

National Conversation on the Future of Our Communities

COMPENDIUM



Sustainable Communities Need Opportunity Rich Schools: A Smart Growth Imperative

Jeffrey M. Vincent, PhD
Deborah L. McKoy, PhD



February 2013

Sustainable Communities Need Opportunity-Rich Schools: A Smart Growth Imperative

Jeffrey M. Vincent, Ph.D. and Deborah L. McKoy, Ph.D.

Surveying American citizens in 2012, the American Planning Association (APA) found that the top three priorities Americans want planners to spend their time on are job creation (70%), safety (69%), and schools (67%). The survey also found that education was the highest priority for targeting local funding.¹ Planners—and particularly those that favor smart growth—already recognize the importance of workforce development and job creation, but too often fall short of extending their analysis and planning to a key foundation of strong regional economies: effective K-12 schools.

Most planners have no idea how they could help improve schools. Finding the mechanisms to link planning and infrastructure investments in communities and regions to efforts that improve K-12 schools is a complex and little understood endeavor. Yet, leaders across the country are increasingly looking for stronger connections between communities and public education.

As urban planners consider their priorities in the coming 15 years, it is imperative they recognize the role that K-12 education and high-quality schools play in realizing livable, equitable, and sustainable communities—and the role they play in contributing to K-12 educational quality. Today's aging school facilities, outdated school siting policies, and restrictive land use policies and practices, as well as dynamic fluctuations in school enrollments and changes to traditional school enrollment, attendance boundaries, and zoning policies all demand new approaches that harness school, community, and regional prosperity. This essay provides urban planning professionals and the smart growth community with action steps to connect their urban planning and development work (which we refer to as "sustainable community planning") to improving K-12 educational opportunities for all families.

Improving access to quality schools is critical if metropolitan areas want to ensure vibrant, resilient communities that retain the talent of young families.

Competitive and vibrant metropolitan regions of the future will have high-quality K-12 education systems that attract families, provide robust skill development, and bolster regional economic engines. The urban planning and community development literature is peppered with such declarations, yet dishearteningly short on policy prescriptions or an understanding of how to do so in practice. Although uneven distribution of K-12 school quality is shaping metropolitan regions by driving families from urban neighborhoods to suburbs, thereby creating sprawl, the planning field has largely ignored this trend. As Howell Baum noted in a 2004 article in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, K-12 education is "a quintessential challenge in

¹ American Planning Association. 2012. Planning in America: Perceptions and Priorities. A Research Summary. Washington, DC: APA.

managing the sprawl system.”² The cost of *not* considering schools and education is great: if urban communities want to retain the talent of young families and have them choose residential locations that support regional sustainable community goals, then improving access to quality schools is critical to vibrancy and resiliency.

Persuading sustainable community planners to consider K-12 education requires that planners understand—and overcome—the persistent obstacles working against doing so. Three of the most significant challenges are as follows:

- ***Concentrated poverty and racial and economic segregation undermine school quality.*** Although regional demographics are in constant flux, one stubborn consistency remains: the prevalence of isolated, poverty-concentrated neighborhoods with high-poverty schools. Perhaps the most consistent finding in educational research is the tremendous academic achievement challenges for high-poverty schools. Socioeconomic conditions and especially poverty concentration predict student achievement. Education scholars find that the achievement gap is, in large part, a function of conditions that constitute an opportunity gap. That is, low-income families and their children face double jeopardy: their neighborhoods lack such opportunities as quality schools, quality child care, preschool, healthy environments, quality affordable housing, and legitimate or living-wage jobs with advancement opportunities. Urban planning scholars have framed this reality as the “uneven geography of opportunity,” where residents are cut off from the resources and amenities afforded by more affluent communities in the same region where schools are generally more successful, infrastructure investments are high, and jobs are more plentiful.³
- ***Out-of-school factors contribute significantly to in-school success.*** Educational performance is a function of more than just what happens inside classrooms. Decades of research demonstrates that the ability to perform well in school requires a range of in- and out-of-school resources that together set the conditions for learning. Educational researcher Richard Rothstein argues, “[d]ifferences in the quality of schools can explain about one-third of the variation in student achievement. But the other two-thirds is attributable to non-school factors.”⁴

So-called non-school factors include housing stability; neighborhood quality and safety; available and affordable transportation options; parent engagement; health care; accessibility of after-school programs, open space, and cultural amenities; and socioeconomic and racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools. Therefore, policies that influence these non-school factors, many of which planners can affect, must be examined for their impact on students and schools. “Unless concerted action is taken to alleviate the hardships and suffering related to poverty and to spur development that can

² Baum, Howell S., “Smart Growth and School Reform: What if We Talked about Race and Took Community Seriously?” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 2004, 70(1): 14-26.

³ See Briggs, Xavier de Sousa (editor). 2005. *The Geography of Opportunity: Race and Housing Choice in Metropolitan America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

⁴ Rothstein, Richard. October 14, 2010. *How to fix our schools*. Issue Brief #286. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. <http://www.epi.org/publication/ib286>.

lead to economic and social stability for communities and families, little change in the character and quality of urban schools in the United States will occur,” says Pedro Noguera, a prominent education scholar.⁵

- ***Institutional and policy silos reinforce piecemeal approaches.*** Typically, the work of urban planning institutions and educators rarely intersects, even though schools and communities have inherent relationships. “It is common sense that the quality of public education and the quality of cities affect one another, but rarely, if ever, are educational and urban policies connected,” says Bruce Katz, a prominent urban policy thinker, “Strategies are needed to do so to ensure better schools, healthier neighborhoods, and more vital cities.”⁶

School districts and other local governments typically do not collaborate, even on matters obviously related to both education and land use, such as making school siting choices, school renovation and expansion decisions, changes to residential school attendance boundaries, coordinating school transportation services, and linking zoning for new housing developments to planning for school capacity requirements. This lack of collaboration, often referred to as the silo planning phenomenon, is largely a function of state policy or, in most cases, the lack of state policy, that would create incentives for collaboration, support cross-agency accountability, or mandate that planning and educational entities work together. In most states, school districts are largely independent jurisdictions that operate under a separate set of state policies and regulations from other local governments.

Given decades of unconnected work, local education agencies, municipalities, and regional agencies that would like to collaborate often do not know where to start and frequently do not trust one another.⁷ To help overcome these hurdles, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released *Voluntary School Siting Guidelines*⁸ to provide guidance to states and local entities on school siting planning. Still, policy and implementation practices for linking schools with sustainable community planning remain woefully lacking.

The Center for Cities & Schools (CC&S)⁹ at the University of California, Berkeley has developed an action framework that arms planners with tools and strategies to integrate schools and sustainable community planning¹⁰. CC&S is an action-oriented policy and technical

⁵ Noguera, Pedro. 2003. *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*. New York. Teachers College Press. Page 142.

⁶ Interview with the authors, 2011.

⁷ McKoy, Deborah L., Jeffrey M. Vincent, and Carrie Makarewicz. (2008). Integrating Infrastructure Planning: The Role of Schools. *Access* 33(4): 18-26; McDonald, N. (2010). School Siting: Contested Visions of the Community School. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 76(2): 184-198.

⁸ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Voluntary School Siting Guidelines*, October 2011, <http://www.epa.gov/schools/siting>.

⁹ <http://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu>.

¹⁰ Adapted from a longer report: McKoy, Deborah L., Jeffrey M. Vincent, and Ariel H. Bierbaum. 2011. *Opportunity-Rich Schools and Sustainable Communities: Seven Steps to Align High-Quality Education*

assistance “think & do-tank” that promotes high-quality education as an essential component of urban and metropolitan vitality to create equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities. CC&S works extensively with local school districts, municipal and regional governments, state agencies, and federal agencies to document challenges, lessons, and successes. CC&S recommends the following seven steps to align high-quality education with sustainable community planning.

Step 1: Know your educational landscape.

Sustainable community planners must understand the educational options and policies in their region and how they affect choices families make about housing.

- ***Understand local educational policies and demographics.*** Map school district jurisdictions, identify key leaders and existing partnerships, understand school district attendance boundaries and assignment policies (which may not overlap perfectly with city boundaries), and chart student demographics.
- ***Inventory educational and workforce assets.*** This should include five categories: high-quality childcare and early learning, K-12 assets (such as programs that prepare students for college and careers), before- and after-school programs and support services, higher education, regional workforce preparation, and adult education.
- ***Assess physical school infrastructure.*** Know the conditional quality and capacity of existing school facilities and grounds, including plans for new construction and/or modernization.

Example: In Emeryville, California, an assessment of condition of the public school facilities inspired a new vision for school and community revitalization. As a result, the city and the school district have been partnering to plan and fund a new “Center of Community Life,” a renovated K-12 campus that doubles as a community center with before- and after-school programming and city-run programs, services, and activities for students and the community.¹¹

Step 2: Engage school stakeholders, families, and young people in sustainable community planning.

Planners should ensure effective engagement of residents of all ages and the institutions that serve them.

- ***Identify multiple ways for school district personnel to engage in planning.*** Planning processes can be long and complex. Invite school districts to participate at critical junctures, such as when deciding housing unit mix or planning park space adjacent to schools.
- ***Identify opportunities for students and parents to engage in planning and connect it to classroom learning.*** Working with teachers, youth participation in sustainable community planning can be an especially effective way to link classroom learning to real-world experience.

with Innovations in City and Metropolitan Planning and Development. Washington, DC: What Works Collaborative. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412348.html>.

¹¹ <http://www.emeryvillecenter.org>.

- ***Ensure meaningful and sustained engagement of school district personnel, students, and parents with appropriate capacity-building tools.*** Provide accurate, timely information to ensure participation of these stakeholders.

Example: The Y-PLAN! (Youth – Plan, Learn, Act, Now!) is a proven methodology for engaging students and schools in local planning and community development projects. Developed by the Center for Cities & Schools at the University of California, Berkeley, Y-PLAN! has built capacity in school districts and local governments to promote youth leadership throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and is currently expanding to New York, Dallas, Washington, D.C., and Detroit.¹²

Step 3: Create a shared vision linking community, regional, and educational prosperity.

Use a robust and inclusive visioning process to unite participants around common goals.

- ***Cultivate leadership and champions.*** Strong, effective leadership will motivate and manage diverse stakeholders and move an integrated planning process forward.
- ***Adopt the vision statement formally across institutions.*** A vision statement can help ensure commitment to and sustainability of a shared mission.
- ***Develop common indicators to measure change, foster shared accountability, and increase the effective use of scarce resources.*** Executed properly, accountability metrics honor individual activities and collaborative efforts, measure changes in collaborative processes and policy/program implementation outcomes, and provide decision makers with objective means of measuring improvements in the use of increasingly scarce resources.

Example: In Charleston, South Carolina, a youth master plan was developed in collaboration with 16 municipalities in the region. The plan identifies seven goals to comprehensively support young people. The employment and transportation goal, for example, emphasizes the need for transportation options for students to get to and from internships and other work-based learning opportunities.¹³

Step 4: Support a family-friendly community through comprehensive services and desirable amenities.

Create the right mix of these resources that will support and attract a diverse set of residents.

- ***Provide comprehensive social services aligned with educational needs and opportunities.*** Schools and service providers should tailor these “wrap-around” services and programs to the social and educational needs of students.
- ***Provide quality amenities to attract families and enrich students’ lives.*** Family-oriented attractions, such as early learning programs, high quality childcare, and open play space, attract families to a neighborhood and offer enrichment opportunities.

¹² <http://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/engaging.html>.

¹³ <http://www.charlestoncity.info/shared/docs/0/caymp%20final.pdf>.

- ***Harness public and private funding to align program operations for efficiency.*** Leverage and maximize a variety of funding streams, including public investment in schools, libraries, and other community infrastructure, as well as private investment in development. The latter often includes investment in community assets.

Example: The SUN Community Schools effort in Multnomah County, Oregon (Portland Metro) has transformed schools into full service community centers. Each of the 60+ SUN schools partners with community institutions such as libraries, parks, community centers, neighborhood health clinics, places of worship, and private businesses to provide social, health, and support services to students and families.¹⁴

Step 5: Align bricks-and-mortar investments in community assets.

Use cross-sector partnerships to coordinate capital investments in schools, housing, transportation, and neighborhoods.

- ***Establish schools as centers of complete communities.*** Ensure adequate modernization and expansion of existing schools to bolster neighborhoods, maximize the joint use of school facilities, and site and design new schools so they are connected to neighborhoods and energy efficient.
- ***Ensure family-oriented, mixed-income housing.*** Mixed-income housing aims to decrease high concentrations of neighborhood poverty and provide affordable housing options for families at every income level, including school teachers and staff.
- ***Pursue joint development with school districts.*** Through joint development, two or more entities partner to plan, site, design, and build facilities.

Example: In California, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research is working with the California Department of Education to explore ways to improve state guidelines for encouraging collaborative local planning by municipalities and school districts. The 2013 planned update of the state's General Plan Guidelines presents a unique opportunity.¹⁵

Step 6: Maximize access to opportunity through affordable transportation options.

Young people and families living in high-poverty, resource-limited neighborhoods require access to jobs, health services, and educational options. By developing more affordable, multimodal transportation options, municipalities can provide access to these opportunities.

- ***Make areas surrounding schools safe for pedestrians and bicyclists.*** Upgrades to sidewalks, bicycle lanes, street lighting, and street furniture improve the safety and vibrancy of public spaces and enable young people and their families to more easily access local schools.
- ***Site schools to maximize multimodal transportation access.*** Strategically locating schools allows them to serve as the home base for a range of academic and extracurricular activities.

¹⁴ <http://web.multco.us/sun>.

¹⁵ http://opr.ca.gov/s_generalplanguidelines.php.

- ***Align transit options to support school choice and extracurricular opportunities.*** Given that parents now have more choices than ever in which school(s) to send their children to, transit can play a key role in ensuring all families' access to educational choices, including after-school activities.
- ***Create incentives for multimodal transportation choices by students and families.*** Urban design elements and neighborhood infrastructure that create safe and vibrant environments are critical to getting families with children walking and bicycling.

Example: In Baltimore, middle and high school students ride Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) buses at no cost. Baltimore City Public Schools contracts with MTA for the service, used by more than 25,000 students.¹⁶

Step 7: Institutionalize ongoing innovation.

Cross-sector collaboration needs to become business as usual. This should include a two-way system of accountability between schools and their communities.

- ***Support inter-disciplinary capacity building for new professional practice, formal communication systems, and streamlined collaborative decision-making.*** Job descriptions at public agencies—from school districts to transit agencies—should clearly communicate the need for collaborative skills.
- ***Measure change, assess impacts, and leverage results.*** New indicators and data will be needed to measure change, determine its effectiveness, and then make data-driven policy and program decisions.
- ***Leverage diverse resources.*** Now more than ever, economic conditions call for innovative partnerships that weave together diverse funding sources to maximize resources.
- ***Balance what works with what could be.*** Changing the status quo will depend on supporting effective policies with a proven track record and new policies that take risks and innovate.

Example: In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region of North Carolina, the county board, city council, community college board, and county library board adopted a joint resolution promoting joint use of public facilities. The resolution establishes the Joint Use Task Force with representation from two dozen agencies and works to align public capital investment in the region for shared use and reduced facility development costs.¹⁷

¹⁶ <http://planning.maryland.gov/pdf/ourproducts/publications/modelguidelines/mg27.pdf>.

¹⁷ <http://charmeck.org/city/charlotte/planning/CapitalFacilities/Pages/JointUseTaskForce.aspx>.

A Call to Action for Smart Growth Planners

Given the critical importance of K-12 school quality to sustainable communities, urban planners and educators must align forces and collaborate. Although coordinated metropolitan planning and educational improvement efforts are foundations for prosperous schools, communities, and regions, they are too often pursued in isolation. Realizing the smart growth vision for sustainable communities over the coming decade requires that local governments, community leaders, developers, planners, and educators work together to plan and redevelop communities.

Jeffrey Vincent, Ph.D. and Deborah McKoy, Ph.D. co-founded the Center for Cities & Schools at the University of California-Berkeley. Contact: jvincent@berkeley.edu or debmckoy@berkeley.edu.