

School Siting and Sustainability in Illinois: Examining the Significance of School Location and Community-Centered Schools

Executive Summary of Report

Many Illinois school districts face tough decisions about whether to renovate existing facilities or construct new facilities elsewhere. These decisions arise from population changes and school reorganization, lack of funding, actual or perceived inadequacy of school buildings, and increasing competition among schools to attract students. When faced with these decisions, districts can achieve greater environmental, economic, and human health benefits by maintaining and siting schools in walkable, community-centered locations.

In the fall of 2008, Healthy Schools Campaign was awarded a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation through the *Helping Johnny Walk to School* project. The project encourages community-centered schools through state-level policy and practices, and is supported through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and with generous funding by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. With the help of the grant, Healthy Schools Campaign convened a policy board to research policies affecting school siting decisions, report school siting challenges, and publicize model policy suggestions to decision-makers. Based on public listening sessions and research on current challenges, the policy board offers the following recommendations.

Address School Acreage Issues at the State and Local Level

Large minimum acreage requirements set by many school districts and municipalities make school siting in community-centered locations difficult and potentially lead to greater transportation reimbursement requests. To address local large acreage standards and encourage best practices, the State could create educational materials and programs – including an interactive portal featuring small acreage, community-centered Illinois schools – to encourage more districts to maintain and site schools in community-centered locations. State reimbursement for school district land acquisition could be redirected toward types of district expenses that ensure better maintenance of existing buildings and infrastructure that encourages safe walking and biking to school. Conducting studies to assess the impacts of land donations for schools, land-cash ordinances, and development impact fees on school siting decisions would also help the State better understand implications of local decisions for State reimbursement of school transportation and air quality. Directing the Illinois State Board of Education to promote community-centered school siting to districts seeking counsel on school acreage standards may lead districts to more fully understand the long-term benefits of walkable school location and site schools accordingly.

Reform State Reimbursement Policies for School Transportation

Policy changes must be made to address significant increases in school transportation mileage and dramatic increases in annual State appropriations for school transportation reimbursement – up more than 300% from FY94 to FY09 (vs. about 38% inflation during the same period) – while taking into account the realities of rising fuel costs and concerns about climate change. Capping annual state transportation reimbursements, adjusting the transportation reimbursement formula to reward transportation best practices, and creating incentives to help districts encourage more students to bike and walk to school could compel districts to site schools in ways to reduce busing and vehicular transport needs. School consolidation and reorganization policies and decisions need to be studied to assess possible impacts on transportation spending, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and walking and biking to school. An appointed school transportation task force could lead such efforts.

Modify State Funding Policies for School Construction, Renovation, and Maintenance

State funding for school capital projects and facility repairs should be tied to a reliable revenue source for more consistent funding, as the school construction grant program has not funded for over five years. Language in the School Construction Law and related administrative rules suggests that State reimbursements favor large, fast-growing school districts while small school districts are ineligible. Such legislative language giving funding preference to “replace aging schools” should be amended to include language that promotes a more comprehensive school assessment process and does not discourage renovation of older school facilities from funding. Health Life Safety assessment procedures and policies need further examination to assess how they impact decisions about historic buildings, school relocation, and possible demolitions. Creating educational and assessment tools that help explain and quantify benefits of maintaining older, community-centered schools could lead to a greater appreciation and understanding of such school buildings. Developing a centralized, publicly accessible database of all Illinois school building ages and repair needs could help the State better assess and address the capital needs of older Illinois school buildings. Requiring school districts to spend a percentage of school budgets on facility repairs and maintenance may ensure greater local attention to maintenance and repair needs and reduce reliance on state tax dollars for maintenance and repair.

Examine Recent Green Building Requirements for School Facilities Seeking State Funding

Green building requirements established by Public Act 095-0416 should be assessed and possibly strengthened to ensure that projects receiving state funding are sited in walkable locations, thus ensuring responsible use of energy and tax dollar resources for subsequent transportation reimbursements. Public leaders should consider legislative amendments or updating administrative rules to allow districts to pursue future versions of green building certification standards. Developing a pilot project could help green building experts and state leaders better understand how new green building requirements affect schools’ certification scores and siting decisions.

Encourage Coordinated Planning Among School Districts, Municipalities, and Local Communities

Greater coordinated planning and community input often produces school siting decisions that afford greater community access to and support of the school. Because school districts are exempt from municipal policies and ordinances, there is often little collaboration between school districts and local government entities on where to locate schools, even though such decisions can lead to financial, social, and environmental outcomes affecting both parties. State agencies could offer technical and professional assistance to encourage municipalities and school districts to develop clear, simple processes and policies for collaborative planning. Encouraging or incentivizing school-community partnerships, joint use of school facilities, public forums or charrettes to ensure greater public involvement in the school siting process, and developing step-by-step materials on collaborative school facility planning may also promote community-centered school siting decisions.

Equip Districts to Acquire and Reference Comprehensive Data When Comparing Facility Options

When faced with building capacity and functionality concerns, limited financial resources for school facilities, and pressure to attract students, Illinois school districts must compare various options for facilities; the options weighed are renovate, replace, or relocate. Such comparisons are often incomplete, failing to account for externalities caused by the potential facility locations such as impacts on busing needs and walkability, student health, air quality, costs of public utility and service expansion, and lost property values when existing schools are abandoned or relocated. Developing online evaluation tools and more comprehensive feasibility criteria can help districts assess broader impacts of school siting decisions and quantify the values of community-centered school locations.