Build 'Smart'

By Barbara McCann and Constance Beaumont

Smaller, community-centered schools can help your district grow in more ways than one

Since the end of World War II, our nation has sprawled. Small businesses have been displaced by conglomerates. Walking communities have been replaced by hour-long commutes from the suburbs. And the notion of small neighborhood schools has largely vanished, replaced by huge facilities on large, multi-acre complexes physically removed from the communities they serve.

Many school districts have reinforced this country's randomly scattered, sprawling land-use patterns by building huge facilities on complexes so large they can only be accommodated on sites on the edge of the community or outside.

But the bigger-is-better trend is subsiding, and educators are now focusing on the disadvantages of the massive "factory schools." Rather than build on remote locations that discourage interaction between schools, parents, and the community, they are beginning to push for smaller, more community-centered schools.

In Pomona, Calif., school officials revitalized a dying shopping mall as a learning campus, saving money and providing new opportunities for children and teachers. In Newport, R.I., community support helped educators renovate a centrally located historic elementary school that serves a diverse student body. In Portland, Ore., a partnership with a developer helped the district raise funds and build an elementary school that is within walking distance for most students. And in Chattanooga, Tenn., school officials built two schools downtown for the price of one while involving the state university in a teaching partnership.

There is compelling evidence that smart growth schools such as these not only help school districts improve student performance but also cut costs. And these efforts are being supported by organizations such as Smart Growth America and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, as well as environmentalists, public officials, urban planners, public health officials, developers, and citizen advocates.

These advocates want to end the practice of widely separating schools, businesses, and homes into distinct zones. They seek to revitalize existing neighborhoods while protecting open space, keeping housing affordable, and providing more transportation choices. They recognize that school size, quality, and location are essential to creating strong communities. If a community functions well in all other respects but fails to provide a good school, families lose out—and move out.

Modestly sized, community based

Smart growth schools are modest in size—not huge facilities where children can feel lost. Research shows that small schools graduate a higher percentage of students, and a higher percentage of these graduates continue on to postsecondary education. Students in smaller schools earn higher grade point averages, participate more in extracurricular activities, and have better attendance records and a heightened sense of belonging. Small schools also are targets of less violence and less vandalism.

For educators, the most compelling arguments for smart growth schools are improved educational outcomes and expanded resources for learning. Schools located within communities can draw on nearby resources for a richer learning

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HMFH Architects, Inc./Photograph by Wayne Soverns Jr.

Rather than rebuild, the Newport, R.I., school district renovated the historic Thompson Middle School, whose central location makes it easily accessible to students and local residents.

experience, and involvement with the broader community creates favorable conditions for learning.

The Minneapolis Interdistrict Downtown School is located in the city's theater district, where students take advantage of their neighbors' performance space. Fenway High School, located in an old industrial building across from Fenway Park in Boston, collaborates with a wide variety of agencies and businesses to provide required internships for every student. Other schools share space with community colleges, museums, or even a zoo.

Smart growth schools also attract support and involvement from groups and individuals who can enhance the learning experience. Georgia Tech, for example, is supporting a new downtown elementary school in Atlanta. In such cities as Spokane, Wash., and San Antonio, Texas, the renovation of schools that have held older neighborhoods together for decades has boosted civic pride and community involvement.

The distance from home to "sprawl schools" isolates children, depriving them of the independence and physical activity that come with biking or walking to school. Just a generation ago, 70 percent of children walked or biked to school. Today, 80 percent *don't* walk to school—most commonly because of distance.

Public health officials say the decrease in daily physical activity has contributed to skyrocketing obesity rates among children. Neighborhood campuses make it possible for students to integrate physical activity into their daily routines by walking or biking to school each day. Students also have easily accessible recreational space on weekends and after school. A number of communities have started participating in an annual "Walk to School Day" event each October.

Some smart growth schools provide social and health services for students, their parents, and community residents. San Francisco's Tenderloin Community School, for example, offers a child development center, a community garden, and a community kitchen.

Smart savings

Many administrators, board members, and parents recognize the benefits of small community schools, but the widespread perception is that larger facilities are more cost-effective because they allow economies of scale. In the long run, though, large, isolated schools might offer few savings, and the community involvement inherent in smart growth schools can lead to economic benefits.

A 1998 study of 128 high school budgets by New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy found that schools with fewer than 600 students spent approximately $1,400 more per student annually than schools with more than 2,000 students. However, when the costs were evaluated on a per-graduate basis, the smaller schools were found to successfully educate students at a lower cost than larger schools.

Large schools also can have hidden costs, which can mean less money for teachers and supplies. One expensive area is transportation, where costs have doubled in the past 25 years as schools were built farther from the students they serve. As an example, a 1997 school siting study in Bend, Ore., found that annual transportation costs at neighborhood schools were 32 percent lower than at sites on the edge of the community.

Characteristics of Smart Growth Schools

SMART GROWTH schools are the antithesis of "mega-school sprawl," which promotes wasteful, inefficient land use while weakening existing communities. These schools are diverse because they grow out of the needs of individual communities, but they share these characteristics:

- They are small in size and thus fit gracefully into the neighborhoods they serve.
- They encourage broad community involvement in school facility planning.
- They provide high-quality education.
- They are located within a neighborhood and are safe for children to walk or bike to.
- They act as a neighborhood anchor and support community use of the school facility after school hours.
- They are well designed and fit in well with the scale and design of the surrounding neighborhood.
- They make good use of existing resources, including historic school buildings, whenever possible.—*B.M. and C.B.*

School districts are learning that smart growth schools can actually save them money. In Washington, D.C.'s strapped public school system, parents worked out a public/private development partnership that provided funding to modernize the Oyster Bilingual Elementary School. In Columbus, Ohio, a team of architects and structural engineers conducted architectural feasibility analyses for 10 historic schools and found that they could be renovated to meet state-of-the-art educational standards for $13 million less than the cost of building 10 new schools. With virtually every state in the union—and many school districts—facing serious budget deficits, such savings are important.

Overcoming obstacles

Despite these clear benefits, smart growth schools face many obstacles. State site standards often require very large parcels of land for schools, forcing districts to build at the edge of communities. Not only are the sites far from many of the people they serve, but they are too big to relate meaningfully to their neighborhoods.

Preserving and rehabilitating small, high-performing schools is a challenge when funding policies are weighed against renovation to favor new construction. Many states—and private consultants who advise school districts—recommend that new schools be built whenever the costs of renovating existing schools exceed some arbitrary percentage of new construction costs. This is so even when renovation options could yield "like new" schools at a significant cost savings.

Too often, school architects are unfamiliar with renovation options and techniques and consequently overestimate the costs of renovation or overlook renovation possibilities altogether. School facility planning is often totally separate from carefully developed plans for growth and community preservation. As a result, school construction programs sometimes undermine community revitalization efforts.

Fortunately, solutions to these problems are being pursued on many levels, and school officials all over the country are working with planners and citizens to come up with creative approaches to building and renovating smart growth schools:

1. Maintain, renovate, or expand an existing school. Thousands of top-performing, small schools have anchored older neighborhoods for generations. One of the most important and least costly ways to have smart growth schools is to make sure these schools are well maintained and upgraded frequently.

Renovating solidly built, well-designed historic schools is another approach. In Newport, R.I., the district used a $19 million bond issue approved by voters to renovate the historic Thompson Middle School in the center of the city. The 106-year-old Townsend Building is now used for administrative offices, a library, and computer labs. Additional classrooms, a cafetorium, and other facilities are housed in new wings that were designed by HMFM Architects of Boston to harmonize with the 1897 structure.

Located just off Newport's Main Street, the Thompson School serves as a community center and is seen as both an economic and an educational asset. Thanks to its central location, students can walk to the school, as can local residents attending civic meetings in the cafetorium. The library in the old Townsend building is a source of local pride and an amenity enjoyed by few modern schools. It features stained glass windows, wooden floors, and a view of the harbor and a church steeple.

In St. Louis, the decision to renovate and expand the historic Adams School grew out of a grassroots effort to revitalize a neighborhood dispirited by gangs and drugs. Leaders from the Washington University Medical Center, the St. Louis Board of Education, the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team, McCormack Baron Associates, and Trivers Architects helped rehabilitate the school and build community-serving facilities next to it.

Interior spaces deemed incapable of meeting modern educational program requirements were gutted, but architects managed to retain some of the school's distinctive features, such as the original wood floors and beautiful, light-filled windows. A new school wing, designed to be compatible with the 1878 structure, now houses art and music classes, a library, administrative offices, a cafeteria, and a gym.

A new community center next to the school accommodates a well-used gym, a fitness center, and a health screening center. Next to the community center is a baseball field for the St. Louis Cardinals and a restored city park.

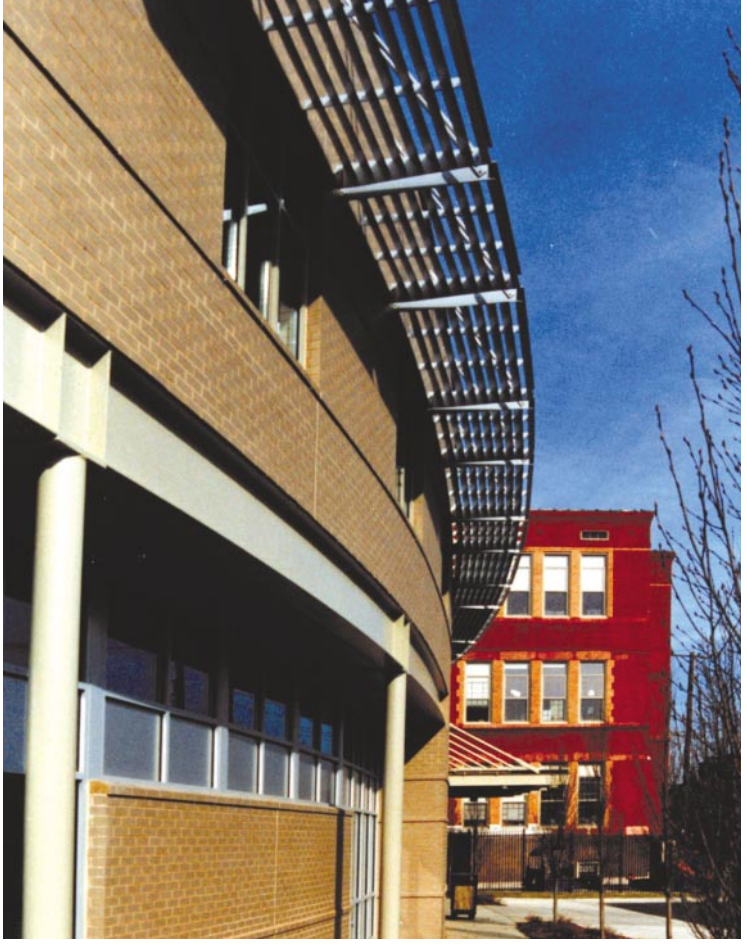
2. Build a new school in the existing community. In many districts, renovating an existing facility is not a viable option, but a sprawl school isn't the only alternative.

In Manitowoc, Wis., the school board had available land on the edge of town but followed community wishes to build a new school in the city on the site of a beloved but outdated elementary school. The new Jefferson Elementary uses classic architecture and incorporates murals and a fireplace saved from the old school while providing state-of-the-art facilities. The community has developed a tremendous sense of ownership and pride in the school and in their neighborhood.

The Hamilton County Board of Education in Chattanooga, Tenn., determined that enough children were being bused from the downtown neighborhoods to merit building a new school. The board was approached by the River City Company, a community development group working to revitalize downtown, with a plan that led to the construction of two new magnet schools, one of which was funded by private sources.

Chattanooga's Battle Academy of Teaching and Learning and the Brown Academy of Classical Studies draw students from the current population of primarily poor downtown residents, as well as from the families of people who work downtown. Both receive assistance from the University of Tennessee.

3. Retrofit other facilities for use as school buildings. In communities with limited land and financial resources for expansion or construction, boards are developing innova-



A new wing and an adjacent community center helped revitalize the neighborhood around the Adams School in downtown St. Louis.

tive strategies that include retrofitting other buildings.

Former factory and warehouse buildings have been successfully transformed into smart growth schools from Portland, Ore., to Boston. Elementary students in a Buffalo, N.Y., public school attend class under the soaring ceilings of an old church.

In the mid 1990s, California's Pomona Unified School District had one-third of its students in temporary classrooms and no available land to build a new school. The district purchased the half-empty Plaza Azteca/Indian Hill Mall, converting it into three elementary school "educational villages" that serve 500 students each and the Village Academy, a small high school that focuses on preparing students for careers in four specific fields.

The Jet Propulsion Laboratory operates an on-site facility for training science teachers, and the district has built additional staff training rooms. A drug store, a movie theater, and a variety of other small businesses share the site.

4. Build a new school using smart growth principles in a new community. New schools can create a sense of neighborhood in rapidly growing communities. A few builders are leading the way. The earliest example is in the Kentlands development in Gaithersburg, Md. The Rachel Carson Elementary School is within walking distance for many children in this traditional neighborhood development.

In Fairview, Ore., developers of a new smart growth style subdivision worked with businesses and the school district to bring an innovative new elementary school to the Reynolds School District. The district had failed five times to get approval for a school levy, but the developers of Fairview Village—a large residential development being built on the former site of Tetronix Corp.—believed a school was essential to the success of their plan to build a complete smart growth community.

The developers, Holt and Everhart, worked with Tetronix to offer land for a new school and devoted their entire staff to phoning area voters for two weeks before the levy to purchase the land. With this support, the referendum passed, and the district built an architecturally innovative school that is within a quarter mile of every home in Fairview Village. Federal transportation funds helped build a lighted walking trail from the village to the school. The school uses its wetland location to provide an outdoor classroom and a science curriculum tailored to using the area as a natural laboratory.

Building for the future

Several states have adopted policy reforms that make it easier to build smart growth schools:

- Maryland has eliminated acreage standards and favored state investment in existing schools. In recent years, about 80 percent of state school construction funds have been used to renovate or improve existing schools.
- Pennsylvania has eliminated certain policies that formerly discriminated unreasonably against school renovations.
- Maine has encouraged cooperation between school districts and local planners and has issued a brochure, "The ABCs of School Site Selection," that promotes smart growth concepts.
- Florida requires that design professionals with preservation expertise conduct feasibility studies on the renovation of historic schools before the schools are demolished.
- Massachusetts gives "bonus points" to district-level applications for state funding if the districts can demonstrate that they have maintained existing schools properly and not allowed them to deteriorate unnecessarily.
- California supports walkable schools through its Safe Routes to Schools grant program, which awards funds to local jurisdictions to improve student walking and biking routes.

Promoting small, community-based schools requires innovation, new partnerships, and a commitment to working to overcome the barriers presented by traditional rules and regulations. But with this commitment, districts can meet educational and fiscal goals in new ways. And educators who favor smaller, more community-centered schools have a strong ally in the smart growth movement.

Barbara McCann (barbara@bmccann.net), a Washington, D.C.-based consultant, is the former director of information and research for Smart Growth America (www.smartgrowthamerica.org).

Constance Beaumont (preservationinfo@aol.com) is the former director of state and local policy for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C. (www.nationaltrust.org).