

## **The Connection:**

### **Smart Growth Principles and Community-Centered Schools**

Integrating smart growth principles into the educational facility planning process will assist school districts and communities in delivering a first-rate education *and* improving the neighborhood. The results of the collaborative planning process are community-centered schools that offer many benefits similar to those of smart growth: better living and working environments, an enhanced sense of pride in the community, and a human scale for facilities and programs that serve the citizens of large cities. Just as smart growth development looks different in each community, each neighborhood school is unique because it serves specific academic programs and communities. Community-centered schools may be new facilities, renovated or retrofitted historic buildings, or buildings adapted to accommodate educational functions. Public and private organizations may share a community-centered school facility, and it may be accessible throughout the year to residents for various purposes during the day, evenings and weekends. Community-centered schools that are a result of a collaborative smart growth planning process share at least one common physical characteristic: all are located in the towns and neighborhoods they serve.

#### **Educational Benefits**

Through long-term and careful planning with the community that includes students, teachers, administrators, and members of all community constituencies, high-quality, community-centered educational environments

- Promote a sense of safety and security
- Build connections between members of the school and the community
- Instill a sense of pride
- Engage students in learning
- Encourage strong parental involvement
- Foster environmental stewardship.

Each community-centered school may look different and function differently, but they all hold the following six traits.

*Promote a sense of safety and security:* Community-centered schools can reduce student isolation and alienation that often breed discipline problems and violence. Students in small schools have a stronger sense of identity and belonging, of being connected to a community (Cotton 2001). This sense of belonging manifests itself in increased participation in extracurricular activities, strengthening students' connections to each other and to the school. Simply stated, in a small group, each individual feels that he or she matters more than in a large group. Thus the community-centered school fosters self-worth, improves behavior, and increases students' ability to learn (Cunningham 2002).

#### **A Note about "Small Schools"**

Community-centered schools are often smaller than schools built outside of town. In part, their size may be constrained by the limits of space available in an existing community. More important, regardless of the number of students enrolled, all community-centered schools create a "small school" atmosphere.

Research demonstrates that smaller learning environments, like community-centered schools, provide high-quality education. Just as smart growth differs from community to community, the definition of "small" varies from school district to school district. The school's population and enrollment must be defined so that the facility serves the students and the neighborhood in which it is located. As CEFPI notes, "The reality is that the size of the school is not as critical as the delivery systems used in meeting the educational needs of students... . In all cases, planners must decide what kind of program will meet the needs of all students. . . . One size does not fit all. The debate over school size should center on addressing the identified educational program in the most effective manner" (CEFPI 2004: 2:6).

"Smaller schools create intimate learning environments where each learner is well known and can be guided and coached individually by teachers" (Cunningham Group 2002). Many studies show that students in small schools improve their grades, test scores, attendance, and graduation rates (Blank 2003, 19-20). Moreover, small schools reduce the effect of poverty on achievement. In fact, according to a recent U.S. Department of Education study, "a higher percentage of students, across all socioeconomic levels, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities" (Irmsher 1997).

Small schools encourage teachers to become more involved in their students' success. Staff members find themselves playing multiple roles, more fully participating in decision-making, and working together to integrate the curriculum across disciplines and grade levels. Their increased participation gives them greater satisfaction in their work, reduces staff turnover, and offers a greater chance for a strong connection between the learner and teacher (Blank 2003, 19).

*Build connections between members of the school and the community:* Community-centered schools foster increased involvement in the school by all members of the community, including parents. This has been proven to play a role in students' success (Blank 2002, 27-28). Increased community participation may be due in part to the ease with which parents and other visitors can get to the school and to the welcoming feeling of a neighborhood school, in contrast to large, often intimidating facilities located outside of the center of the community.

"A true community partnership recognizes schools as an integral part of the town, city, and state, and it involves all members of the community who have a vested interest in the schools. Whether financial, political, social, or educational, these interests should be recognized and addressed" (CEFPI 2004, 3-2).

Such a school acts both as an educational facility and as a community center. Members of the business community might serve as guest lecturers; senior citizens might come in for meals, recreational opportunities or to assist with instruction; neighbors might use the facility for evening or weekend classes or recreation. Schools may also organize volunteer programs for students to help adults who live in the community.

*Instill a sense of pride:* Community-centered schools can reinforce a "sense of place" or distinctive neighborhood character, because they blend into the fabric of the community. In contrast, schools isolated on vast tracts of land, separated from communities they serve often have no architectural context on which to draw. By reflecting a community's unique identity and culture in its design and activities, neighborhood schools can instill pride and ownership, key ingredients to successful learning environments. The new high school in Foresthill, California, for example, reflects its site's heritage as a former timber mill property by blending traditional timber-mill elements with the high-tech look that students wanted and by working with a nearby forestry education center.

The convenience of getting to and from a community-centered school often increases student participation in school-related activities. At a neighborhood school, students are more likely to walk or bike between home and school, instead of having to rely on a school bus or private ride that can limit their freedom to participate in after-school activities. Students also develop independence and responsibility in getting to and from school and community activities on their own, instead of being chauffeured by their parents and guardians.

*Engage students in learning:* Strong connections between local businesses and a community-based school allow students to apply what they are learning at nearby businesses, offices, cultural venues, and libraries. For instance, Moore Square Museums Magnet Middle School in Raleigh, North Carolina, collaborates with nearby museums and arts facilities to give students the opportunity for hands-on learning (for more details, see the case studies). Likewise, students in California's North Hollywood High School Animal Studies/Biological Sciences Zoo Magnet Center go behind the scenes at the Los Angeles Zoo to work with zoo research staff on unique, exciting science projects.

*Encourage strong parental involvement:* As students participate more in the school, so do their parents. Recent research has shown that when parents are involved in school activities, their children do better and stay in school longer. In fact, a critical mass of parental involvement improves the performance of all students, not just those with more involved parents (Blank 2003). Clearly, the connection between parents, students, and the school is an important influence on student achievement. Community-centered schools support and encourage these connections.

"Community partnerships often produce more systemic recommendations, incorporating a broad range of the community's physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational assets" (CEFPI 2004, 3-3).

*Foster environmental stewardship:* Community-centered schools are themselves excellent teaching tools to instruct children on preserving and protecting the natural environment and to instill in them a sense of environmental stewardship. Teachers, for instance, can use the school's compact site to talk about land use and development; a renovated or reused building provides lessons on resource conservation. Many schools that install energy-efficient heating, cooling, or lighting systems leave the mechanical workings exposed to be used as educational and

instructional tools. For example, the Neptune Community School, in Neptune, New Jersey is working with the Liberty Science Center to develop a rooftop green space that will serve as a living classroom. The school also will install transparent floors so that students can see the geothermal heating and cooling systems and other energy-conserving components and learn, from the example of their building, how energy consumption affects the environment.

“Revitalizing a neighborhood school may stimulate local businesses and residents to make improvements to their properties. This new investment can raise property tax assessments, broaden the tax base, and ultimately enhance tax revenues.”

Yale Stenzler, Ed.D.  
Former Executive Director  
School Construction Program, Maryland

### Community Benefits

Quality of education is *always* the primary consideration when investing in school facilities. Schools that are centered in the community enhance their educational programs and improve the overall quality of education. However, they also benefit the community as a whole by

- Promoting economic development
- Strengthening neighborhoods
- Improving human and environmental health.

### Economic Development

Major employers with considerable purchasing power, schools significantly influence a community’s economic well-being. The economic consequences of a school’s location are often underestimated or ignored, yet they affect not only students and teachers but the local business community as well. A study by Charles H. Sederberg of the University of Minnesota found that in six rural Minnesota counties, the school district payroll made up, on average, 4 to 9 percent of the county’s total payroll. District expenditures comprised 1 to 3 percent of a county’s total retail sales, and the take-home pay of school employees accounted for five to ten percent of total retail sales (Lawrence 2002, 15). Other studies show that property values can fall when nearby schools are closed (Lyson 2002; McClelland 2004). When the high school in Lund, Nevada, closed, the town’s retail sales dropped 8 percent (Lawrence 2002, 16).

Meanwhile, new construction in outlying regions may create unexpected negative consequences. A school built outside of town may limit places for parents or teachers to shop as they travel to and from the school and provide few opportunities for students to work part-time near the school. In rural areas, building schools near farms can render agricultural land unusable, because of state laws regulating pesticide use near schools and buffer zones between schools and farms (Fried 2004).

### Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting

This U.S. EPA study was the first to empirically examine the relationship between school location, the infrastructure and environment around schools, transportation choices for trips to school, and impacts of those choices on air pollution. It found that:

- School proximity matters. Students with shorter walk and bike times to and from school are more likely to walk or bike.
- The built environment influences travel choices. Students traveling through neighborhoods with sidewalks and bike lanes are more likely to bike or walk.
- School location has an impact on air emissions. Centrally located schools that can easily be reached by walking and biking reduce air pollution. (EPA 2003)

[http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/school\\_travel.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/school_travel.pdf)

### Strong Neighborhoods

Community-centered schools help create strong neighborhoods whose residents know one another. When the school is an integral part of the community, it becomes an icon of the community as well as a gathering place for residents of all ages. Residents and students are likely to use a community-centered school for many activities before, during, and after school hours throughout the calendar year. Community schools create a venue for neighbors to

build relationships, encouraging them to invest time, money, and effort in building a cohesive neighborhood. In rural communities and small towns, the community school may be the only civic gathering place, and its loss can be devastating; a survey of small towns in North Dakota that had lost schools showed that residents participated

less in local organizations and activities following the schools' closure. Residents also rated their quality of life significantly lower than did their counterparts in communities that did not lose their schools (Lawrence 2002, 17).

Citizens are more likely to participate actively in the daily life of small neighborhood schools than they are in schools located far from where they live (Cotton 1996, 17). This participation gives them greater influence regarding academic curriculum, educational standards, budgets, teacher qualifications, and the daily operations of the school—factors that contribute to an economically and socially vibrant place in which to live, work, and play.

School boards have long been an important vehicle for involving residents in community governance. But the number of people serving on school boards fell from one million in 1930 to less than 200,000 today as the number of school districts declined. At the same time, U.S. population doubled. This loss of opportunities to serve on school boards may be contributing to the general disengagement of Americans from civic life (Lawrence 2002, 17).

### *Healthy Communities*

Integrating educational facility planning with smart growth planning will create community-centered schools and provide health benefits for residents, who can use

school facilities for recreation and exercise. It also helps to improve the environment. Locating schools close to where people live can reduce the number and length of automobile trips, reducing auto emissions and thus air pollution. An EPA study of two high schools in Gainesville, Florida, suggested that neighborhood schools could generate 13 percent more walking or biking trips and 15 percent fewer auto emissions than schools built outside a community. (EPA 2004)

### **Walking to School: A Quick Guide**

#### **International Walk to School Day**

<http://www.iwalktoschool.org/>

A one-day event that occurs around the world every October. Children, parents, teachers, and community leaders walk to school together to promote physical activity and making streets more friendly for walking and bicycling.

#### **Walk to School Programs**

<http://www.walktoschool-usa.org/>

Programs that extend Walk to School Day events into more sustained programs to encourage safe walking and bicycling to school. They rely on neighborhood, school, transportation, public works, health, safety, and environmental partners to accomplish specific goals. They occur at the neighborhood, school, county, or state level.

#### **SAFE KIDS Walk This Way**

<http://www.safekids.org>

A year-round pedestrian safety program conducted by the National SAFE KIDS Campaign with support from Federal Express and 3M. Local SAFE KIDS coalitions launch the programs by participating in International Walk to School Day. SAFE KIDS coalitions work with parents, educators and community leaders to teach pedestrian safety to children, enforce speed limits and other traffic regulations, and improve school environments through research, engineering, and traffic calming.

#### **Walking School Bus**

<http://www.walkingschoolbus.org>

A small group of students who are accompanied by one or more adults on their walks to and from school.

#### **KidsWalk-to-School**

<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/index.htm>

A walk-to-school program to guide community members and local and state health officials on how to implement walking school buses and other walk-to-school programs.

#### **Safe Routes to School**

<http://www.saferoutestoschool.org>

A sustained walk-to-school program that uses a comprehensive approach to make school routes safer for children to walk and bicycle. The programs often use policies and dedicated transportation funding to create permanent change and normalize walking.

#### **Safe Routes to School Legislation**

<http://www.walktoschool-usa.org/funding/index.cfm>

Legislation that dedicates funding to create safe walking and bicycling routes to school. The model is California's law that directs significant transportation funding to local Safe Routes to School programs.

Reprinted from the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center for the Partnership for a Walkable America.

<http://www.walktoschool-usa.org/downloads/WTSDbooklet.cfm>

Walking or biking to school gives students an opportunity for everyday physical activity. Fifteen percent of children aged 6 to 19 are overweight, triple the rate of just twenty years ago, according to the 1999-2000 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Another 15 percent are on the verge of becoming overweight. The soaring obesity rate has brought with it startling rises in the incidence of childhood diabetes (McConaughy 2003), asthma, and even high blood pressure (Stein 2004). Although many factors are to blame for the obesity epidemic, one element is a lack of physical activity. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey for 2001 found that on at least five days in the previous week nearly a third of the students surveyed had not engaged in even moderate physical activity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that only a quarter of American children regularly walked or biked to school in 1999 (U.S. CDC 2002). Physical activity recommendations for children suggest a variety of activities each day—some intense, some less so; some informal, some structured. Walking or bicycling to and from school is an ideal way to incorporate exercise into a child's daily routine at no extra cost. However, proximity to a school, though necessary, may not suffice to spur this activity. That's why many jurisdictions have begun "Safe Routes to School" programs that ensure children can walk safely to and from school.

Locating schools in neighborhoods, reusing infrastructure, and renovating buildings conserve energy and resources. Integrating schools into existing neighborhoods, instead of building them on undeveloped land on the fringe of the community, also preserves the natural environment, including farmland, fields, and wildlife habitat. By reusing buildings, roads, parking lots, and other infrastructure, communities can avoid building more impervious paved surfaces, which in turn reduces contaminated water runoff into nearby lakes, rivers, and streams. Rather than draining the natural and human resources of their communities, neighborhood schools promoted by smart growth preserve and nourish them (Lawrence 2002, 15).

