Report Presented By

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New Schools Better Neighborhoods

Education Essay

Creating Healthy Schools and Communities Through Joint Use Planning

The intent of this special focus essay is to begin a regional dialogue about the significance of education in the context of regional planning. It highlights the importance of re-thinking the role of schools in their communities through joint use siting and reinforces the multiple benefits themes in the RCP. This essay sets the stage for a more comprehensive discussion of education issues in the next RCP update. No policies are associated with this essay.

Note: New Schools Better Neighborhoods (NSBN) advocates for a vision of public facilities, especially schools, as vital community centers, and to assist families and neighborhoods in creating built models of community centered learning centers. They are an independent, community-led master planner, focused on leveraging billions of dollars in state and local public facility bonds for the benefit of families and children. These facilities are designed to offer an array of social services accessible to community residents and local stakeholders from dawn to dusk. NSBN's joint-use philosophy reflects the focus on ameliorating the long-term academic and facility deficits that plague low-income communities. These deficits, along with the lack of early education, recreation, and access to healthcare, contribute not just to reduced school attendance, poor academic achievement, and high dropout rates, but also to the involvement of students in gang activities that threaten safe passage to, from, and within, their schools.

Overview

By 2020, California's population of 33 million is projected to reach 45.3 million, an increase of 37 percent. At the current rate, the state is adding nearly 4 million people, or the equivalent of the population of Los Angeles, every seven years. Pressures of growth are taxing the physical infrastructure. State mandated reforms in educational practices, including bold measures like class size reduction, have created the need for more and better educational facilities. Poor planning decisions are stretching other forms of public infrastructure to the limit and draining economic vitality from our region. A new framework is needed by which current programs, procedures and policies developed at every level of state, regional and local governance can coalesce to address these challenges with smarter strategies for planning, investment and implementation.

Smarter planning for education means siting and designing schools that serve as centers of their communities, a concept endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education and leading national educational facilities planning organizations. The concept calls for gymnasiums and play fields that double as community open space and recreation centers; auditoriums that serve as community theatres and meeting venues; and incorporating centralized libraries, health information clinics and other community services into school facilities that are designed for greater parent and community access and engagement. Schools

THE LINK BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOOD AND SCHOOLS

Studies confirm that deteriorating schools and neighborhoods disproportionately affect life prospects and school readiness of poor children living in inner-city communities and in low-income suburban enclaves. Specifically, the physical and social health of neighborhoods is at risk when institutions that we expect to educate and support children are relegated to second- and third-rate status in those communities.

Schools should serve a variety of community needs in partnership with public, civic, and private organizations, including:

- Provide spaces for public meetings and activities and access to communications technology.
- Help meet leisure, recreational and wellness needs.
- Support relationships with businesses that support students and the local economy
- Provide spaces that facilitate mentorships and work-based and service learning.

designed as the vital centers of community can also leverage community resources such as museums, zoos, and other existing facilities - to create integrated learning centers.

Developing joint-use schools that serve as centers of their communities is a concept that also has implications for "smart growth" strategies. Over the past 30 years, California's growth has consumed land for sprawling low-density development, with the car and its attendant infrastructure (e.g., streets and highways, parking lots) taking up a third of all developed land. This strategy also produces more traffic congestion and loss of productivity; air pollution and its environmental and public health impacts; loss of open space; the inability to reach jobs and services; and isolation of children from the elderly.

Need for Joint-Use Community-Centered Development

Families with infants, young children and little economic means are seriously challenged in Los Angeles County. The wages and formal education of these children's parents often fall well below minimal standards required for daily living, not to mention advancing family opportunities. Public schools experience severe overcrowding and, along with their neighborhood public parks, have physically deteriorated with lack of maintenance and the impacts of gangs and crime. These low-income families have inadequate access to day care, early childhood education facilities, family resource centers and health clinics. Available housing is often in substandard condition. Compounding these community deficits, older inner-city and inner-suburban neighborhoods have little open land and, until very recently, lacked the investment capital necessary to build infill housing, preschools, day care, pocket parks, branch libraries and community amenities that revitalize neighborhoods and nurture the families who make up those neighborhoods.

Two seminal reports published in January 2007 further highlight the current pressing need for broader community development opportunities:

- The Advancement Project's "Citywide Gang Activity Reduction Strategy: Phase 3 Report" documents the impact of gang violence for the past 20 years in Los Angeles. Specifically, this report advocates that "comprehensive, neighborhood-based, school centered-strategies for effective prevention, intervention, and community development will be needed in order to pull 'sliding communities' with emerging violence back to safety and keep safe areas safe." This study concludes that the solutions to the gang crisis in Los Angeles "require cross-silo creativity, bold leadership, smart strategy, and sustained focus."
- Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's report "The Schoolhouse Framework" illustrates the need for new and innovative ideas for realizing a great public education for every child in Los Angeles. Specifically, the Mayor's report calls for schools to be "neighborhood centers" with strong family and community involvement. The Mayor proposes that this "neighborhood centered" model support schools by establishing relationships with a broad range of partners including parent groups, local businesses, health care agencies, libraries, parks, and others

Failing to build our public schools, especially in poor communities, as mixed-use, family resource centers, as holistically

integrated centers of community learning, not only is fiscally inefficient, but also places the core principles of equity and justice at risk.

Challenges of Joint-Use Community-Centered Development

One of the largest statewide expenditures in public infrastructure goes to building and maintaining public schools. Public K-12 school enrollment has more than tripled in the past 50 years. The estimated growth in student enrollment is 50,000 students annually. New enrollment records will continue to be set for the next nine years, increasing to an estimated 6,180,921 students in K-12 public schools by the 2007/2008 school year. This is an increase of 547,275 students, or 10 percent between 1997 and 2007. This includes a decrease of 345,193 Anglo students and an increase of 800,000 Hispanic students, indicating the current and continuing demographic trend toward greater diversity, but, in part, also the decision of many Anglo parents to leave the public school system.

The renovation and replacement of educational facilities is currently in a state of crisis. It can take up to seven years to run the gauntlet of local and state approvals and procedures before a school is ready to serve its constituents. As a result, school boards and building officials are working hard to get facilities on line faster. Larger and larger schools are being built in an attempt to address the problem. In an attempt to save time and money, districts are sometimes forced to replicate building plans that are outdated with respect to current educational research and teaching strategies. In most cases, projects move forward without much involvement from students, parents, educators and community members, all who have a long-term stake in the outcome. The result is often community alienation, disenfranchisement or even backlash.

There is a woefully inadequate allocation of time and money for planning how schools will fit into their communities; how the efficiencies of building larger and larger schools may not be justified in light of critical social and educational consequences; how combining school and community uses could produce more efficient and community centered environments for learning; or even for adequately identifying risk factors like building on toxic waste sites and other environmental hazards that can lead to mistakes at a scale that would have once been considered unimaginable.

The need to renovate or replace educational facilities presents an opportunity for citizens, educators and planners to take a much smarter view of the design of learning environments. This "smarter" view can include everything from how learning spaces are designed to the process used to plan and design them. More traditional educational facilities were once designed to sustain a model of education characterized by large-group, teacher-centered instruction occurring in isolated classrooms. But current knowledge and research about learning calls for new models.

Smarter Design Strategies

Smart school planning and investment means replacing the current factory schools with facilities that support these and other examples of current best practices and ongoing research in the learning sciences. This means, among other things, that school populations should be significantly less than previously projected, and that large school populations may in fact be detrimental to the learning process. The development of smaller

CASE STUDY: CITY HEIGHTS, SAN DIEGO

In 1992, City Heights in San Diego's Mid-City area had no center, no focus, and little community infrastructure. In 1996, the CityLink Investment Corporation used a community-focused master planning process to propose The Urban Village.

The retail project met local needs to improve public safety by incorporating a police substation. The Urban Village also included the Rosa Parks Elementary School.

Since then, median home values have doubled and tax increment financing had tripled, which has further enhanced redevelopment efforts.

The City Heights model demonstrates that articulating a clear vision, seizing opportunities to leverage public resources, employing a collaborative land use planning strategy, and securing public sector endorsement, can lead to the restoration of healthy neighborhoods and communities.

CASE STUDY: ELIZABETH STREET LEARNING CENTER

ELC is a pre-K through 12th grade school that focuses on shared governance, innovative curriculum and instruction, and comprehensive student and family support. ELC addresses childrens' social, mental health, educational, and health needs comprehensively with public, private and civic partners by:

- Recognizing Learning Support as an integral part of the school infrastructure
- Partnering with a local medical center to provide on-site health clinic/mental health services
- Strong outreach, including parent/community volunteers
- Adult education that serves over 600 adults daily
- High school academies to provide career/college guidance
- Developing Early Literacy and other Early Childhood programs
- After-school tutoring programs

ELC is also known for its early childhood programs, and is a model School Readiness site by the California Children and Families Commission.

schools on smaller sites can also save time and money and put schools closer to parents and students.

There are also opportunities to accommodate more efficient and productive uses for educational facilities. For the most part, school facilities in California have been, and continue to be, designed and constructed to serve a specific educational purpose based on a limited educational function. Most educational facilities operate during a 7-8 hour time frame as stand alone institutions, with limited access or joint use by other community organizations. In most cases, the auditoriums, sports facilities, food service, libraries, media center, computer labs and other specialized areas of the school are available for use by the general public only on a very limited basis. Thus, local municipalities must provide duplicate facilities to serve the same functions, with separate budgets for capital improvements, staff and operating expenses.

Smarter designs for new or renovated facilities can accommodate direct community access to spaces like libraries, gymnasiums, auditoriums, performing arts, athletic and recreational spaces that can serve the broader needs of the community. Instead of being designed for a limited time frame of 7 - 8 hours every day, combining community uses can produce facilities that operate 12 - 14 hours, serving a wide range of community needs that can also include things like health clinics, counseling centers and other social services. These designs can be implemented without jeopardizing the health and safety of students, by having certain community activities take place during school hours and others limited to evenings and weekends. The result of these smarter and more efficient joint use design strategies is to reduce duplication of community infrastructure.

Today's educational facilities should also be designed to strengthen the integral relationship that exists between a school and its community in other ways. When implemented through a community-based planning process, the results can also include increased community engagement and support for a wide range of cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational needs. A national movement integrating schools more closely with the community is growing, with support from the U.S. Department of Education and other organizations.

Smarter schools should be inviting places rather than foreboding institutions. Their locations should encourage community use and their shared public spaces should be accessible - day and night, all year round - to the community. Today we know that 12 or 14 years of learning will not be enough to equip people for the rest of their lives. We can't afford to think of graduation as a finish line, and that means that one of the most important end products of schools needs to be citizens who have learned how to continue to learn. Schools should support learning for people of all ages. In short, school facilities should allow access to flexible and comprehensive programs to meet all learning needs. They should provide space and programs for everything from early learning to adult education and training.

Smarter school planning and investment can also extend the learning environment beyond the traditional school site by creating schools in non-traditional settings. When community sites become destinations for educational field trips and extended academic learning centers, the links between school and community are strengthened. But these extensions are not limited to field trips alone. Through partnerships between school boards and other community organizations, a wide variety of community resources like museums, zoos, parks, hospitals and even government buildings can be enlisted to serve as full-time

integrated learning centers. In this way, the school is not only the center of the community, but the community can also be seen as the center of the school - school as community and community as school - a learning community.

All of these examples point to ways that schools can better serve as the center of their communities, either by playing a more integral role as a community activity center or by extending the learning environment further out into the community to take better advantage of a wider range of community resources. Schools that are more integrated with their communities in these ways can strengthen a community's sense of identity, coherence and consensus. Like a new version of the old town square, they can serve as a community hub, a center for civic infrastructure, a place where students and others can learn to participate and support the common good.

Summary

The projects undertaken by third party intermediaries invariably represent a variety of community-specific situations that reflect the input of the local community in the planning and design process. The opportunity for the community to become engaged in this process provides a strong sense of ownership for the project that becomes evident in their involvement in the funding and construction phases as well as during operations where the neighborhood's sense of ownership prevents vandalism or abuse. Similarly, these exercises provide residents with opportunities for involvement and development of skills that are often manifested in other civic engagement processes that the residents become involved with including neighborhood councils, school PTAs and local community-based programs.

Now that this portfolio of models exists, we must take the joint-use concept to scale which requires legislation at the state levels to develop new rules, regulations, and funding vehicles to facilitate the easy access to existing and future joint-use funds since even when those limited funds exist the methods for accessing them are cumbersome and prevent sufficient access to them which often leads to the concerns about underutilization of existing funds in the pursuit of additional resources. The short-term availability of local, regional, and state bonds for education, libraries, healthcare, criminal justice, and other program facilities makes the immediacy of these projects that must be planned, designed, and implemented as quickly as possible or face loss of potential funding very important. As Robert Hertzberg, former speaker of the California State Assembly has frequently said "This is a once in a decade, once in a lifetime opportunity …" to access these limited funds.