit

During the walk audit, prioritize student comfort, engagement, and voice. Stay attentive to what students need in the moment and be ready to adjust the pace, environment, or support to ensure meaningful participation.

- Are students showing signs of needing a pause, break, or sensory support?
- Are adults stepping back to allow students to lead, while still offering support when needed?
- Are all forms of communication being respected and encouraged?
- Are any students becoming disengaged or overwhelmed—and how can the experience be adapted in the moment?
- Are students enjoying the process and feeling heard?

Step 8: Reflect to Understand

Immediately after the walk audit, take time to debrief with students and partners. This is a key time to process what was observed and begin transforming those experiences into insights that can guide meaningful next steps.

Start by reviewing all materials collected during the audit including quotes, notes, photos, drawings, maps, and worksheets. Give students space to share initial reactions, highlight what stood out, and ask questions. If methods like photovoice were used, invite students to explain what their photos captured and why those moments mattered to them.

Next, work together to identify patterns, themes, and common barriers. If multiple groups walked the same route, compare observations to surface shared experiences and unique perspectives. Choose reflection strategies that align with the group's goals and the types of information gathered, such as:

- Group discussions to share takeaways and reactions.
- Sorting activities using sticky notes, sketches, or charts to cluster ideas and barriers.
- Visual tools like mind maps, empathy maps, timelines, or journey maps to organize and deepen understanding.
- Student-led projects such as videos, posters, or presentations that illustrate challenges and advocate for change.

This also offers a valuable opportunity to reinforce IEP or transition goals. By turning raw observations into organized insights, students build skills in communication, analysis, and problem-solving — key competencies for community participation and self-advocacy.

Example: Nice Streets, Mean Streets: Mapping Transportation Accessibility in Michigan

Programs to Educate All Cyclists (PEAC), a Southeast Michigan organization focused on empowering individuals with disabilities through cycling, active transportation, and self-advocacy education, uses a powerful reflection strategy with their students: classifying roads as "nice" or "mean."

This approach helps students process and communicate their experiences in a way that is cognitively accessible, intuitive, and actionable. After walking or biking in an area, students reflect on the barriers they encountered and sort their observations into two categories:

- **Nice streets:** Safe, predictable, and easier to navigate; features like slower vehicle speeds, clearly marked paths, bike lanes, and drivers who stop for pedestrians.
- **Mean streets:** Stressful or unsafe; features include high-speed traffic, unclear crossings, and loud or overwhelming conditions.

By labeling streets based on how they feel and function, students link emotions to environmental features, which helps them better understand how physical and cognitive barriers affect their travel experience. The

activity reinforces reflection, strengthens decision-making skills, and builds students' ability to advocate for transportation systems that they can use.

PEAC is currently expanding this work through a project with Strava, in partnership with the University of Michigan's Science, Technology, and Public Policy (STPP) Program. Researchers are using Strava data to identify high-use commuting routes. PEAC students will then assess those routes through the nice-vs.-mean framework, evaluating them based on their lived experience of accessibility.

By combining quantitative data on route usage with qualitative assessments of cognitive accessibility, the project helps pinpoint where safety and accessibility improvements are most needed. It also demonstrates the power of pairing student-centered reflection with data-driven tools and highlights how the lived experiences of students with disabilities can and should inform transportation planning.

Apply It: Reflect on the Experience

After the walk, take time to process what students observed, felt, and shared. Look beyond individual comments to find patterns, recurring barriers, and moments that reveal deeper meaning.

- What patterns or common themes emerged?
- Were there any consistent barriers students experienced?
- What surprised you?
- What are the most powerful "aha" moments you heard or saw?
- What seemed to really matter to the students?

Step 9: Turn Insights into Action

After students and partners reflect on their experience, work together to identify key takeaways that can shape advocacy, planning, and future collaborations. These insights can reframe conversations, shift priorities, and spark new partnerships. This process can take place the same day as the walk, during a follow-up session, or over time as part of an ongoing effort.

Turning insights into action doesn't require having all the answers. Instead of jumping to solutions, start by clearly naming what's not working and why it matters. Reframing challenges as opportunity areas helps teams stay focused on student experiences and uncover invisible barriers.

Students attending Lucinda Means Bicycle Advocacy Day at the Michigan State Capitol. Source: PEAC

Ideas and solutions may surface during the walk audit or in follow-up conversations, especially if decision-makers or experienced partners were involved. Capture these ideas to build on as the work moves forward.

Depending on the goals of the audit, the next steps may include:

- Writing a summary report or visual brief that highlights key barriers and insights.
- Creating a student-led presentation, poster campaign, or story map to share findings.
- Hosting a follow-up session to identify opportunity areas and potential collaborators.
- Applying for funding or technical assistance to support recommended improvements.
- Building or expanding a coalition to sustain action and accountability.

Encourage students to stay involved. Practicing how to share their experiences with decision-makers builds communication and advocacy skills—and reinforces the message that students are essential partners in transportation planning, not just passive users of the system.

Example: Coalition Building Turned Local Voices into Lasting Impact at WalkMassachusetts

In 1990, a group of Boston residents spoke up and convinced the governor to stop highway construction through the city and turn the cleared land into a park. What began as a small group with a shared concern grew into WalkMassachusetts, a statewide coalition that has helped shape policy, improve walkability, and launch one of the nation's first SRTS programs.

Their story is a powerful reminder that meaningful change often starts with just a few committed people who care about their community and have the courage to take action.

Today, WalkMassachusetts continues this work by supporting other communities through their Walk Audit Academy. They highlight how walk audits can build partnerships and grow coalitions that reflect local needs and drive lasting change.[27]

Building a coalition can start small. Simple, practical ways to strengthen it over time include:

- Creating a short and clear explanation for why someone is being invited and what they might gain from joining.
- Keep the door open if someone says no, it might turn into a yes later.
- Think beyond the usual people you work with. New partners can bring in fresh ideas, funding, or helpful skills.
- Consider timing and accessibility to make it easy for everyone to join.
- Use tools like System Support Mapping to identify shared goals and how each person can contribute.

See the Resources section for more information.

Apply It: Take the Next Steps

Use these reflection prompts to help turn student observations into actionable next steps. Stay focused on what students experienced, not just what could be built or changed.

- What are the clearest patterns or themes that emerged?
- How can those challenges be communicated in a way that decision-makers will understand and act on?
- Who else needs to see or hear this to move the work forward?
- What format would most effectively share these insights?
- What ideas shared by decision-makers or experienced partners during the walk audit or in follow-up conversations?

Resources

The following tools, templates, and examples are organized by step, making it easy to find what you need before, during, and after your walk audit.

	Before You Begin	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8	Step 9
Active Routes to School Accessibility Survey, NC Department of Health and Human Services	•						•	•		
All About Autistic Meltdowns: A Guide For Allies, Reframing Autism	•							•		
Demystifying Disability by Emily Ladau (Read Plain Language Summary and Translation)	•			•	•	•		•		
Disability Etiquette for Hearing Impairments, Speech Impairments, & More, Community Resources for Independence	•			•	•	•		•		
Disability Etiquette Guide, United Spinal Association	•			•	•	•		•		
Inclusion & Abilities Guide, Massachusetts Safe Routes to School	•			•						
Inclusive: A Microsoft Design Toolkit	•		•		•					
Step by Step: Creating Autism-Inclusive Health Walks, Walking Scotland (Formerly Paths for All)	•				•	•		•		
Top Tips and Practical Resources for Autistic Young People, Include Autism	•				•		•			

Resources

	Before You Begin	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8	Step 9
Transportation Stories, Rooted in Rights	•		•		•			•		
A Resident's Guide for Creating Safer Communities for Walking and Biking, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)		•					•			•
Walk Audit Tool Kit, AARP	•				•	•	•	•	•	
Frame Your Design Challenge, IDEO Design Kit: The Human-Centered Design Toolkit		•								•
Integrating Safe Walking and Bicycling to School into Comprehensive Planning, National Center for Safe Routes to School		•					•			•
MPO Database, FHWA Transportation Planning Capacity Building		•					•			•
Safe Routes to School Walk Audit, Safe Routes Partnership		•				•	•	•	•	
State Transportation Plan Database, FHWA Transportation Planning Capacity Building		•					•			•
Transportation Toolkit, USDOT Every Place Counts Leadership Academy		•					•			•

Resources

	Before You Begin	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8	Step 9
Walk Audit Academy, Walk Massachusetts		•		•			•			•
30th Street Youth Engagement Toolkit, Growing Up Boulder			•	•	•				•	•
Activities for Transportation Toolkit, Growing Up Boulder			•	•	•				•	•
Project Sidewalk Tool, University of Washington Makeability Lab				•						
Inclusive Meetings: Words to Know, Autistic Self Advocacy Network					•			•		
Infrastructure Glossary Mini Guide, Vermont Safe Routes to School					•					
How to Create a Walking Route Map, Safe Routes Partnership						•				
Safe Route to Schools Google Map Creation Instructions, Colorado DOT										
Building a Coalition: Identifying Partners, NC Vision Zero							•			•
System Support Mapping, NC Vision Zero							•			•

Resources

	Before You Begin	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8	Step 9
Empathy Mapping, NN Group									•	
Human-Centered Design and Journey Mapping Training, Toyota Mobility Foundation									•	
Effectively Planning and Implementing Safe Routes to School for Students with Disabilities, Michigan DOT									•	•
Involving Students with Disabilities in SRTS, National Center for Safe Routes to School										•

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SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School

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