



of sprawl

A convergence of movements offers
hope that Johnny can once again
walk to a great neighborhood school.

Photos contributed by Kevin Shaver of BBT Architects, Inc and the Ensworth Elementary School.

Schools

& small schools

by David Goldberg



As students at Fairfield Senior High School in suburban Cincinnati headed back to school this year, they got a message from the local police: Don't even think about walking.

Law officers were moved to issue the warning after the local school district decided to eliminate bus service for high school kids in response to a budget crisis. It turns out that because the school, built in 1997, is set among busy, multi-lane roads with no sidewalks, even students who live within a mile of the school had been taking the bus, if they didn't go by car. Police were terrified at the prospect of kids trying to navigate that hostile environment without automotive armament.

Much as it pained him, Fairfield Mayor Erick

Cook, himself a principal of an elementary school in another district, echoed the plea. "The bottom line is, the school system, developers and the city failed the kids by neglecting to put in sidewalks," Cook said. But the larger problem, Cook went on to acknowledge, was the selection of the site in the first place. In the hunt for a spot large enough for the modern high school, with its outsized parking and sprawling, single-story building, officials felt forced to look to the developing fringe of town. Because most kids would have to arrive by car, they opted for highway access. And rather than build the sidewalks that were left out when the area developed, they chose to bus students who lived nearby.

But Cook noted that Fairfield is hardly alone in this situation. In fact, his own school, South Lebanon elementary in South Lebanon, Ohio followed a similar pattern, having moved a few years ago from a historic, centrally located building to a new site accessible only by car or bus. It's a trend he laments. "As the people began to move outward, you moved away from the ability to create neighborhood schools."

Again, though, Ohio has plenty of company—about 49 other states, in fact. In suburban DeKalb County, Georgia, 57 percent of school principals rate the area around their schools moderately to extremely dangerous for kids on foot or bicycle, according to a survey by the county health department. Neighboring Gwinnett County actually has sited schools on highways in commercial and light industrial zones in order to fetch a higher resale price should the school fall into disuse. Indeed, the phenomenon of building spread-out schools in unwalkable environments is so common it now has a name: "school sprawl".

A raft of statistics illustrates the consequences of the trend. As recently as 1969 roughly half of all students walked or biked to school. In 2001 the number was closer to one in 10. A study in South Carolina discovered that children are four times as likely to walk to schools built before 1983 than to those built after that year. The report attributed the change largely to the increasingly remote and pedestrian-hostile settings of newer schools. Of course, kids generally are less active today, and that's one reason the rates of obesity and physical inactivity among kids have risen so that 30 percent of our kids are overweight or obese and a third of middle and high schoolers are sedentary. At the same time, the rise in rush-hour traffic associated with school trips has been identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a key contributor to air quality problems in a number of cities.

In addition to the effects on traffic and kids' health, critics of school sprawl note other issues, as well. Large, new schools built in a previously undeveloped area often act as a magnet for new residential development, drawing people and resources away from existing schools and neighborhoods, and large, drive-to schools fail to serve as a neighborhood resource and focal point. Because school districts and local governments do their planning in isolation from one another, the new growth often takes local officials by surprise, causing them to scramble to build the roads, water mains, sewer lines and other services to support it. This uncoordinated planning is one reason many suburban schools open with classroom trailers parked outside, the critics say.

Meanwhile, there is mounting evidence that the impersonal environment of the mega-school inhibits the basic function of the school; that is, giving kids the best education possible. This realization has given rise to a growing movement for small schools, a cause gaining an increasingly high profile with the involvement of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and many others. This movement is finding com-





mon cause with the movement for Smart Growth, a term used to refer to better planning that values improving the places we've built before sprawling willy-nilly into new territory. Together they're working to change the rules and habits that contribute to school sprawl.

Why Big Schools?

The case for larger schools has been that they can offer a more comprehensive curriculum, and that the upper grades can have access to a wider range of activities, from chess club to Japanese club, for which there would be too few students in a smaller setting. This often had the ring of an attempt to make a virtue of necessity, as state and local school officials pushed for the economies of scale from greater concentrations of students, services and facilities.

Perhaps the most influential advocate for "sprawl schools" was the Council of Educational Facility Planners (CEFPI), an Arizona-based professional association that issues guidance on school construction. According to standards that were in place from the 1970s until very recently, an elementary school of 500 students requires 15 acres, and a high school of 2,000 would need at least 50 acres. By contrast, older neighborhood schools occupy two to eight acres. Those existing schools themselves were disadvantaged by the so-called two-thirds rule used by CEFPI and others: If the cost to rehab a school exceeds 60 percent of

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cost of replacement, build a new school. Building anew at the "proper" size means either razing nearby buildings—which is prohibitively expensive—or moving the school out of the neighborhood. According to a South Carolina study, school site size has increased in every decade since 1950, and schools built in the last 20 years are 41 percent larger than those built previously.

"The problem has been that, in order to meet those standards, given the cost and availability of land, school officials feel the need to abandon neighborhood sites and build in the middle of nowhere," said Constance Beaumont, author of "Why Johnny Can't Walk to School," a report by the National Trust for Historic Preservation that was among the first to address the issue of school sprawl.

There are signs that the tide is beginning to turn in some states, Beaumont noted. Maryland now prioritizes rehab and construction in urbanized areas, rather than building schools in greenfields. In the last few years, 80 percent of construction money went to reconstruction and rehab, versus 25 percent in the mid-1990s. In California, a program called Safe Routes to School earmarks one-third of federal road-safety money for improvements around schools, creating safe crossings, adding sidewalks and bikeways, etc. The program has been so popular that a version of it has been included in proposed federal legislation.

Others are taking a closer look at the trade-offs involved. In Oregon a study in the Bend-La Pine

district found that, compared to sites on the metro fringe, "sites in higher density neighborhoods decreased total transportation costs by 32 percent annually and lowered site development costs by 14 percent." As a result, this fall the district opened Ensworth Elementary School, a compact, two-story prototype neighborhood school designed and located so that all of its 300 students can walk or bike. And nearly all do, said Beaumont, who now works for Oregon's transportation and growth management program.

Perhaps most significantly, CEFPI itself recently unveiled "Creating Connections," a re-examination of its siting guidelines that puts an emphasis on viewing schools in the larger community context. (Find it on the web at <http://www.cefpi.org:80/creatingconnections/index.html>.)

Small Schools

The return of the neighborhood school is getting a large boost from a growing body of research demonstrating the benefits of smaller school environments. The research has been motivated at one end by the concerns of rural communities that are seeing their local schools closed in a wave of consolidation, and at the other by advocates for smaller, more manageable schools in low-income, urban areas.

So what have they found? Smaller schools have lower drop-out rates and higher average scores on standardized tests. Children in high-poverty schools see an even more pronounced improvement. While it's true that larger schools generally do show a small savings on spending per student, when that figure is computed for students who actually graduate, the per-graduate cost per student actually is slightly lower. Larger schools can have more extracurricular offerings, but participation in after-school activities declines as schools get larger. A U.S. Department of Education report found that schools with over 1,000 students have much higher rates of crime and vandalism than schools with 300 or fewer students. And teacher satisfaction is higher in smaller schools, according to a Chicago study. (You can find links to much of the research online at <http://www.smallschoolsworkshop.org/info3.html#8>.)

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Convinced by the research, several philanthropies are supporting the small-schools movement. Since 1994, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has committed more than \$1 billion to improving public schools, primarily through creating small high schools. Gates advocates high schools of 400 students or fewer, arguing that they can "provide a personalized learning environment where every student has an adult advocate. Students in small schools feel less alienated and tend to be more actively engaged in school activities."

Despite the growing appreciation for small schools, a number of daunting challenges remain. School funding is among the largest. Many administrators remain convinced that a smaller number of campuses reduces administrative and other costs.



The notion that big and (typically) new is better than small and (frequently) old is ingrained and difficult to reverse. One of the thorniest issues, though, may be the implications for student-body diversity when schools draw from smaller geographic areas.

"There is a bit of a conflict between small schools and integration," acknowledges Jonathan Weiss, a former Clinton Administration official and author of "Public Schools and Economic Development: What the Research Shows", a report for the KnowledgeWorks Foundation. "Because we tend to live in neighborhoods that are segregated

that they would be more racially balanced and create city-wide school for fourth and fifth grades.

"It was a brutal battle," Ahman recalls. "It might have been easier just to consolidate them all into a couple of large schools, but we didn't want to do that. I hate to say it, but a lot of white people just didn't want their kids going to school with poorer, black kids." But the board was determined both to integrate the schools and to make it possible for families to continue to get their kids to school without driving. "To make them walkable, we posted 14 crossing guards to make it safer to cross our busier roads," in addition to installing crosswalks and traffic controls.

Recognizing the reality that the Decatur of the world have faced, some small-schools advocates suggest breaking up larger campuses into several schools-within-a-school. One frequently cited success story in this regard is New York City's Julia Richman Education Complex. Once a failing, violence-plagued school of thousands, the sprawling compound has been divided into six schools, each with a different theme and identity. A Washington Post article on the complex described it like this: "There is no public address system and no bells announce the end of class. The metal detectors ... have disappeared, along with cages for particularly violent students. Vandalism ... and fights in the hallway are rare. The number of students graduating and going on to college has shot up."

What makes places like Richman work, says Weiss, is not merely making the schools smaller, but also selecting administrators and faculty who share a vision, and giving them

by race and income you often need to draw from a larger area to get a diverse population."

As a school board member in Decatur, Georgia, John Ahman has grappled with this tension firsthand. To preserve its prized walkable, neighborhood schools, the small city of 19,000 for years has resisted a state guideline that would have meant consolidating their five elementary schools into two. But recently two inescapable realities forced change: The need to close a school with fewer than 80 students and a desire to address a persistent achievement gap in a pair of schools that were predominantly African-American. The solution ultimately was to close two schools, expanding the attendance zones for the remaining campuses so

the extra resources needed to succeed. In any case, advocacy for small schools won't succeed if done in a vacuum that disregards other community issues, he cautions.

"In a way small schools are one part of the larger smart-growth puzzle," says Weiss. "Communities should be careful about pursuing small schools in isolation from pursuing broader, more integrated Smart-Growth strategies. It's unlikely small schools by themselves will be a panacea."

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