



Smart School Siting

How School Locations Can Make Students Healthier and Communities Stronger

Locating schools within communities can mean healthier students by making it easier for students to walk and bike to school, and to use school playgrounds and facilities outside of school hours.

Forty years ago, nearly half of all students walked or biked to school.¹ Now, only 13 percent do.² Why this change?

The biggest reason is because today's schools are located too far from children's homes for walking or biking to be practical.³ In recent decades, due to a variety of pressures, schools have increasingly been built on the outskirts of communities.⁴ As a result, two-thirds of schools are now located far from where children live.⁵ Meanwhile, obesity rates for children and adolescents have more than tripled,⁶ and nearly a third of children are overweight or obese.⁷

But locating schools *within* communities can mean healthier students by making it easier for students to walk and bike to school, and to use school playgrounds and facilities outside of school hours. Districts can promote healthy school siting by locating schools near where students live, whether by retaining centrally located schools or by building new schools within communities instead of on their outskirts.

In determining where schools will be located, districts must balance many complex and challenging factors. Public Health Law & Policy (PHLP) has developed model school siting policies for districts to provide a starting place for school districts working to ensure that siting decisions support the educational success, physical health, and overall well-being of students and their community.

A Crisis on Multiple Fronts

Research shows that physical activity improves students' academic performance and test scores.⁸ But, less than 50 percent of all children, and even fewer teens, meet recommended levels of physical activity.⁹ When children don't get enough physical activity, they become vulnerable to many health problems, including obesity,¹⁰ one of the most urgent public health challenges facing the nation.

Nearly a third of children and teens are overweight or obese.¹¹ Childhood obesity can cause lifelong ill effects, including increased rates of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cancer, asthma, low self-esteem, depression, and other debilitating diseases,¹² all of which come at a staggering economic cost.¹³

Bringing new attention to where schools are located can be an important part of solving this health crisis. When physical activity is part of a daily routine, children and adults get significantly more exercise, decreasing the likelihood that they will become obese or suffer from chronic diseases.¹⁴ If children's schools are near their homes, they can get regular physical activity to and from school, and are more likely to go to school playgrounds on weekends or during summer vacations.¹⁵ Moreover, we know that parental involvement improves academic



achievement and student behavior, and it is easier for families to be involved in parent activities and the school community when schools and homes are close together.¹⁶

Schools that are located in the midst of communities provide other benefits too: less driving time means less air pollution, fewer greenhouse gas emissions, and reduced traffic.¹⁷ Schools can also serve as neighborhood centers, boosting property values,¹⁸ serving as a link to the past and providing continuity and connectedness for community residents who attended a local school in their youth,¹⁹ and providing a familiar and accessible space for activities like adult exercise classes, voting, or services in an emergency.²⁰

Good School Siting Saves Money

There are financial advantages to making smart school siting decisions, along with the health and academic benefits.²¹ The annual cost of busing students in the United States is approximately \$17 billion,²² and the volatile nature of fuel costs makes it difficult for districts to plan and prepare.²³ In a March 2011 survey, three-quarters of school district transportation directors reported that high fuel costs were affecting operations, and as a result 22 percent had reduced bus services.²⁴ Other districts maintained bus service by transferring general school fund dollars to the transportation fuel budget, cutting staffing, athletic and field trips, and funding for repairs.²⁵

Reducing the need for school buses can free up considerable funding for core education needs. In some states, the state education department pays most busing costs, while in other states these costs are paid at the local level, providing meaningful savings for districts that can reduce transportation costs through prudent school siting. The cost of transporting students to far-flung schools





falls not only on schools but also on families, who may incur substantial costs driving their children to school and attending school events.²⁶

Good school siting often involves rehabilitating an existing, more centrally located facility instead of building on a new site. Despite occasional claims to the contrary—and some state laws that favor new building over rehabilitation—renovating an existing school often costs considerably less than building a new one.²⁷ As a result, rehabilitating older schools can provide another source of financial savings for school districts and communities.²⁸

Troubling Trends

Despite what we know about the importance of proximity to school, children are less and less likely to live close to their school. In 1969, about 45 percent of elementary school students lived one mile or less from school,²⁹ and almost 90 percent of those children walked or biked to school.³⁰ By 2001, only 24 percent of elementary school students (and 18 percent of all students) lived within one mile of school.³¹

The growing distance between home and school is an issue in urban, suburban, and rural communities,³² and it is a prime contributor to the decline in walking and biking to school.³³ In many districts, new schools are constructed on the fringe of urban areas, away from developed areas.³⁴ School consolidation and closures are also important factors: the number of schools in the United States has fallen by 70 percent since the 1930s,

despite dramatic increases in the number of children in schools.³⁵ In rural communities, consolidation often means closing two centrally located schools and replacing them with a new school at the midpoint between two towns, near no one.³⁶

Decisions about school siting are intertwined with another complex matter: the effect of school locations on the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of the student population. Communities across the United States vary widely in the diversity of their populations. But when it comes to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, few neighborhoods are well-integrated or representative of the demographics of their community or school district as a whole. As a result, schools often end up highly segregated, particularly when children attend their neighborhood school.³⁷ In fact, since the late 1980s, racial and ethnic segregation in schools has increased,³⁸ despite studies showing that attending a diverse school is important for the educational and occupational success of children of all races.³⁹



Districts can take steps to make the most of the opportunities for walkability and diversity in their community. Although different approaches will be appropriate in different settings,⁴⁰ some possible approaches include siting schools on the border between neighborhoods serving different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups; designing student attendance policies to balance walkability and diversity; and coordinating with local governments to encourage mixed-income housing near schools.⁴¹ Although there are many challenges involved with developing schools that are both diverse and walkable, PHLP's model school siting policies for districts set out initial steps toward achieving this goal.

Ten Elements of Smart School Siting

School districts and local governments can work together to ensure that decisions relating to school locations support healthy students and a healthy community. What follows are 10 key considerations for smart school siting.⁴² PHLP's model school siting policies for districts spell out in detail how districts can implement the 10 elements of smart school siting.

1. Collaborative Planning

Provide for meaningful coordinated planning between school districts and local governments, with the goal of sharing data, addressing joint needs regarding school locations, ensuring due consideration of environmental impact and other siting factors, and encouraging residential and mixed-income residential development near school sites.

2. Long-Term Data-Driven Planning

Engage in long-term planning, based on data including current and projected student enrollment, demographics, residential density of children in new and existing development, anticipated development, student transportation costs and trends, and assessments of all costs and benefits. Provide a substantial role for public input into short- and long-term school facilities planning in order to ensure community buy-in and achieve better results.

3. Account for All Costs

Consider all costs and benefits of different options, not only the cost of construction and land acquisition, but also the cost of required street and utility infrastructure, transportation to the site, disposal of closed facilities, and so on. For each option, assess both quantifiable and unquantifiable costs and benefits, and assess costs and benefits not only for the school district, but also for students, families, staff, local jurisdictions, and the community as a whole.

4. Co-Location and Shared Use

Consider making it feasible for students and the larger community to share resources (e.g., libraries, gymnasiums, parks, fields) by locating facilities near each other and, where desired, through more formal intergovernmental contracts or joint use agreements spelling out how use and responsibility will be shared.

5. Preference for Renovation

Prioritize renovating existing facilities before building new ones, especially where historic structures are in question.

6. Diverse, Walkable Schools through School Siting and Assignment Policies

Work toward developing schools that allow students, families, and staff to walk, bicycle, and take public transportation; provide the community with easy access to school facilities; and serve a student body that represents

the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the community's students and families. This involves (a) providing schools in locations that balance walkability and diversity; and (b) designing school attendance zones and assignment policies to support walkability and diversity.

7. Equity in School Facilities

In weighing determinations about school construction, closures, and rehabilitation, consider equity of school facilities to avoid providing some students with a learning environment that is inferior to that provided to others. For example, take steps to ensure that inferior facilities do not disproportionately house students of color or lower-income students, and evaluate the impact of school siting decisions on students and communities from an equity standpoint, including assessing whether some groups of students bear a greater burden of lengthy trips to and from school. Consider facility and transportation equity for students and families with disabilities.

8. Health Impacts

Take all health impacts of proposed sites into account (through a formal health impact assessment or another methodical analysis), including the location's supportiveness and safety for physical activity; air pollution and asthma levels; past or present toxic contamination of site or nearby areas; and nearby sources of pollution or toxic contaminants, such as highways, industrial facilities, or pesticide applications.

9. Safe Routes to School

Support Safe Routes to School programs to maximize opportunities for walking and biking to school.

10. Safe Infrastructure for Walking, Bicycling, and Public Transportation in School Vicinity

Improve the safety and convenience of travel by foot, bike, and public transportation near schools and on school property by providing safe infrastructure. For example, ensure that the areas surrounding schools have sidewalks, bicycle lanes, or whatever infrastructure is necessary to allow students to safely travel to school through different modes of transportation. Ensure that site design safely accommodates students arriving and departing by all modes of transportation, including walking, bicycling, public transportation, school bus, and private vehicles: prioritize safe access for children who are bicycling or walking (including those walking after drop-offs from cars or buses).



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