

# **Creating Communities of Learning**

Schools and Smart Growth

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**Schools and Smart Growth**  
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a report by  
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Formerly she was Senior Urban Designer in the New Jersey Office of State Planning (OS), where she provided leadership for the Communities of Learning campaign and managed the Community Schools Smart Growth Planning Grant program. She was the principal author of the OSP report “Creating Communities of Learning: Schools and Smart Growth in New Jersey” which is available at the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities website [www.edfacilities.org](http://www.edfacilities.org).

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## Executive Summary

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New Jersey is a bellwether of trends in education and land use reform to link planning for schools and communities based on the principles of “Smart Growth.” This opportunity came to the fore as a result of the New Jersey Supreme Court’s landmark 1990 ruling in *Abbott v. Burke*, which ordered the state to provide educationally adequate facilities for public school children in the 30 designated special needs (Abbott) districts. To remedy the court order, the state launched a \$12 billion school construction program in July 2000. In addition to the construction program the court ordered Abbott districts to implement a comprehensive package of reforms closely aligned with the concept of community schools. The school construction program provides a unique opportunity to link school reform with facility design and bring this concept to life, by planning and designing schools that serve as centers of community.

Significantly, the design of schools as community centers also represents a key strategy to achieve the goals of New Jersey’s State Development and Redevelopment Plan, a blueprint for state investment based on the principles of Smart Growth. To raise public awareness about this once in a lifetime chance to leverage the state’s investment in public school construction to implement both the State Plan as well as the Abbott reforms, the former Office of State Planning (OSP) initiated the Communities of Learners campaign, which operated through conferences, symposia, outreach, technical assistance, and small grants—offered through the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program, targeted to Abbott districts. As a result of the short-lived campaign (2000-2002), New Jersey became a test bed for creative strategies to engage citizens in integrated planning for school reform, school design, and community building.

This report describes two exemplary projects seeded by the campaign: a national design competition for a new high school in Perth Amboy and an effort to engage large scale public engagement in a community school master planning process Plainfield. What contributed to the successes achieved in each case? What were the impediments? Hopefully these lessons will inform policy makers, practitioners and advocates in New Jersey and elsewhere, in advance of state funding.

The report begins with a brief historical overview of how school finance reform and state planning evolved in New Jersey as overlapping and interactive trends. Next, the report describes how the Communities of Learners campaign and the Community School Smart Growth Grant Program came about, as the necessary backdrop for the case studies, which follow. The conclusion presents general findings from these case studies as well as the Communities of Learners campaign that served as an impetus and incubator for them. These findings and recommendations based on them are summarized here.

### **Communities of Learning: Schools and Smart Growth**

Although I am admittedly biased in favor of this initiative, it is fair to say that it succeeded in its aim of sparking a statewide

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conversation about a larger vision for schools in the 21st century and how they fit into New Jersey cities and towns. The terms “smart growth” and “community schools” provided the neutral language (less charged than “state plan” and “Abbott implementation”) for this conversation.

### **Perth Amboy High School Design Competition**

Strategic investment by federal and state agencies and foundations brought design to the fore in this case. The prestige associated with the National Endowment for the Arts grant for the competition helped give the community a voice it otherwise would not have had in the Abbott school procurement process—and also helped give state agencies permission to do things in new, more flexible and collaborative ways, as long as they met their program goals.

The OSP played an atypical role by not only brokering the joint venture between the city and the school district to sponsor the competition, but also by participating as an active partner, and ally in negotiating the support of sister agencies. This suggests how a state planning agency can serve as an intermediary to facilitate collaboration between public entities accustomed to a high degree of autonomy; and to set a higher standard for school planning and design.

Savvy leadership by the Mayor, Superintendent, president of the Board of Education and high school principal provided a necessary but not sufficient ingredient for the success of this project. The cooperative relationship between the district and municipality and among civic groups and service agencies also helped. But the unwavering commitment of school and city leaders to the project helped the team overcome the obstacles that arose along the way.

#### **In-side Out Design Process**

An “inside-out” school -redesign process allowed for the community to engage in planning for educational and support programs and school design criteria in tandem with site selection. The competition provided a clear goal for the volunteer committees to work towards, despite uncertainties concerning the site. And the growing momentum in planning for the new school arguably expedited negotiations over site acquisition by keeping the issue in the public eye.

#### **Community Profile Research**

Community Profile Research provided the faculty with the synthesis of information necessary to plan the academies as well as prepare short-term operational plans. The research also provided justifications required to gain state approval of features in the proposed academy model that did not conform to the Facilities Efficiency Standards. Good planning requires good information.

#### **Design Competition**

A competition is only as good as its program. The community based planning that guided development of the program was an essential ingredient in the success of this model for procurement of an architect.

The community planning process and design competition did not prolong and arguably expedited the school procurement process—which hinges on site acquisition. Moreover, the significant amount of pre-design planning would not otherwise occurred at this stage in the standard state procurement process, yet added tremendous value to the

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final product, aside from the high quality of designs elicited by the competition. To compare this method relative to standard procedures will require use of both qualitative as well quantitative methods.

## Sustainability

One goal of the high school planning process was to ensure the sustainability of the community-school partnership by building on existing initiatives such as the School Based Youth Services (SBYS) program, to help institutionalize it. The Community School Collaborative for Adolescent Health—a direct spin-off of one of the planning process—now under the direction of SBYS has great potential. But the sustainability of that partnership will depend on the continued availability of strategic resources: time, money, and expertise.

### Plainfield Community School Master Plan

This project, under the leadership of Larry Leverett, aspired to the democratic ideal of education—*Paideia*—and achieved it in mobilizing as many people as it did in the community school master planning exercise. In this case a superintendent in the vanguard of the community school movement blazed the path that others, including state agencies, followed. However the concrete achievements of this community school partnership fell far short of their aspirations and, in the short term at least, the initiative has not survived the loss of Leverett’s leadership.

## State Agencies as Supportive Partners

Here the role of state agencies was to support and try not to get in the way of a farsighted superintendent’s efforts to realize his vision of full service community schools as part of a framework for district-wide reform. However as the planning process played out, it lost focus and became too broad. Part of the problem derived from too literal reliance on the consultant’s model for the participatory planning process. But OSP and other state agencies encouraged confidence in this high profile consultant, Concordia, and were eager to see their model tested locally.

## Leadership and Decentralization

This case study suggests that Concordia’s model should have been adapted to suit Plainfield’s particular needs and political culture.

The Concordia Model offered the added value of capacity building by training the cadre of paid local facilitators to lead the volunteer planning committees. With more time to incubate, the organic, decentralized community school planning system might have worked as intended, enduring regardless of who the superintendent was. But in the prolonged vacuum of leadership that followed the unexpected resignation of the superintendent, without an influential champion the ideal was quickly set-aside by the experts left in charge of capital improvements in favor of efficiency. Decentralization must be balanced with the need for progressive pragmatic leadership.

## Learning By Doing

The district deserves credit for being willing to experiment with the Concordia Model. In creating a community of learners, it is important to give people permission to fail when taking a calculated risk, and learn from the mistakes made. “If you always do what you’ve always done you’ll always get what you’ve already have,” as Leverett likes to repeat. And other districts, notably Perth Amboy, learned valuable lessons from observing the Plainfield planning process as it played out

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## Impediments to Change

School facilities provide a unique opportunity to organize collective action to improve education and build healthier communities. There are numerous paths to take toward this goal. The rules of the game, such as facilities efficiency standards, the state school construction procurement guidelines, and school finance formulas may present obstacles along the way, but these rules are not an impediment to change, as they are constantly evolving. The real obstacle is what Don Schon referred to as the “dynamic conservatism” of institutions: “a tendency to fight to remain the same,” a condition he refers to as “the stable state,” which in today’s constantly changing world is no longer possible to maintain. Schon (1971, p.30) advises: “We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are ‘learning systems,’ that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.”

Schon, D. (1971).  
*Beyond the Stable State*. New York.  
Random House.

Institutional change is hard but carefully crafted school facility planning projects undertaken in the context of an effort to create a systemwide community of learning, can provide the impetus for state and local agencies, with other school and civic stakeholder groups, to take the small steps that can add up to larger moves.

## Recommendations

The principle recommendation based on the findings of this research is to plan and design schools that serve as centers of communities. The short-lived Communities of Learning campaign and Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program proved to be an effective way to encourage collaborative experimentation to test various ways to achieve that goal. It is only through such a program, operating at many levels of government and at the grassroots, that we can change the system by which we plan and design and continually improve schools and communities. A program along these lines should be reinstated in New Jersey and replicated in other major cities and states undergoing similar school construction initiatives.

Community of Learning and Community School Planning Grants

In addition there needs to be an incentive for innovation, and to set a higher standard for school planning and design, not simply replace what has been built in the past. The National Endowment for the Arts program for school design competitions provided such an incentive, and should be continued and expanded.

Incentives for Innovation and Design Quality

For innovative projects such as those studied here to benefit the functioning of the system as a whole there is a need for continued feed back through case study reports, action research and the exchange of information. Ideally such a research program would be linked to teaching and outreach, to train the next generation of architects, planners, policy makers and educators in the new interdisciplinary skill sets required to create schools as centers of community.

Applied Research

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## Introduction

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There is a widely acknowledged and urgent need to modernize, repair, replace and build new public schools as the population of school-age children grows and the nation's inventory of school buildings ages. One reason for the backlog in school construction is that the burden for capital improvements falls on local school districts, which typically depend on property tax revenues for such expenses. Thus the condition of public school facilities provides concrete evidence of the growing disparity in the quality of education between rich (predominantly urban and minority) and wealthy suburban school districts. As a result of measures to end inequitable disparities in school financing, and standards-based reform, states are beginning to assume a more active role in school facilities planning. At the same time that states are becoming more active in land use planning, to end inequitable regional growth patterns. In this way state governments are poised to play an active role in linking planning for schools and smart growth.

New Jersey is a bellwether of this trend. As a result of the New Jersey Supreme Court's landmark 1990 ruling in *Abbott v. Burke*, which ordered the state to provide facilities for public school children in the 30 designated special needs (Abbott) districts, "that will be sufficient to enable these students to achieve the substantive standards that now define a thorough and efficient education," the state launched the largest school construction program in the nation, in July 2000. In addition to the construction program, the court ordered Abbott districts to implement Whole School Reform—a comprehensive redesign effort involving the participation of all members of the school community—as well as provide supplemental programs to make up for past gaps. Thus implementation of the Abbott reforms is closely aligned with the concept of community schools, and the school construction program provides a unique opportunity to give this concept concrete form in the design of schools that serve as centers of community.

Significantly, the design of schools as community centers represents a key strategy to achieve the goals of New Jersey's State Development and Redevelopment Plan (a guide for state investment, based on the principles of Smart Growth), which are, essentially, to revitalize existing cities and towns and encourage new suburban development where necessary in compact forms, in order to curb sprawl and conserve scarce open space.

To raise public awareness about the opportunity to leverage the state's investment in public school construction to implement both the State Plan as well as the Abbott reforms, the New Jersey Office of State Planning (OSP) initiated the Communities of Learners Campaign. This program sought to stimulate a statewide conversation about an expanded vision of public schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how they fit into New Jersey cities and towns. The campaign operated through conferences, symposia, outreach, technical assistance, and small grants—offered through the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program, targeted to Abbott districts. As a result of the short-lived campaign (2000-2002), New Jersey became a test bed for

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participatory planning for schools as centers of community—more broadly, efforts to engage the public in an integrated process of school reform, school design, and community building.

This report describes two exemplary projects seeded by the Community of Learners Campaign: in Perth Amboy and in Plainfield. What contributed to the successes achieved in each case? What were the impediments? Hopefully these lessons will inform policy makers, practitioners and advocates in New Jersey and elsewhere, in advance of state funding.

## Methodology

The report presents findings based on action research. The author of this paper served as a member of the OSP staff from January 2000 through January 2002, and provided leadership for the Communities of Learners Campaign and grant program. After the OSP and this grant program were eliminated in February 2002 as part of a reorganization of state government, I assumed the role as director of the Perth Amboy project. My role in Plainfield shifted to participant observer.

Perth Amboy and Plainfield are well suited for comparison as they similarly situated in the system of Abbott districts: both communities were founded in the sixteenth century by English settlers; they are equidistant from New York City (from Times Square it is 31 miles to Perth Amboy and 34 miles to Plainfield); about the same size (Perth Amboy is four square miles and Plainfield is six square miles); and have about the same population (numbering 41,967 and predominantly Hispanic in Perth Amboy and 48,374 and predominantly Black in Plainfield).

The report begins with a brief historical overview of how school finance reform and state planning evolved in New Jersey as overlapping and interactive trends. Next, the report describes how the Communities of Learners campaign and the Community School Smart Growth Grant Program came about, as the necessary backdrop for the case studies, which follow. The final section presents findings from the case studies, and recommendations based on these findings.



## Background: Schools and Smart Growth

The history of the school finance equity lawsuit, known as the Abbott decision, is well known, as is the history of state planning in New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> Less well understood is how school finance and land use reforms evolved through overlapping and mutually interactive processes. It is only against this historical background that it is possible to fully appreciate what was achieved in the case studies profiled in this report, as well as obstacles to change.

### The Democratic Ideal of Education: Paideia

The Abbott package of reforms and New Jersey's state plan are both grounded in state constitutional guarantees of liberty and equity that reflect the ideals of Progressive Era reformers like John Dewey.<sup>2</sup> The image of the ideal democratic community that captured their imagination has inspired civic innovation ever since it originated as an archetype in fifth century Athens. The role of education in the ancient Athenians' civic ideal lies in their concept of *Paideia*, which "is to enable members of a community to discuss with each other serious matters of common interest requiring joint decision-making and action" (Barker, 1998). While the democratic ideal of education "may seem remote of execution" Dewey observed in *Democracy and Education* (1916), it is a "tragic delusion except as the ideal more and more dominates our public system of education."

Dewey sought to realize the democratic ideal of education captured by the concept of *Paideia* in touting schools that serve as social centers. This new social form soon became an important motif in the new field of city planning, then known as civic design, notably, in Clarence Perry's concept of the neighborhood unit. As a sociologist Perry addressed how the design of a residential neighborhood centered on a school could foster active citizenship among a diverse immigrant population (see Perry, 1929). Clarence Stein and Henry Wright applied Perry's concept of the neighborhood unit in their design for Radburn, New Jersey, a planned community partially realized in 1929. Their colleague, architectural and social critic Lewis Mumford (1938, p. 471) promoted this approach to civic design in his classic *The Culture of Cities*, which hailed the "school as community nucleus."

Idealistic planning principles did not guide New Jersey's growth however. As has been well-documented federal policies and programs homeownership from the 1930s through the de facto if not deliberate pattern of residential



encouraging  
1950s contributed to a  
Site plan Radburn, New Jersey

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segregation. This pattern became deeply etched in New Jersey where southern blacks migrating north along Interstate-95 began to settle around the state's booming manufacturing cities in the 1940s. With the postwar exodus of the white middle class to the suburbs the state's growing black population turned out to be essentially trapped in these cities, where the shrinking tax base could not maintain or upgrade already overcrowded schools and other public facilities (see Massey & Denton 1993, and Blackwell 1999, inter alia).

### **The Urban Crisis and State Planning in New Jersey**

In the early 1950s a small group of policy makers began to pay attention to the growing crisis in the nation's cities. This group included Dr. Leonard Duhl, at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and Paul Ylvisaker a young program officer in the Public Affairs department at the Ford Foundation (see Lemann, 1988). Ylvisaker convinced the Ford Foundation to support what came to be known as the Gray Areas program, a comprehensive approach to improving the physical, social and economic conditions of poor urban neighborhoods, engaging local citizen participation. Ylvisaker later recalled that a key factor in the success of the foundation in launching this new philanthropic approach was “the ability of two major departments (public affairs and education) to work together.”<sup>3</sup> The ideas of Ylvisaker, Duhl and their colleagues provided the template for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s and the international healthy city movement in the 1980s (see Flower, 1993).

Paul Ylvisaker helped wage the War on Poverty in New Jersey under the direction of Governor Richard Hughes (who Kennedy helped elect in 1961). Hughes appointed Ylvisaker as the first Commissioner of a new state agency, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), established in 1966 to bring together state and regional planning, housing, and antipoverty programs. But just as Ylvisaker started his new job in the summer of 1967, civil unrest exploded in Newark and then Plainfield. Through his handling of these riots and their aftermath (famously standing down the heavily armed national guard about to enter Plainfield) Ylvisaker gained the political capital and trust that enabled him to mobilize state resources for community based development initiatives such as street academies, job training, health centers, and new and rehabilitated housing (see Brach, 1995).

Ylvisaker then proposed the creation of a state planning commission, with regulations to force municipalities to consider the regional impact of local land use, and to forbid discriminatory zoning—an usurpation of the state's deep rooted tradition of home-rule. “We in New Jersey are going to try something that will eject me from office almost certainly” he predicted, and in fact he was fired when a Republican, William Cahill, was elected governor in 1969. Ylvisaker's subsequent professional moves—after two years teaching Public Affairs and Urban Planning at Princeton, in 1972 he became dean at the Harvard Graduate School of Education—highlights the transit of ideas from state

<sup>1</sup> On the history of state planning in New Jersey see [www.nj.gov/dca/osg/smart/chronology.shtml](http://www.nj.gov/dca/osg/smart/chronology.shtml). On the history of the Abbott litigation see the website of the Education Law Center at: [www.edlawcenter.org](http://www.edlawcenter.org).

<sup>2</sup> See Rebell, M. “Education Adequacy, Democracy and the Courts.” at [www.accessednetwork.org](http://www.accessednetwork.org)

<sup>3</sup> As cited in Paul Ylvisaker Biographical Profile at: [www.cof.org/files/Documents/Awards/Ylvisaker/Ylvisakerbio.pdf](http://www.cof.org/files/Documents/Awards/Ylvisaker/Ylvisakerbio.pdf).

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government to the academy, and between the academic disciplines of planning and education at this time.

### **Judicial Remedies: Mount Laurel and Robinson v. Cahill**

In the early 1970s, with both federal and state government stepping back from activism in the War on Poverty, the New Jersey Supreme Court signaled its willingness to address inequities in school finance and zoning—both legacies of localism—in two landmark decisions. In 1973 in *Robinson v. Cahill* the court ruled that paying for schools through the property tax discriminates against property poor school districts, by denying children in those districts the “thorough and efficient education” guaranteed in the state constitution. In 1975 in what is known as *Mt. Laurel I* the court ruled that the use of zoning to exclude low-income housing was unconstitutional. Both the *Robinson* and *Mount Laurel* decisions “exalt state power over local control to remedy asserted deprivation of constitution or statutory rights” explains John Pittenger (1989, p.171), and in doing so establish the link between the school finance and land use reform movements. What remained to be worked out was the connection between the court-ordered remedies. This became clear over the next two decades, as trends in education and planning once more converged on the concept of community schools.

In *Mount Laurel I* the court ordered each of the state’s 516 municipalities to provide a regional “fair share” of low and moderate-income housing. Governor Byrne directed the DCA’s Division of State and Regional Planning to include an assessment of municipal affordable housing obligations in a State Development Guide Plan already being prepared (to qualify for federal “401” planning funds). But neither the court order nor the state plan had the force to guide a more equitable pattern of regional development as the completion of the final segment of I-287, a ring road that circumnavigates metropolitan New York, triggered a wave of development in the 1970s that transformed central New Jersey dairy farms into suburban towns and office parks. Then elimination of the federal “401” planning program further weakened state influence over local land use decisions. Lack of funding led the DCA to abolish the Division of State and Regional Planning in 1981.

That same year, frustrated by deepening disparities between rich suburban and poor urban districts, the Education Law Center (ELC), a public interest law firm, sued the state in *Abbott vs. Burke*, charging that the school funding formula crafted by Governor Byrne in response to the *Robinson* decision was still inadequate.

### **Linking School Finance and Land Use Reform**

The court agreed to hear the *Abbott* case in 1983, the same year it issued an opinion, known as *Mount Laurel II*, that designated the State Development Guide Plan as the vehicle for assessing each municipality’s fair share of affordable housing to assure consistency of housing development with the state’s regional planning goals. We can see the court’s actions as two facets of a single policy theme—linking school

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finance and land use reform and involving the state in planning for schools and communities to remedy regional inequities.

In 1986, with passage of the Fair Housing and State Planning Act in response to Mount Laurel II, New Jersey became the first state with an affordable housing policy and one of the first with acknowledged need for growth management. The legislation created a State Planning Commission (SPC) staffed by an Office of State Planning (OSP), with the mandate to prepare and adopt a State Development and Redevelopment Plan (herein referred to as the State Plan) through a participatory process called cross-acceptance, to ensure input from all levels of government and the public. The SPC initiated the first cross-acceptance process in 1988.

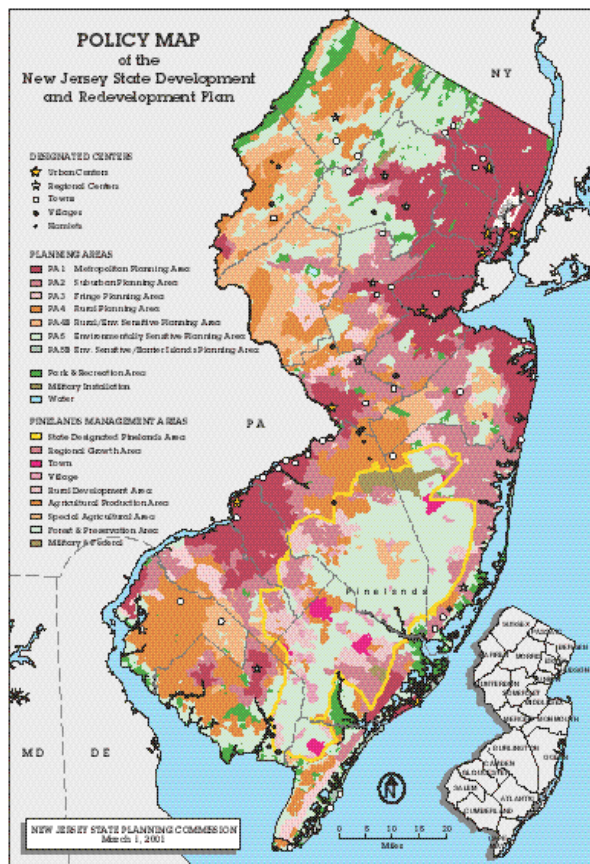
But by then the rebound of the economy in 1984 had triggered another wave of growth (in which New Jersey outpaced the nation), fueling sprawl that deepened the “savage inequalities” marking conditions of children and families in wealthy, predominantly white suburbs, and those in poor, predominantly urban and minority communities (Kozol, 1991). In this context—and in parallel with growing ecological awareness—the state Supreme Court agreed with the ELC’s argument that a combination of factors including “disparate funding and programs, inadequate education, high poverty and low property wealth” produced “unconstitutional education.” Then in 1990 in *Abbot II* the court ruled not only that a constitutional education includes educationally adequate facilities, but also, “depends to a significant extent on the money spent for it, and on what that money can buy—in quality and quantity—and *the ability to innovate.*”

To comply with the court’s order for immediate parity in foundation funding and supplemental programs for children in the thirty designated “special needs” school districts then-Governor Florio signed the Quality Education Act (QEA) and raised taxes to pay for it. In 1992 Florio appointed Dr. Larry Leverett to oversee implementation of the QEA as Assistant Commissioner and Director of Urban Education—an institutional acknowledgment of the distinctions between urban and suburban districts and the need to connect what goes on within schools to what takes place in the surrounding neighborhood.

That same year, 1992, the SPC adopted the first State Plan. With no regulatory authority the State Plan “provides a context, a vision and process” within which state agency plans or local master plans “can be developed and implemented to achieve commonly derived goals.”<sup>4</sup> Its goals are to revitalize existing cities and towns and encourage new suburban growth where necessary in compact patterns to curb sprawl and conserve open space.

*A constitutional education “depends to a significant extent on the money spent for it, and on what that money can buy—in quality and quantity—and the ability to innovate.”*

*Abbott II, 1990*



New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan 1990

As one strategy to achieve these goals, the State Plan envisions schools that serve as community centers, and directs municipalities to: “Integrate school facilities planning with neighborhood and community wide planning and development;” as well as “Make the most effective use of existing school facilities; ... and locate new school facilities to serve as focal points for ...development.”

At this same time influential educators conceived of a corresponding view for school improvement. Notably Ernest Boyer, then director of the Princeton-based Carnegie Foundation for the Improvement of Teaching, envisioned “a neighborhood of learning” including networks of parks, and proximity between schools and cultural institutions such as libraries, museums and zoos, as well as school facilities that could house programs of the “learning neighborhood.” Similar ideas had been considered too radical for practice when proposed in the 1970s by theorists such as Paul Goodman and Ivan Illich and the architect Christopher Alexander, but Boyer asserted “I do believe the children of this country are ready to be inspired by a larger vision.”<sup>5</sup>

But implementation of Abbott lagged due to inadequate state funding, as the court ruled in 1994, the inaugural year for Governor Whitman, who rode a tide of voter anger over tax hikes to defeat Florio. Over the next few years a dialogue played out between the court, the Whitman administration (whose political base was firmly in the wealthy suburbs) and the state legislature (also predominantly suburban) over whether and how to respond to the Abbott mandates.

### Renewal of Urban Schools and Communities

In 1997 this dialogue took a new turn, when Governor Whitman proposed the Core Curricular Content Standards (CCCS) to define an adequate education as guaranteed in the state constitution. The court upheld these standards, and directed the Commissioner of Education to devise commensurate standards for educational facilities. However, in 1998 in *Abbot V*, the court called for Whole School Reform, which as noted above involves the comprehensive redesign of an entire school engaging the participation of the entire school community—a bottom up approach somewhat at odds with standards based reform.

At the same, in the beginning of her second and final term, Governor Whitman began to set the stage and climate that facilitated integrated planning for urban redevelopment and improvements to urban schools. For one thing she established the Urban Coordinating Council

<sup>4</sup> The New Jersey State Plan is online at: [www.state.nj.us/dca/osg/plan/stateplan.shtml](http://www.state.nj.us/dca/osg/plan/stateplan.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> See Dr. Ernest Boyer’s 1995 report from The Carnegie Foundation For The Advancement of Teaching, *The Basic School: A Community for Learning*.

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(UCC) staffed by the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority in the DCA, to target state resources for redevelopment to urban neighborhoods with the greatest need — which are primarily Abbott districts.

In 1998 both Plainfield and Perth Amboy applied for UCC designation. This involved forming a Neighborhood Empowerment Council charged with developing a comprehensive strategic plan through community forums. Ironically, in a Republican administration the DCA under the direction of Commissioner Jane Kenny revived the progressive planning legacy of Paul Ylvisaker's tenure there, thirty years earlier.

"There's a new attitude to do something," Thomas Jannarone, director of urban affairs for the New Jersey Association of School Administrators said in an interview at the time, adding "but it's born out of a relationship that for years has been adversarial."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As quoted by Drew Lindsay. 1998. "New Jersey Special Report." *Education Week on the Web*. Online at: [www.edweek.org/reports/qc988/states/nj-n.htm](http://www.edweek.org/reports/qc988/states/nj-n.htm).



## Communities of Learning

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By January 2000, it was only a matter of time before the New Jersey legislature would authorize funding to build new and repair dilapidated schools in poor urban districts, in response to the state Supreme Court's historic ruling in the decades-long suit known as *Abbott v. Burke*. A team of planning and design students from MIT under the direction of Professor Roy Strickland were already testing Ernest Boyer's "neighborhood of learning" concept in two Abbott districts, Union City and Paterson, and expanding on them. "Use Abbott funds to revive New Jersey's cities" Strickland urged in an Op Ed in the *Star Ledger* in December 1999. "Why build schools in splendid isolation when they can serve as agents for community rebuilding, job growth and private investment?"

*“Why build schools in splendid isolation when they can serve as agents for community rebuilding, job growth and private investment?”*

Strickland's Op Ed caught the eye of Herb Simmens, Executive Director of the Office of State Planning (OSP). The OSP did not figure among the state agencies directly concerned with the Abbott reforms. But Simmens was gearing up for the next round of cross-acceptance—the participatory process to ensure public input on the first revision of the State Plan. He felt the time was right to educate the public, including public officials, about the opportunity Strickland highlighted: to leverage the state's investment in school facilities to achieve the goals of the State Plan to revitalize existing cities and towns and curb sprawl. He assigned this job to a new staff member, this author.

Under these conditions new programmatic ideas germinated in the margins of state government, while the process of hammering out policies for Abbott school construction and the divvying up of responsibilities among the key actors played out.

### Reconnaissance and Networking

We began with reconnaissance and learned that in 1992 there had been a groundbreaking initiative nearby, when the Architectural League of New York and the Public Education Association sponsored the New Visions for New York Schools design competition to influence the first major school construction program in that city in a long time. (Through that competition Roy Strickland's innovative ideas first gained public attention.)<sup>1</sup> Rosalie Genevro, Executive Director of the Architectural League, shared what they had learned and suggested we contact Mark Robbins, director of design at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (and an architect who had entered the competition).

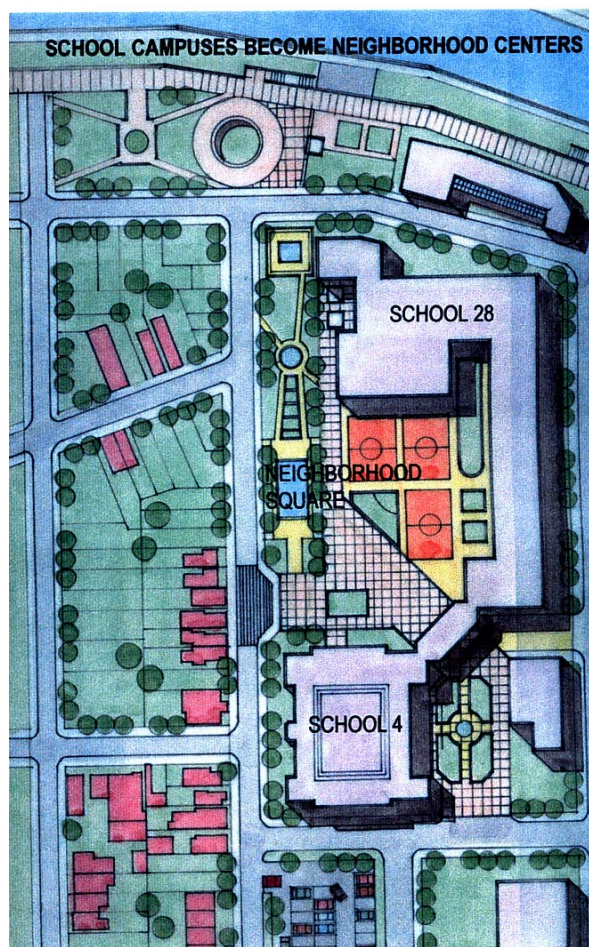
Robbins had just established the New Civics Works program at the NEA, to sponsor national design competitions for public buildings

<sup>1</sup> See Genevro, R. (Ed.). (1992). *New Schools for New York: Plans and Precedents for Small Schools*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

and places, and school design was a high priority in then President Clinton's policy agenda. "That which is honored in a country is that which will be cultivated there," USDOE Secretary Riley, quoting Plato, had declared in 1999, adding: "Our attention to quality design of our schools will show the importance we place on an emphasis on learning for all Americans."<sup>2</sup> The NEA was supporting a design competition for two public elementary schools in Chicago in conjunction with a Mayors Institute on City Design focused on urban schools. Robbins encouraged us to consider sponsoring design competitions in New Jersey as a way to have an impact on Abbott school construction, thus planting the seed of the idea that took root in Perth Amboy (see case study).

Meanwhile we invited Strickland, who we knew through school friends, to make a presentation on his approach, which he calls Neighborhoods for Learning, at the OSP office. This meeting, in March 2000, served as the occasion for bringing together a host of people from other state agencies— including the Economic Development Authority (EDA), the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS), the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority (NJRA), the Treasurer, and the Council on the Arts, and the Department of Education (DOE) — whose work involved urban schools and neighborhoods. Strickland's presentation impressed this group, which consisted mainly of middle managers but included those in a position to act. Their enthusiasm translated directly into action, largely thanks to Maureen Hassett, an aide to DCA Deputy Commissioner Anthony Cancro and Commissioner Jane Kenny.

On Hassett's recommendation, Commissioner Kenny invited Strickland to repeat his presentation for the Chief of the Governor's Office of Policy and Planning and other cabinet officers responsible for the pending Abbott school construction program. That meeting, which took place in April, paved the way for Kenny to propose a Community School Program to be undertaken by the OSP



Detail of Neighborhood for Learning plan for Paterson NJ prepared by Roy Strickland and MIT students Turid Horgen, Ashna Mathe, Gail Vittori, Geraldine Ramos, Jung Fu Zhu, Kiran Mathe, Sabina Suri, Tracy Dyke, and Timothy Jon.

<sup>2</sup> "US Department of Education, American Institute of Architects, AARP Call for Federal Support of School Construction." ALAWON: American Library Association Washington Office Newslines. 8:106. Oct. 15, 1999.

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and NJRA. This new initiative—which would support a planning process to involve local stakeholders in the development of schools in their neighborhoods—would complement the Urban Coordinating Council (UCC) program (see above) as well as the new Smart Growth Planning Grant program, administered by the OSP, a \$3 million annual appropriation to assist local efforts to incorporate State Plan recommendations. These state officials were a bit wary of including this new agenda and group of players — planners — in the school construction program but at least did not shoot down the trial balloon Kenny had launched.

The Governor did not provide new funding for the proposed Community School Program, but the OSP now had permission to convene informal meetings of the interagency group, which came to be called the Community School Task Force and launch what was dubbed the Communities of Learning Campaign, to support a statewide conversation to come up with a new vision for schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how they fit into New Jersey cities and towns.

### **Outreach**

One thing possible to do without new funding was to mobilize the resources of area planning and design students and faculty to help local groups plan “neighborhoods of learning.” Professor Barry Jackson, a former colleague at the School of Architecture at New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) responded immediately to our inquiry. His undergraduate architecture students that spring were designing a new elementary school to be built in the midst of a neighborhood slated for redevelopment, in advance of the Abbott program, in Newark, the largest city and school district in the state. In conjunction with the design studio OSP design staff worked with Dale Caldwell, then Executive of the Newark Alliance (and now Deputy Commissioner of the DCA) to organize a partnership between the city, school district and other stakeholder groups to apply for a Smart Growth Planning grant to coordinate a plan for the redevelopment of the neighborhood with the school design process. But fractious local politics derailed that effort.

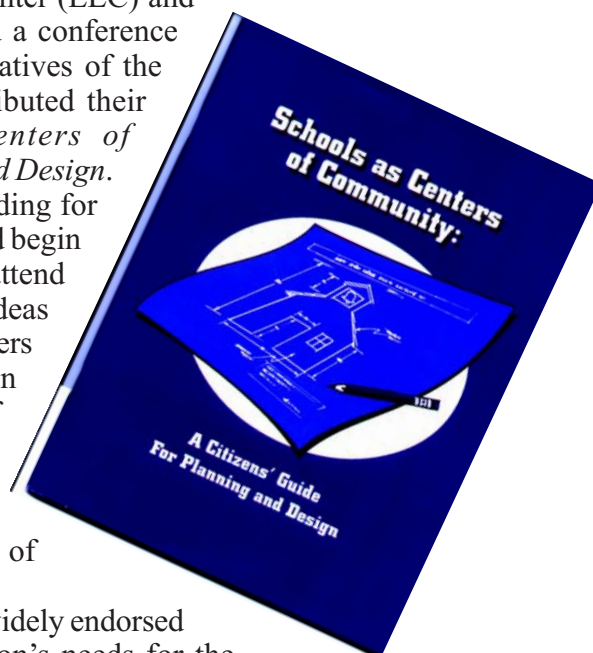
Clearly we needed to identify communities that already were engaged and/or would be receptive to collaborative community-school planning. James Nichols, then director of the school facilities division of the DOE, and another former colleague from NJIT, suggested three Abbott districts: Union City, which received national attention for its school improvement efforts; Plainfield, where Superintendent Larry Leverett was implementing a broad vision of community schools district-wide; and Perth Amboy, where Superintendent Pablo Clausell (also the president of the Urban Superintendents Association) served as an articulate champion for the Abbott reforms. We reached out to Leverett and Clausell, since Union City already had the benefit of help from Strickland and his colleagues at MIT.

In the meantime, Commissioner Kenny used her influence and the reward of additional Smart Growth Planning Grant funds, to convince the City of Trenton and Trenton Board of Education to partner

on a planning study centered on the new schools to be built there with Abbott funds. Over the next eight months OSP design staff worked closely with Bill Valocchi, a planner for the city, to develop an RFP to produce a Community Schools Master Plan — the first in New Jersey. Both this RFP and the eventual plan (produced by Strickland in association with ICON, a Boston based urban design firm, served as a model for several subsequent grantees.

### Schools As Centers of Communities: A Citizens Guide

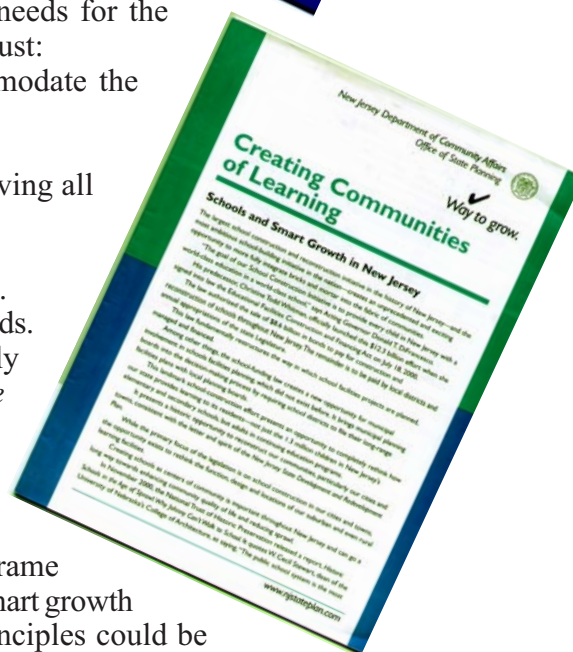
Then in May 2000 the Education Law Center (ELC) and the Public Education Institute (PEI) organized a conference on Abbott school facilities at which representatives of the US Department of Education (USDOE) distributed their newly published report: *Schools as Centers of Communities—A Citizens Guide to Planning and Design*. (With the end of the court battle over state funding for Abbott facilities in sight, state agency staff could begin to work with the ELC, the litigant, or at least attend their events.) *The Citizens Guide* summarized ideas discussed in a national forum on Schools as Centers of Community, convened by the USDOE in conjunction with the American Institute of Architects in 1998. The *Citizens Guide's* emphasis on linking school reform with facility design and community building resonated with the mission of the Communities of Learning Campaign.



The *Citizens Guide* introduces a set of six widely endorsed design principles for schools to meet the nation’s needs for the 21st century, namely, such learning environments must:

1. Enhance teaching and learning and accommodate the needs of all learners.
2. Serve as centers of community.
3. Result from a planning/design process involving all stakeholders.
4. Provide for health, safety and security.
5. Make effective use of all available resources.
6. Allow for flexibility and adapt to changing needs.

The Communities of Learning Campaign simply adopted these design principles and the *Citizens’ Guide* itself— “a practical introduction to a process for engaging all educational stakeholders in the process of planning schools that more adequately address the needs of the whole learning community.” We now revised a white paper that had been in the works to frame the discussion of statewide planning for schools and smart growth in New Jersey in terms of how these six design principles could be adapted or already were being applied in the state, examples that our audience could relate to.



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In June Cancro authorized Stuart Bressler, Assistant Director of the NJRA and I to plan a Governor's conference on this topic. The binding of the Abbott reforms and the State Plan in a single cluster of policy ideas was nearly complete, albeit focused on facilities.

### **Launch of the Abbott School Construction Program**

In July 2000, in a move truly as momentous as the new millennium, Governor Whitman signed into law the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act (EFCFA), launching what had become a \$12.3 billion effort, an expanded schools construction program including aid—at least 40% of eligible costs—for all 618 districts in the state. This bill fundamentally restructured the way in which public school facilities projects are planned, managed, and financed in New Jersey. The legislation designated the Economic Development Authority (EDA) as the state agency responsible for construction and financing all projects in Abbott districts and those non-Abbott districts eligible for 55 percent or more state aid. The EDA had to create a whole new department to handle this massive undertaking.

With the enactment of the EFCFA we agreed to cosponsor the conference on Abbott implementation and Smart Growth with the ELC, PEI, and the Coalition for Our Children's Schools—now allies with the informal Community School Task Force. They were already planning a workshop on Abbott facilities for early January, and more importantly, they already commanded the respect of urban educators, whereas the sincerity of the state on this issue was still suspect. A committee including Bressler, Joan Ponessa of the ELC, Mark Lohbauer of the EDA, and myself met monthly, over coffee and outside of the office, to plan the conference, and cultivate our new relationship.

#### **Community School Smart Growth Planning Grants**

Then, in August 2000 Commissioner Kenny announced the establishment of the Community School Planning Grant program funded with a set-aside of \$500,000 from the Smart Growth grant allocation. The new program targeted assistance at Abbott districts that were also one of the 14 designated UCC communities—which included Perth Amboy and Plainfield. The application packages included a copy of the DOE *Citizens Guide*, effectively adopting these guidelines as part of the ideology of state policy.

And so it was that the Communities of Learning campaign got underway in just eight months, operating at several levels: to build a consensus for the community-based school agenda among policy makers, the education community and civic leaders; to provide technical assistance and planning grants in support of local initiatives; and to strategically coordinate state agency partners and the resources of planning and design academics and professionals.

The following case studies of Community School Smart Growth Planning projects in Perth Amboy and Plainfield must be understood as part of this larger effort to literally build a community of learners sustained through various networks of support and exchange.

# Partnership with Perth Amboy

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2000

Roy Strickland presentation at OSP  
Launch of Community of Learners campaign

OSP Outreach: Offers technical assistance

Educat. Facilities Construction & Financing Act  
Community School Smart Growth Grant program

Columbia Urban Design Studio

Meeting with NEA Director of Design to  
discuss school design competitions

Decision to partner with OSP and apply for DCA and  
NEA funds for high school design competition

2001

Abbott Schools and Smart Growth Conference  
First round of Community School Planning Grants

Submit grant applications

DCA/EDA/DOE MOU support for School Design  
School Design Symposium

Community School and NEA Grants awarded

Participate in School Design Symposium

2002

OSP closed  
Community School grant program terminated  
EDA rejects proposed site for HS

Issue RFP for Community School Planning Study

New project director

Hire planning consultant

Kick off meetings with faculty

Public Forum, guest speaker from Plainfield

Exec. Order 24: creates SCC, supports  
community input on school site selection and design

Communittee Steering Committees meet  
Planning consultant recommends Delaney Homes site

New Principal begins work

Faculty plan academies with Community Research

Report as reference material

DOE proposes changes to Abbott program, cutbacks

Develop revised program model with academies

2003

SCC agrees to support competition

Renegotiate competition terms with SCC

Mayor brokers land swap for site

DOE approves revised program model

Competition Stage I announced

Superintendent retires.

Competition Stage I Jury.

Finalist site visit

Faculty receive SLC planning grant

Community-School Partnership for Adolescent

Health receives operational support

2004

SCC negotiates contract with winning team

Finalists proposals on display at high school

Stage II Jury selects winner

Community-School Partnership for Adolescent  
Health receives planning grant

# Partnership with Perth Amboy

Far Right:  
Perth Amboy  
Redevelopment  
Areas

(Jacobs Environmental Inc.)

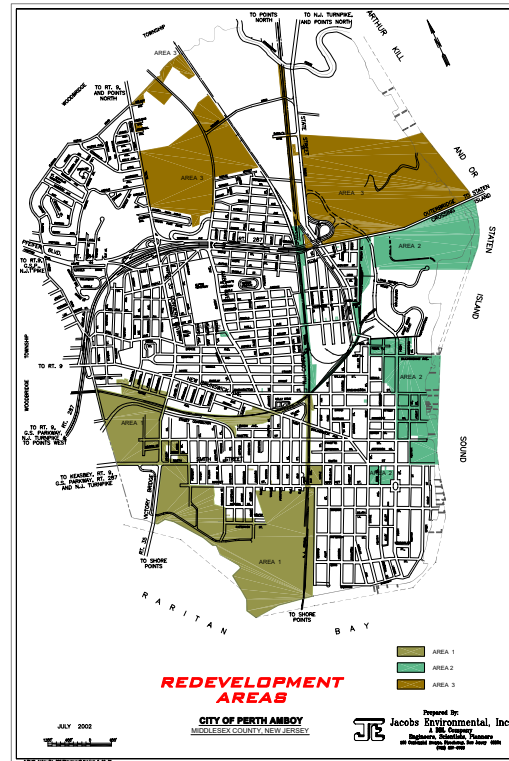
Top: Fishing on the  
Perth Amboy  
waterfront.

Middle: Ma & Pa  
stores are the  
backbone of this  
city of immigrants'  
economy.

(photos by Ellen Shoshkes)

Bottom: Perth  
Amboy was once a  
center of the  
structural terra cotta  
industry.

(photo by Marcella Massouput).



Perth Amboy



Located at the confluence of Raritan Bay and the Arthur Kill, Perth Amboy has been a port of entry ever since English settlers arrived there in the early seventeenth century. Perth Amboy's spectacular waterfront, fine harbor and proximity to New York City have stimulated both its historical development and its emergent renaissance. In the nineteenth century the city, which occupies a 4.4 square mile peninsula, hosted thriving manufacturing and maritime industries. By the mid-twentieth century however, this industrial base had begun to decline. By the 1970s, the city lay dormant: the boat basin closed, the shoreline eroded, buildings and barges decayed, and stores vacated. Local officials ignored the situation and allowed conditions to deteriorate.

A change in leadership, marked by the election of Joseph Vas as Mayor in 1990, served as a catalyst for the city's revival. Vas focused redevelopment initiatives on the city's major asset, its waterfront as well as the need to revitalize the business district. In 1997 Mayor Vas launched FOCUS 2000, an ambitious plan to reclaim 700 old industrial sites, comprising more than 1,000 acres, nearly one-third of the city, mostly along the waterfront.

But to ensure that all Perth Amboy residents maintain a high quality of life and benefit from the new development will require substantial improvement in education. In 2000 only 23 percent of Perth Amboy residents over 25 had more than a high school education. Thirty percent had less than a 9th grade education. The schools face the additional challenge of educating a large population of low-income, first-generation immigrant families. Nearly 70 percent of the total population and 86

<sup>1</sup> Source: US Census 2000; School Report Card, NJDOE; Abbott School Profiles, Education Law Center

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percent of public school students are Hispanic. Spanish is the first language spoken at home for 76 percent of the student body.<sup>1</sup> Another challenge facing the schools is overcrowding. Perth Amboy grew faster than both the Middlesex county and the state, increasing by 12.7 percent from 41,967 in 1990 to 47,303 in 2000 (US Census). The number of students in the district has grown by more than 50 percent since 1992.

### **School Construction in Advance of State Funds**

When the state Supreme Court designated Perth Amboy as one of the thirty “special needs” districts in the Abbott case in 1990, the state Department of Education (DOE) determined that the district’s most serious problem involved facilities. Perth Amboy residents did not wait for additional state aid to address their facilities needs, however. In February 1992 the Board of Education launched a comprehensive building program that included replacing four, century-old elementary schools with two new schools; the renovation and expansion of a 30 year old elementary school; and the gut renovation of two middle schools, one built in 1922 and the other in 1906. The district financed these improvements by raising \$45 million from a lease-purchase transaction, and \$32 million from the proceeds of bond sales.

In 1998, when Perth Amboy’s school construction program was about 75 percent complete, the state agreed to make all Abbott school buildings safe and educationally adequate. In the Long Range Facility Plan (LRFP) all districts had to submit to the DOE the district added a new high school and new elementary school. Built in 1972, to house 1,600 students, and currently housing over 2,000, the high school was bursting at the seams. But when the state took over the district’s facilities projects, all work stopped, pending funding and implementation of the Abbott construction program. Around that time Perth Amboy hired Dr. Pablo Clausell as Superintendent of Schools. He also served as an articulate spokesman for the Abbott reforms as President of the New Jersey Urban Superintendents Association.

### **Outreach: Forming the Partnership**

OSP design staff approached Clausell in the early spring of 2000, to encourage the district and the city to apply for a Smart Growth grant to integrate planning for schools with the city’s redevelopment initiatives. Clausell agreed this made sense, as long as the Mayor was on board. A few weeks later at a meeting of the Urban Superintendents and Urban Mayors Associations on this topic Clausell introduced us, and our proposal to Mayor Vas. They agreed to develop a proposal. But both men had a lot on their plate, and neither had the staff to take on this project. When the OSP design team expanded its role beyond outreach to providing technical assistance, Mayor Vas was willing to see what we could do together, and directed us to work with Helga Crowley, the new Executive Director of the Perth Amboy Redevelopment Agency. Crowley welcomed this addition to her portfolio, which included overseeing a revision of the Master Plan.



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## Urban Design Studio: Fall 2000

Luckily, Brian McGrath, who taught urban design at Columbia University agreed to have his fall studio class work in Perth Amboy. McGrath, together with Mark Robbins had produced one of the cited designs in the New Visions for New York Schools competition (see above). By the time classes began DCA Commissioner Jane Kenny had announced the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program. With this new focus, the studio served multiple purposes: to investigate the linkage between planning for new schools and redevelopment in Perth Amboy; to solidify the partnership between the city, the school district, and the OSP, and help the partners develop a Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant proposal.

At the kickoff site visit the students heard from representatives of the city and the district. To begin with City Business Administrator Don Perlee described a \$600 million mixed-use waterfront redevelopment project on 49-acres, and Mayor Vas's concern that it might siphon activity away from the city's main shopping street. He asked students to consider how neighborhood based development around schools could counteract this effect. Austin Gumbs president of the

Board of Education explained that while he hoped the investment of Abbott funds would offset the danger of gentrification he wanted to encourage innovation. "Do not simply replace what is there," he urged. "We want to build a showcase for a new kind of educational plan." As the students prepared to leave, Clausell presented Crowley, whom he was meeting for the first time, with a copy of the district's LRFP, which she had not known about— signaling how the design studio served as a learning experience for the local partners as well as for the students.



Perth Amboy  
Redevelopment Agency  
Executive Director  
Helga Crowley and  
Business Administrator  
Don Perlee make a  
presentation the city's  
existing and planned  
redevelopment  
initiatives to Columbia  
urban design students.

### Idea for a school design competition

Concurrently the Communities of Learning campaign sharpened its focus on school design. In late October, member of the core interagency team met with Mark Robbins of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) to discuss the idea of sponsoring a series of national school design competitions with funding from NEA's New Civic Works and DCA's Community Schools Smart Growth Planning grants. All concerned liked the idea, but the deadline for both grants was imminent.

Thanks to the urban design studio and Robbins' encouragement the seed of this idea took root in Perth Amboy in December. At the final review of the urban design students work, Robbins, who was a guest critic, "sold" the idea to Crowley and Perlee. Clausell and Gumbs eagerly agreed to sponsor a competition, and choose the new high school, which had to be built first so the rest of the district's construction program could proceed. Clausell felt the competition would provide a way to

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demonstrate preferable alternatives to the state’s “one size fits all” educational program models, which reflected outdated ideas about teaching and learning. This was so important he said, “Because what we build now will affect the next 50 – 100 years.”

With just a few weeks to submit a letter of intent to the NEA we came up with a two phase project:

**Phase One:** The \$50,000 Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant would support a community-based planning process to crystallize a vision for the new high school and how it fit into the city’s physical, social, cultural and economic landscape, thereby maximizing benefits for Perth Amboy as a whole.

**Phase Two:** The \$50,000 New Civic Works grant would support a national competition for the new high school, based on the planning guidelines and design program established in Phase One. The goal was to discard the state’s “cookie cutter” model, and rethink what a high school for the 21st century should look like, while accepting the limitations imposed on Abbott funds.

### Incubation and Proposal Development

While waiting to hear about funding, the project incubated as the Communities of Learners Campaign evolved. One milestone along the way occurred in January, 2001 with the conference on “Smart Schools, Smart Growth and Abbott Implementation” cosponsored by the interagency team with the Education Law Center and other advocacy organizations. Despite problems with Abbott implementation—Clausell declined to participate due to frustration in working with the state—the conference signaled that a broad consensus had formed around the concept of community schools. Buoyed by this success the OSP proposed a series of events focused on school design, including a symposium on school design, and an exhibition and catalogue of submissions to the proposed Perth Amboy school design competition.

In February the NEA invited the Perth Amboy partnership to submit a full proposal. In turn, this proposal now gave voice to the expanded ambitions of the Communities of Learners campaign, asserting that the design competition would not only enhance the quality of the design of the new high school in Perth Amboy, but more generally, serve as a model that could be replicated in other New Jersey cities and towns, as well as in other states undertaking similar school construction programs.

We now enlisted Ralph Lerner, an architect with extensive experience with competitions, to join the team. Lerner recommended we conduct a two-stage competition. Stage one would be open to all licensed architects. A jury would select four finalists to proceed to stage two, and receive an honorarium to complete their submissions. This meant we needed to persuade the EDA, the state agency charged with building the school, to agree to negotiate a contract for the design of the high school with the winner of the competition. And we needed to find additional funding for the honoraria.

The EDA was a logical source for funding since the competition

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would advance new facility project partly through the preliminary design phase, for which state funds were allocated. The amount needed, \$100,000 matched the other grants, and represented a fraction of the fee allowed for this portion of design work. EDA Executive Director Caren Franzini agreed to write a letter of support for the competition, although couched in general terms. At the time, based on the DCA's firm commitment to the project, it seemed reasonable accept this level of uncertainty and keep the process moving forward. .

In September the NEA announced the award of the grant to support the Perth Amboy high school design competition. Robbins made the announcement—and news of a special round of funding for school design competitions—at the state sponsored Symposium on School Design in October, 2001. Among the other speakers featured were Julie Eizenberg, winner of the Chicago school design competition, Jeanne Nowaczewski, the director of that competition, Steven Bingler, author of DOE's *Citizens Guide* who was then working in Plainfield (see case study), and Roy Strickland, who was then working in Trenton (See above.) Nowaczewski invited Coleman Genn, an advisor to the Chicago competition, who had been involved in launching the small schools movement in New York, and who was now at the Center for Educational Innovation, the think-tank that devised and helped implement the academy model in Paterson. In this way the statewide Communities of Learning hooked up with national networks of expertise and support that would further nurture local initiatives and learn from them.

### **Phase I: Community School Smart Growth Planning Study**

After a year of development the community school planning study began in November 2001. Genn offered to guide us through the start up period. “The high school has not seen a lot of change in curriculum in decades,” Gumbs explained to him. “The faculty is old and tired, not receptive to new ideas. But because the city's landlocked it will be hard to find a site for large high school. We may *have* to do something new, like build a campus with satellites connected by core facilities, and move some learning activities right downtown.”

“There are places that are doing pieces of all this,” Genn assured him and asked. “Can you get a cadre of enthusiasts involved, to get started?” “The problem is having someone to be in charge of getting it done,” Gumbs acknowledged. Clausell was supposed to appoint someone, since the current principal, who was on the verge of retirement, was not the right person to lead the school into the future.

Genn advised: “The Board and Superintendent and Mayor have to sit outside the process, be in a position to receive reports. That frees the planning process to move ahead. It has to be layered carefully. Kids, teachers, have to be free to dream without ‘daddy’ looking over their shoulder. Once you have the pieces—parents, Mayor, community, the teachers union, and superintendent—gather all these people for a dreaming session. To get the ball rolling, press the Superintendent to designate who will be running this process. The leader designated by the Superintendent must meet with him and the Mayor, so he or she is

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empowered. Another thing to remember is that the dreams must be contained within a semblance of reality. And the process must be democratic.”

We tried to follow this advice. But time was now of the essence, . The partners felt some urgency to lock in state funding as well as pressure, partially self-imposed, to show results. The project thus proceeded on several levels, leaving unresolved for the time being who would run the internal school redesign process, and site selection.

### Organizing the Project Team

An important first step was to form an **Executive Committee** to advise and guide the planning process, as well as to serve as partners in the realization of the new high school. It included members of the Mayor and Superintendent’s cabinets, representatives of the state agency partners and civic leaders, such as the executive director of the local branch of the YMCA, the CEO of the local hospital, the superintendent of the county vocational school and a senior police officer.

Next we had to hire an **urban planning consultant** to map and recommend how to make full use of community resources and to identify strategic opportunities, such as possible alignment of academies with regional economic growth trends. But in issuing an RFP we found there to be a dearth of qualified consultants as this was a new type of project. The list boiled down to Strickland and a young firm known as D+U, whose partners taught urban design at Columbia. In December both submitted proposals. But Strickland, who had started a new job in Michigan, withdrew from consideration. With some hesitation due to their lack of experience, the contract went to D+U, assuming that OSP staff would provide oversight and technical support, if needed.

Lerner, our **professional advisor**, spelled out the team’s immediate task: “What I need is for you to articulate the goals and objectives of the competition with clarity,” said Lerner. “Here is our educational philosophy. Here is our community. Here is the site. Here are our goals. Here is a building program sympathetic to our goals and objectives.”

### An End and a Beginning

At this time the Communities of Learners campaign was advancing on many fronts, including a second round of Community School planning grants, and discussions with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) on leveraging these grants to incorporate its new campaign to combat obesity by promoting “active living.” The prospect of a new administration led by a Democratic Governor who had campaigned in support of implementation of the State Plan and the Abbott reforms provided additional cause for optimism. So it came as a shock when Governor James McGreevey eliminated the OSP in



A meeting of the Perth Amboy High School Design Competition Executive Committee.

(photo by Mark Lohbauer)

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February 2002, ostensibly to deal with the budget crisis. The new administration reorganized and renamed a smaller office, but terminated the Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program, initiating instead, a Smart Future grant program focused on implementation.

As the old adage goes an end is also the beginning. Since I was already serving as the de facto project manager for the Perth Amboy partnership, the partners agreed I should continue in that role as a consultant to the city. With a designated leader the pace of the project quickened. And additional funding became as some foundations stepped in to leverage the community school planning partnerships that had been seeded to achieve related programmatic goals. Notably, the Perth Amboy team received funding from the RWJF as a pilot in its new Active Living program area, to take advantage of the design competition to raise awareness about how the design, site planning and ongoing programming of the high school could encourage healthy life-styles and more routine physical activity, to combat the obesity epidemic. And the Rockefeller Foundation commissioned this action research to inform its work in states in the midst of school finance reform.

The recognition from prominent foundations and infusion of funding galvanized the team's resolve to persevere in the face of uncertainties due to the upheaval in state government, the state budget crisis, and more prosaically, the need to find a site for the high school.

### Site Selection

Three sites had been proposed by the district for the high school, but only one, the location of the former National Lead factory, was compatible with the city's redevelopment plan. The DOE had approved this site, which was on the waterfront in an industrial zone, but in mid-March the EDA had concluded a feasibility study that found it would take too long and cost too much to clean that land for use as a school. Jack Rodecker, the district's business administrator, sat down with Mike Keller, the city's Director of Economic and Community Development, and D+U, and compiled a new list of nine potential sites. D+U spent the next few months evaluating these alternatives.

Meanwhile Clausell advised the team to keep moving forward with the visioning process. The momentum from public participation in planning the new high school from the "inside-out" would help build community support for a site, which was sure to be controversial given the limited options.

### Visioning: An Inside Out Process

With the new focus on the inside out planning process, the high school principal, Ben Rotella, began to play a crucial role, as the gatekeeper to the faculty and the facility. First he convened a meeting of district supervisors, to announce the design competition project and introduce the planning team. With a little encouragement from Gumbs and Clausell they poured out their ideas and hopes and concerns, based on past disappointments. "The dream that is emerging here is a dream for the town: a campus that is in community service, a partnership,"

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Genn told the group, and noted. “But there are two other resources to tap into: teachers and students.” Rotella’s game-plan to engage faculty and student input was to form committees.

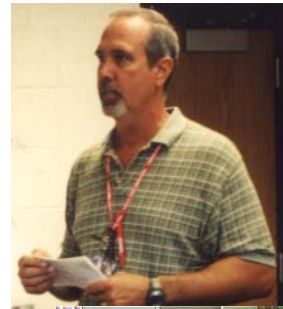
Rotella then arranged for us to meet with the School Management Team (SMT), which includes faculty, staff and members of the community. “The competition is an opportunity to not just put up four walls and a ceiling, but a different kind of school,” Gumbs told them. “The project team’s concern is what goes on in the competition. It is your job to focus on what we want for the education of Perth Amboy’s kids. This is a real opportunity to think out of the box and not be constrained by the DOE’s cookie cutter model.”

Genn talked to the SMT about the small schools. “This does not necessarily mean building several smaller buildings, which is not realistic in an urban area,” he explained, “but creating schools within a school or ‘houses’ is not enough. A real small school learning community has to have autonomy over hiring, budget and curriculum. The first step is to come up with a shared vision. If it were up to me, I would use five questions to guide this visioning process: What do you want to do? How do you want to do it? What do you need to do it? How will you know when you’ve done it? How will someone else know when you’ve done it? This meeting is an organizational meeting. The SMT is the nucleus of the reorganization.”

Rotella appointed more faculty to the SMT to engage in this process, but the committee dropped the baton that had been handed to them. One contributing factor may have been that the Board of Education was trying to lure Rotella out of the principal’s office and into a newly created position: Administrator for Development of Secondary School Building. Their negotiations played out throughout the spring, and Rotella’s sense of being sidelined perhaps colored the messages he sent to the faculty, encouraging skepticism. In addition union representatives had their own procedural concerns. Given growing tensions between the faculty under Rotella and project team, Clausell suggested “Let’s see what the faculty come up with.” And so we organized a volunteer Community Steering Committee (which nonetheless included many teachers and staff) which worked in parallel and became the actual nucleus of change.

### **Community Steering Committee**

Recruitment of volunteers to join the Community Steering Committee got underway with notices in the district newsletter and the local paper, outreach to local organizations, and a Community Forum in late April. At this event Brian Osborne, Special Assistant to the Superintendent of Plainfield Public Schools shared lessons from the large scale community engagement process to underway there (see Case Study). In this way, the cross-fertilization of ideas continued after the demise of the Communities of Learning campaign, through informal networks. A second public forum in Mid-May provided an opportunity for people to air their concerns. While the turnout at public fora was modest, the outreach effort served the purpose of engaging a core group



Chairpersons of the Community Steering Committee subcommittees:  
Clockwise from above:  
Marcella Massopust,  
Greg Vicarra, Ana Cruz,  
and Lou Gumbs.

(photos by Ellen Shoshkes)

of enthusiasts. And since all meetings were recorded and rebroadcast several times on the widely watched local cable channel, the message reached a much larger audience.

Largely in response to lessons being learned in Plainfield, the public engagement process in Perth Amboy was a short, highly focused effort. Volunteers joined one of four subcommittees, each studying a particular issue considered strategic for the future of the high school: Innovative Learning Environments; Special Themed Academies; Healthy Schools and Life-styles; and Community Learning Centers. The subcommittees met weekly, reviewing relevant research, best practices, and model programs. The subcommittee chair attended the SMT meetings to coordinate the work of the two groups. Each subcommittee organized their work a bit differently, but with the goal of making recommendations to the Board of Education at its last meeting before summer break.

### Subcommittee Recommendations

The **Innovative Learning Environments** committee reviewed trends in teaching and learning and school design. They developed a shared vision of their ideal community of learners “as caring and nurturing; a democratic empowering safe haven.” The design of the facility, and “learning spaces (formerly known as ‘classrooms’),” should embody this vision, support project-based instruction, encourage creativity and reflect the heritage of the community.

The **Special Themed Academies** committee studied the pros and cons of small schools and recommended in favor of offering students the opportunity to explore careers in seven themes, aligned with community resources: performing and fine arts; environmental sciences; health sciences; journalism and communications; culinary and hospitality arts; business/information technology and public safety and civic affairs.

The **Community Learning Center** committee conducted a survey in English and Spanish of nearly 100 parents, adult students, and faculty, to prioritize a list of 12 popular community oriented features. This survey assigned the highest priority to school learning centers, followed by a

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combined school and public library, parent center, day care center, community health clinic and a career center, in that order.

The **Healthy School and Life-styles** committee made an array of recommendations concerning the cafeteria/nutrition; a health profession career path; healthcare; fitness/wellness; daycare; athletic training; and a healthy school environment, and stressed that wherever possible programs in these areas should be integrated with the curriculum.

At the presentation to the Board of Education in late June one person in the audience paid particular attention: Rozalia Czaban, then a middle school principal, who later that evening won the nod to become the new principal of the high school. Czaban began work in July and brought a breath of fresh air to the planning process.

### **Site Evaluation Report**

Meanwhile the planning consultant completed an evaluation of the nine new alternative sites in terms of 12 criteria (safety, location, environment, soils, topography, size and shape, accessibility, utilities, cost, availability, and public acceptance). This analysis identified three acceptable sites from which the final choice could be made: a public housing complex, a vacant furniture factory, and the former site of a petrochemical plant. The site evaluation report, submitted in August, recommend the 15-acre housing complex, known as Delaney Homes, which while not ideal, was the best alternative. The Housing Authority had already decided to demolish that complex and redevelop the site.

With Board of Education and DOE approval, the next step involved the required EDA feasibility study. The EDA advised the district that this could take up to six months. To expedite the process the district wanted to hire a consultant to do the work, but was unsure how to proceed. This confusion mirrored the general frustration with the Abbott school construction program. “The process is just too damn slow,” Clausell said in an interview.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reorganization of the State School Construction Program**

In the response to widespread criticism of the state for holding up school aid to the Abbott districts, in late July 2002 Governor McGreevey issued an Executive Order creating a new agency, the Schools Construction Corporation (SCC), as a subsidiary to the EDA, to oversee and streamline the program. Along with the agency came a new cast of characters as well as the loss of former allies. This gave new urgency to the need to reconfirm the EDA/SCC’s support for the competition. At least the Executive Order also affirmed state support for community schools and public participation in the school planning, design and site selection process—which the competition would showcase.

The influence of Mayor Vas and Dr. Clausell within the McGreevey administration certainly helped in getting the SCC to the table to renegotiate the terms of SCC support, but the effective collaboration of the city, schools and community groups also figured into the political calculus. Thanks to the no-nonsense attitude of Al McNeill, the first CEO of the SCC, negotiations were successfully completed by October

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Dunston McNichol. 2002. “State criticized for holding up aid.” *Star Ledger* 5/30.



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2002. The process of bringing key stakeholders together to rally SCC support for the competition also helped forge a strategy for site acquisition from the reluctant Housing Authority. The city agreed to a land swap, designating the Housing Authority as the redeveloper of city-owned land along with some county-property (although finalizing this deal took nearly two more years).

### **Planning the Educational Program**

Now scheduling for the design competition set the pace, with the goal of announcing Stage I in spring 2003. In the fall (2002) Czaban led the faculty committee, invigorated with an infusion of young new members, in initial planning for the academies. At the same time the faculty had to prepare three year operational plans for the state DOE. In doing this long term and short term planning they relied on the Community Research report prepared by the planning team. This report analyzed conditions within the district, the school and the community based on a synthesis of existing studies, plans, and assessments, and an inventory of resources available to support the educational goals of the high school. It also identified career pathways aligned with regional economic growth trends. These trends, along with the faculty's assessment of its strengths determined the choice of academies.

By early December a plan gelled calling for a stand-alone ninth grade and five academies: Civics Law and Public Safety; Business; Industrial Arts and Information Technology; Environmental Health and Food Sciences; Liberal Arts; and Visual and Performing Arts and Communications. Corey Vaughn, one of the young faculty recruited by Czaban, designed a diagram to illustrate their plan, signaling how thoroughly the faculty embraced the idea. The enthusiasm of the new faculty team carried over to their application for a planning grant from the federal Small Learning Communities program. Vaughn, who wrote the grant proposal, credits the extensive planning in preparation for the competition and the competition itself as an important factor in their success in winning this highly competitive grant on their first attempt.

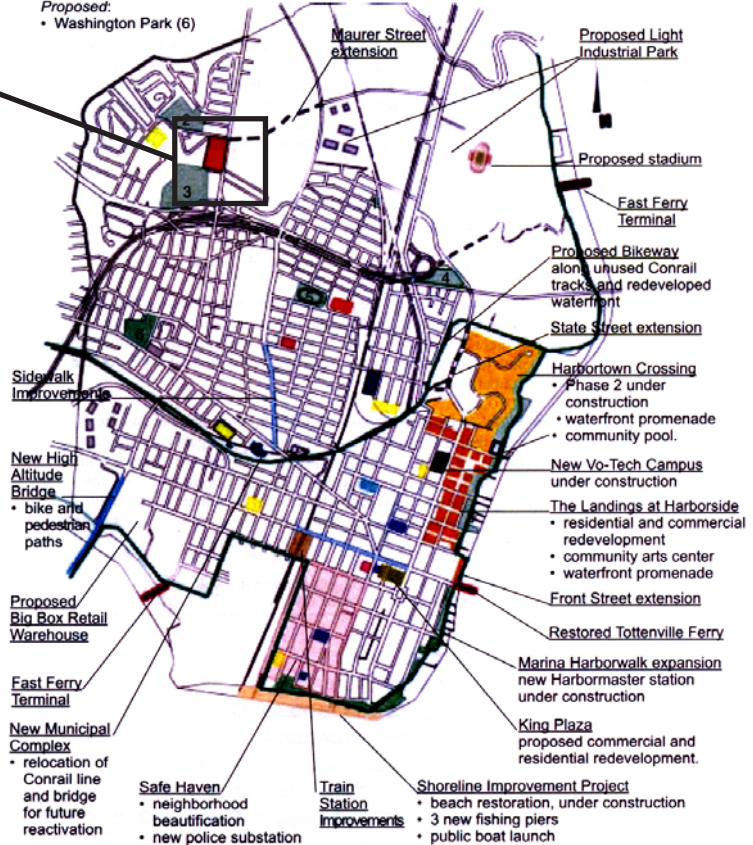
The next step was to translate the faculty and staff's wish list into a space program acceptable to the DOE based on the Facilities Efficiencies Standards and Perth Amboy's particular needs, as documented in the Community Research Report. Mark Wagner, our liaison with the DOE, a member of the Executive Committee, and an architect, worked with the team for a week to accomplish this. The self-imposed deadline abetted the process, as did Wagner's commitment to the project's goals. Wagner also helped the team expedite the DOE review process, which became complicated by the last minute involvement of the district's architect acting as an intermediary. With verbal approval from the DOE in April the competition could begin.



**Summary: Existing and proposed redevelopment projects**

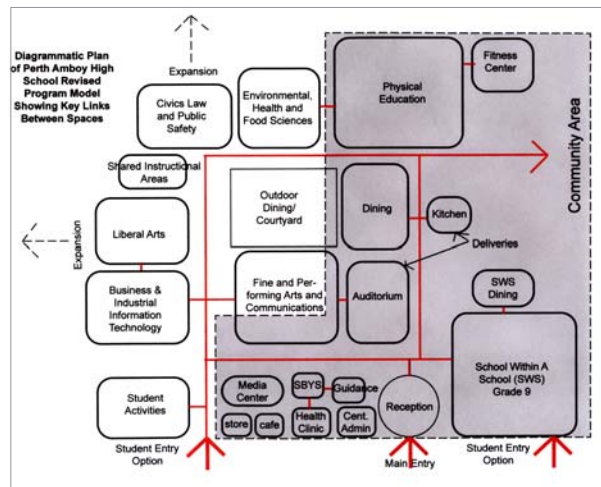
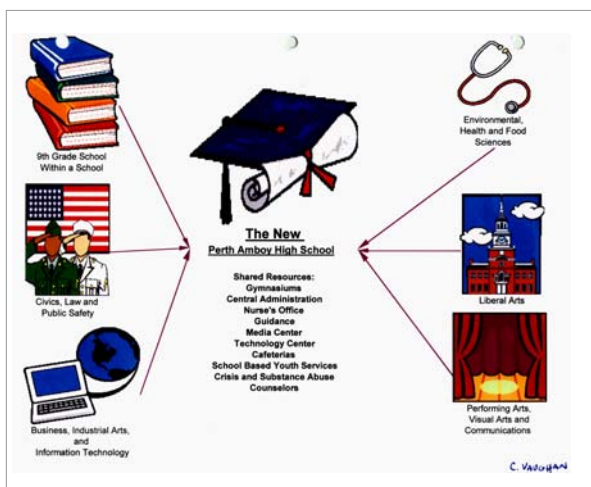
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|--|--|--|
| <b>Park Improvement Projects</b><br>• Francis Street (1)<br>• Dalton Park (2)<br>• Youth Sports Complex (3)<br>• Rudyk Park (4)<br>• Water Stadium (5) | <b>New Schools</b><br>■ High School<br>■ Elementary School<br>■ Early Childhood Center | <b>Existing and Renovated Schools</b><br>■ Middle Schools<br>■ Elementary Schools<br>■ Early Childhood Centers<br>■ Adult School |
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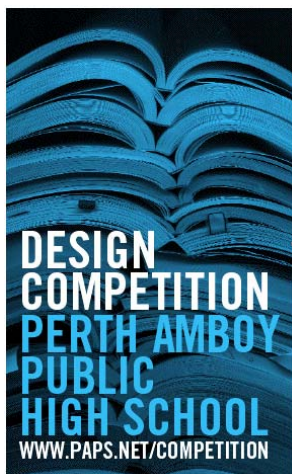
- Proposed:**  
 • Washington Park (6)



Clockwise from above: The site for the new high school; Summary of existing and proposed projects in Perth Amboy for the Community Research Report; Diagram of adjacencies for new highschool design; Diagram by PAHS Technical Coordinator Cory Vaughn illustrating academy concept.

Design Competition: Community Research Report





Poster advertising the design competition, by Glen Cummings, Michael Rock, 2x4 Graphic Design

## Phase II: The Design Competition

Once launched, the design competition imposed a relatively predictable timeline, marked by several public events that help build interest and excitement, culminating in a celebration that crowned an achievement many people could take pride in—not the least of which was support for cutting edge design for a new type of high school.

Two hundred architects registered to enter the competition in May 2003, including some of the top names in the field. In August the task of selecting four finalists fell to a jury that included architect luminaries Henry Cobb, principal of Pei Cobb Freed and Partners, New York City, Toshiko Mori, chair of the Harvard Design School's Department of Architecture, Michael Hayes of Harvard, and Carlos Jimenez from Houston, in addition to Gumbs, Vas and Bernard Piaia, of the DOE. (Clausell was not on the jury since he had announced he would retire in June, and the district would not select his replacement until then.)

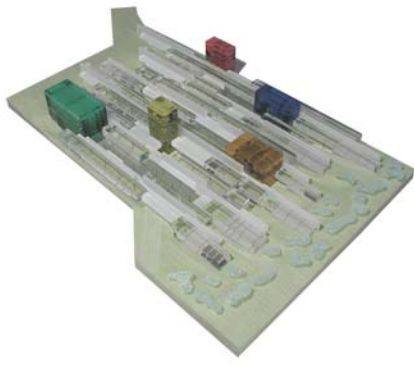
The four finalists—Fox and Fowle of New York, John Ronan Architect of Chicago, Morphosis of Santa Monica, and Gabriel Feld of Boston—attended a site visit in September. After a full day in which the architects heard from the various committees and other faculty, staff, students and residents, they then had a chance to explain their vision for the new school at a public forum. The event had a celebratory feel that energized all involved, especially a group of students enlisted by the School Based Youth Services Program (SBYS), housed at the high school (which had taken on leadership of the Healthy Schools and Lifestyles initiative and formed a Community School Partnership for Health). A second site visit for Peter Eisenman, the first alternate, who entered the competition after Feld withdrew, had the same effect.

Excitement intensified with a month-long exhibit of the finalists' anonymous proposals in the high school lobby during February 2004. Open to the public and widely advertised, the four visionary schemes provoked lively discussions at the school and in local papers. Attention from the national and regional design press heightened the community's appreciation of the significance of their effort to set a new standard as to how schools should be conceived. Invited to submit their comments the public responded: 260 comment forms were conveyed to the jury. Public opinion overwhelmingly favored one proposal, which happily corresponded with the jury's choice as well—John Ronan. Jack Rodecker, now superintendent, made the stunning announcement of Ronan's upset victory over his world reknown competitors to a packed crowd at the Raritan Bay Yacht Club. The crowd immediately embraced the 40 year old as one of their own, reveling in the knowledge of how much this project would mean as much for his future career as it would for the future of the community. This moment meant much more than the selection of an architect behind closed doors would have. It signified great hope in the future, and what both the community and the young architect could become.

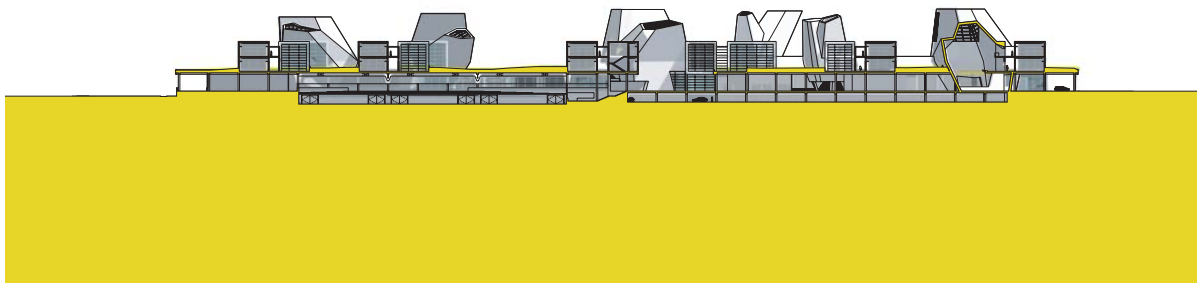
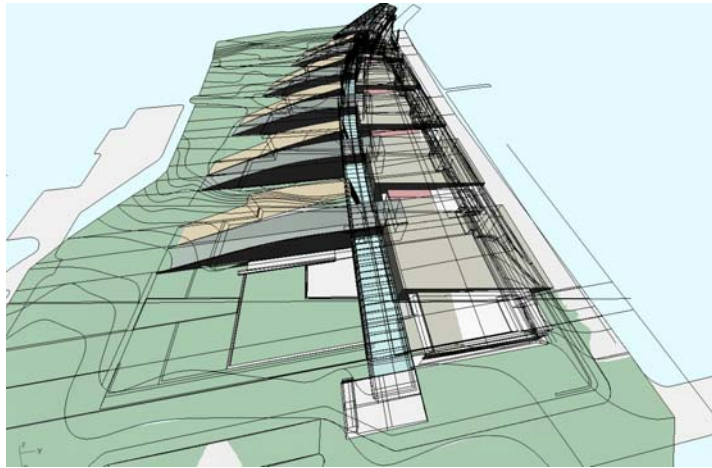


Top left: Students and faculty discuss one of the models. Top right: a student team interviewing Superintendent Jack Rodecker for a show to be broadcast on PATV Channel 34. Center: middle school students viewing the display at the high school; Bottom: faculty staff and students meeting with finalist Peter Eisenman during the site visit.

(Photos top left and below Ellen Shoshkes, others courtesy PATV).



The four finalists: from the top, John Ronan Architect, the winner; Eisenman Architects, second place; Fox & Fowle Architects; and Morphosis. (Images courtesy of the architects)



# Plainfield Community School Master Plan

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2000

Roy Strickland presentation at OSP  
Launch of Community of Learners

Educat. Facilities Construction & Financing Act  
Community School Smart Growth Grant program

OSP Outreach

City and School Collaborative formed to develop grant proposal

2001

Abbott Schools and Smart Growth Conference  
First round of Community School Planning Grants

Community School planning grant awarded  
Participate in Abbott Schools and Smart Growth Conf.

Public Forum to kick off “SMART planning study”

Bingler Workshop: Planning Schools as Centers of  
Communities

Issue RFP for Community School Master Plan

School Design Symposium

Concordia hired as planning consultant

Phase I begins—form Planning Team

Participate in School Design Symposium

Apply for Round II Community School planning grant

Recruit and train facilitators

Phase II begins—form Steering Committees

Monthly Steering Committee meetings through May

2002

OSP closed

Community School grant program terminated

Special meeting to discuss acquisition of swing space

Exec. Order 24: creates SCC, supports community  
input on school site selection and design

Monthly Steering Committees through December

DOE proposes changes to Abbott program, cutbacks

Superintendent Leverett resigns

Steering Committees present final recommendations

2003

Board of Education accepts recommended site for  
middle school, rejects site for elementary school,  
eliminates new elementary school from LRFP.

Design of new middle school begins without commu-  
nity input.

2004

# Plainfield Community School Master Plan



Map from City of Plainfield Website.



Scottish Quakers arrived in Plainfield in what is now western Union County in the 1680s. By the mid-nineteenth century Plainfield had become a summer resort for wealthy families from New York City. The town's growth as a middle class commuter suburb between 1870-1920 produced a rich architectural legacy, today preserved in nine historic districts. By the mid-twentieth century Plainfield had become a manufacturing center. However, suburbanization, along with the deindustrialization, drained Plainfield of the white middle class, resources and jobs. In the summer of 1967 the growing tensions in Plainfield's poor black neighborhoods erupted in riots, which scarred the community for decades, as stores and residences remained vacant, and crime soared. Compounding this stigma, political squabbling since the 1970s "repeatedly stalled numerous initiatives to redevelop the city."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, with its gracious homes, accessibility to New York and suburban jobs, and cultural amenities—such as the Plainfield Symphony, the oldest community orchestra in the state—Plainfield has retained its appeal, and was named one of the state's "most livable cities" in 2001, by *New Jersey Monthly*.

Today Plainfield's population of 47,829 is culturally diverse (62 percent African American, 26 percent white and 12 percent Hispanic and Asian. Yet nearly all of the public school enrollment is of minority descent (76 percent are Black, and 23 percent are Hispanic); and poor (two-thirds qualified for free and reduced-price lunches in 2000-2001).<sup>2</sup> Thus while not one of the original districts named in the Abbott litigation, Plainfield met the standard of need and was added to the list in 1996.

<sup>1</sup> Gluck, . 2003. "Plainfield Unites Under McWilliams." *The Star Ledger*. June 15.  
<sup>2</sup> US Census 2000.  
<sup>3</sup> Leverett, L. "Engaging the Public: a Superintendent's View." *Edutopia.online*. George Lucas Educational Foundation. Online at; <http://www.glef.com>.

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## Planning for Community Schools in Advance of Abbott

Dr. Larry Leverett became superintendent of schools in Plainfield in 1995. He described the school district then as “a place that was spiritually fractured, focused on the negative, effortless in its response to student and community needs ... and plagued by misinformation and defensiveness.” Leverett relished the opportunity to implement the reform policies he had helped craft as DOE Director of Urban Education and Deputy Commissioner (1992-3) as well as the ideas he had learned, during a subsequent year at the Urban Leadership Development Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). He soon garnered support for a sustained, community based strategic planning effort.<sup>3</sup>

Over the next year and a half over two hundred people worked to come up with recommendations for a five-year school reform agenda. This plan to integrate academic support, social services, vocational, health, recreational and enrichment programs predated by two years the Abbott V ruling in 1998 mandating such a comprehensive approach.

In 1996 Plainfield voters approved a \$34 million school bond referendum to implement this plan and make capital improvements—the first bond measure passed in the district in over 20 years. The district established a Community Planning Process Task Force to guide these improvements and help forge the partnerships to take full advantage of them. The task force made recommendations that affected site selection and design of the new Washington Elementary Community School, which features a primary care clinic run by the Plainfield Health Center. The district opened a clinic in the Stillman Elementary School, in partnership with the nonprofit Communities in Schools, and Managed Healthcare Systems, a for-profit agency, with the Plainfield Coalition, local service providers, as an advisory group. In this case funding was provided by the state’s School Based Youth Services (SBYS) program.

The success of these organizing efforts by education and health advocates inspired members of the City Council to lead their own participatory strategic planning process. This initiative, which began in June 1997, gained momentum when Mayor Al McWilliams was elected in 1998 and was further amplified in 1999 with Plainfield’s designation as an Urban Coordinating Council community (UCC) (see above.) As part of the local UCC program, under the direction of John Brinkley, a Neighborhood Empowerment Council (NEC) including residents, churches, block associations, etc. organized its own series of Community Planning Forums.<sup>4</sup>

This capacity for collaboration proved vital when the district lost its Abbott designation in 1997, due to a ruling limiting eligibility to the original 28 districts listed in the lawsuit. A lot was at stake. That same year the Supreme Court ordered *immediate* parity funding and directed districts to prepare a Long Range Facility Plan (LRFP) in anticipation of state funds for capital improvements. Citizens rallied, lobbied lawmakers, and won reinstatement in 1999.

In preparing the LRFP the district found that the DOE’s standard programmatic models did not satisfy Plainfield’s particular needs for small learning communities. Accordingly the district’s plan capped

<sup>4</sup> The Plainfield Strategic Planning Process Report Presented to the Plainfield City Council, August 31, 1998. Available at: <http://www.plainfield.com/stratplan>.



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enrollment of elementary schools at 400 students, and middle schools at 600 students. This necessitated building one new elementary and one new middle school. The plan also called for reorganization of the 2,000-student high school into four academies. The DOE approved Plainfield's nonconforming plan in July 2000.

### **Outreach: Learning from “Larry’s Vision”**

In spring 2000 having heard high praise of Leverett's farsighted vision of community schools, OSP design staff reached out to meet him and learn more about his work. By the time we met, in September, DCA Commissioner Kenny had announced the set-aside of grants for Community School planning, targeting Abbott districts such as Plainfield that were also UCC eligible (see above).

In an email outlining what he would do with such a grant, Leverett described his “vision of creating a system of full-service schools that builds on the good record of SBYS and include community education programs and services in several schools.... Getting the buy-in from the community through an engagement process of some sort would be necessary to determine whether movement in this general direction is aligned with their needs and interests. The final piece is to develop a model of a Community Education School in ... [the Washington Elementary School]. ... The lessons learned could then inform replication processes as we move forward on the siting, design and program specifications for our seven new schools.” He cautioned: “At this point, this is Larry’s vision and if the vision becomes ‘our’ shared vision, then our SMART proposal would be focused accordingly.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant Proposal**

Leverett convened representatives of the district, the city and the NEC to develop their proposal. The group quickly lined up behind Leverett's vision and submitted a proposal in November that announced the formation of the Plainfield Community School Collaboration: A Community Driven Partnership to Rebuild the City of Plainfield. The proposal outlined an ambitious scope of work, including: an assessment of the Washington School planning process; an aggressive public education campaign and visioning process; development of community school site planning and design criteria for the seven new schools to be built in the district; and application of those criteria in the further development of the design for the gut renovation of the Clinton Elementary School, resulting in “the conversion of a traditional facility configuration of a standard elementary school to the design elements that drive a comprehensive school.” They also proposed “developing the programmatic and service delivery design of the Washington Elementary School.” The DCA awarded Plainfield a \$50,000 grant, the standard amount, although less than the \$75,000 requested.

Leverett now lent his voice in support of the Communities of Learners campaign. As a speaker at the “Smart Schools, Smart Growth and Abbott Implementation” conference in January, 2001 he argued for the concept of full service community schools as part of the framework

<sup>8</sup> Email from Larry Leverett to this author, September 21, 2000.

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for system-wide reform. He inspired the audience with his “strategy for connectivity:” a vision of system-wide change, through an inclusive, participatory process of sharing information. Leverett brought a uniquely well-informed perspective to the statewide conversation. After the conference he attended a Community School Institute at Harvard, where he served on the Advisory Board of the Urban Superintendents Program. In this way, innovative ideas for educational policy and practice circulated through networks linking the academy, state government, and localities—and leadership emerged at all levels.

### **Community School Smart Growth Planning Project.**

The following month the Plainfield Collaboration, now known as the SMART Steering Committee and expanded to include representatives of the OSP, NJRA and EDA, met with two main items on the agenda: first, the need for a communications plan; and second, the need to write an RFP for a reduced scope of work reflecting the smaller budget. Leverett took charge of planning a tier of presentations beginning with a Community Forum in May. The district’s architect, Johnson Jones, had started some “scenario planning” around possible sites and the sequencing of projects. Leverett emphasized “the need to share the thinking so far with full appreciation that is the thinking of the architectural consultant” as well as communicating base line information such as what the \$138 million Abbott school construction consists of; key issues regarding implementation of the LFRP such as the need to find sites for seven new schools and a swing school to allow renovations of Clinton School to begin; some notions of what the LRFP was based on, that is, small learning communities; and how the Smart Growth planning process fit into all this.



### **Defining a Scope of Services**

The task of writing the RFP fell to the SMART Steering Committee. When work on this task lagged, OSP staff sensed that they might benefit from some technical assistance. When queried, Leverett confirmed: “It is necessary that you and your colleagues continue to invest in capacity building around community schools in Plainfield.” We recommended as a model the RFP recently issued for a Community School Master Plan in Trenton, which aimed at the same goal: “to utilize the community school concept to develop a comprehensive framework for siting, designing, and constructing schools as centers for community revitalization and growth.” The Trenton RFP, in turn, was modeled on the USDOE *Citizens Guide for Planning and Designing Schools as Centers of Communities* (see above). With a larger budget than Plainfield had, the Trenton project encompassed seven school sites.

Perhaps modeled too literally on the Trenton model, the scope of work requested in Plainfield’s RFP, issued May 2001 was still unrealistic

Larry Leverett addressing a community forum to kick-off the planning study. (photo by Ellen Shoshkes)

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relative to the funds available. Nevertheless, OSP staff felt it was more important to facilitate the local adaptation of innovative planning ideas, and learning by doing, rather than micro-manage grantee budgets.

The Communities of Learners campaign served as a conduit for introducing innovative ideas to grantees through growing contacts with national networks of exchange. Notably, in March 2001 we participated in a series of panels on Schools and Smart Growth at the American Planning Association's national conference in New Orleans, where we began a conversation with another panelist, Steven Bingler, the principal author of the USDOE *Citizens Guide*. This led to plans for Bingler to present a workshop in New Jersey, co-hosted by the interagency team in early June. At that same time, Leverett was trying to contact Bingler, to interest him in Plainfield's RFP. The workshop brought them together.

### Consultant Selection

Out of the ten firms invited to respond to the RFP, only three responded. A lack of local planners with relevant experience, compounded by the desire among some on the Steering Committee to hire a minority-owned consulting firm limited the field. The committee selected two proposals for further consideration: one from a minority-owned firm based in Atlanta, and the other by Bingler's firm, Concordia, which is based in New Orleans. In a good strategic move, Bingler's team included Joyce Harley, a highly regarded and well-connected Black lawyer, and the executive director of the Coalition for Our Children's Schools, in a strategic leadership role.

Both finalists made presentations to the Steering Committee on July 30. By then it was clear that the budget could not support the scope of services requested. The committee asked the finalists to describe a two-phased approach: 1) what they could do for \$43,000; and 2) what they could do subsequently if more funding became available. Based on this presentation, the committee hired Concordia to execute Phase I, reserving the right to consider conducting Phase II at a later date.

In Phase I, which was expected to take four months, Concordia would collect community data; organize a Planning Committee to spearhead the process; assist the Planning Committee in recruiting seven neighborhood steering committees, each with one hundred members; and develop an action plan for the implementation of the community school master planning process in Phase II which was expected to take eight months and cost about \$500,000. The framework for Phase II would be The Concordia Model, a process developed by Bingler and his partner Bobbie Hill, for engaging large-scale public participation in planning for communities centered on schools, in eight highly scripted meetings.<sup>6</sup>

Some members of the committee were concerned that Concordia's Phase I would not produce much beyond organizing for Phase II. But the group had confidence in the firm based on their national reputation, and were reassured by Harley's involvement. Moreover, Leverett had access to an array of expertise to advise him how to achieve his goals.

<sup>6</sup> "Proposal for Community Based Master Planning Services for The Collaborative: City of Plainville [sic], Plainfield Board of Education, & Neighborhood Empowerment Program," submitted by Concordia LLC, June 22, 2001.



### The Concordia Model®

- Meeting #1: Process overview  
*Establish the nature and scope of the community-based master planning process*
- Meeting #2: Steering Committee Organization  
*Form subcommittees that will work together throughout the remainder of the site selection process and to review any data collected to date.*
- Meeting #3: Innovative Learning Spaces and Steering Committee Work Group  
*Explore current research and trends in educational facility design, and review and continue subcommittee work.*
- Meeting #4: Round Robin  
*Subcommittees share information and participate in a discussion about their opportunities.*
- Meeting #5: Conceptual Design Charrette  
*Formulate preliminary recommendations through a planning charrette process.*
- Meeting #6: Revised Recommendations  
*Integrate community and client feedback about preliminary recommendations.*
- Meeting #7: Draft Recommendations  
*Refine scenarios and prioritize recommendations.*
- Meeting #8: Final Recommendations  
*Present and celebrate final recommendations.*

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For example in late August he invited Joy Dryfoos, an alumna of Plainfield High School, to give the keynote address at the district's Student and Family Support Services Summer Institute, to share her insights on collaborative school-community partnerships. In the addition, Brian Osborne, a doctoral candidate in the Urban Leadership program at Harvard, in a yearlong internship as Leverett's assistant, would take on the responsibility of project coordinator.

### **Community School Planning Phase I: Getting Organized**

Concordia staff launched Phase I began in September by forming a Planning Committee, essentially asking the SMART Steering Committee to recruit new members representative of all stakeholder groups (which here meant more Hispanics and women). Concordia spelled out their charge: "Build a Planning Committee that will engage the community in order to select a steering committee that will map community assets and opportunities to make recommendations to site and build community schools in defined neighborhoods."

In actuality they had to recruit seven steering committees, for each of seven neighborhoods. This derived from Concordia's rule of thumb, that a neighborhood consisted of about 7,000 residents. This meant a city of Plainfield's size (pop. 48,000) would contain about seven neighborhoods. But to divide Plainfield into seven neighborhoods of approximately 7,000 people would be hard to do, since so many different factors, aside from population, could be used: from geography, to ward boundaries, to geographical landmarks. Sensing reluctance, Hill reiterated the importance of this task, since the neighborhoods would serve as a tool for soliciting and tracking participation as well as determining community assets and needs, which could contribute to the design of the schools.

However some people worried that defining seven neighborhoods would raise false expectations that each would get a new school, as there would be seven new schools. Others felt it was unrealistic to try and recruit so many people—700. Each steering committee had to have one hundred members, to support the six subcommittees each would be organized into, according to Concordia's Model: social, cultural, educational, organizational, and economic. But Leverett insisted "we've done this before," referring to the planning process in 1996.

The Planning Committee would have to be concrete about what they were asking volunteers to do and when their work would begin and end. But before setting dates for Phase II, the committee would need additional funding. Luckily, the DCA had announced a second round of Community School Smart Growth Grants, for which Plainfield was eligible. The application process now involved submission of a preliminary letter of intent, due in mid-November, to identify projects with a likelihood of success. The Collaborative submitted a letter proposing to implement "a planning process that culminates in consensus about the locations and designs of seven new schools."<sup>7</sup>

The Planning Committee also had to collect various documents

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and data describing research, information and initiatives regarding the Plainfield community, and send this material to Concordia staff based in New Hampshire, who compiled it in a Community Resource Report. This notebook organized the information in six categories aligned with the subcommittees. Only the two Steering Committees that ended up following the full Concordia Model received notebooks however, which only consisted of an annotated bibliography, as opposed to a synthesis of data and trends, which would have been more useful.

### **New Information New Priorities**

In November, district architect George Jones informed the Planning Committee about his recent meeting with the EDA: “Nothing will be approved to go forward with any new schools unless the district owns the land to build the school,” he reported and urged “putting a deadline on siting schools [to]... help negotiations with the state. They want us to have three sites located.” Leverett clarified that the NJEDA had “delayed taking action for 18 months and now defined a new calendar to put responsibility for the delay on Plainfield.” This lack of clear direction mirrored the widespread complaints about the state’s management of the school construction program. However in this case it reinforced the architect’s recommendation for the public engagement process to focus on site selection rather than design.

### **Proposal for Second Community School Planning Grant**

Invited to submit a full proposal for a second Community School grant the Planning Committee focused the Phase II effort on four priority projects (rather than form seven neighborhood steering committees):

- Clinton Elementary School: planning for educational programs and community use of the renovated facility (the design was fairly “set”) and the temporary “swing” school during construction;
- Plainfield High School: planning and programmatic design of the five thematic academies and for community use of the renovated and expanded facility;
- New middle school: planning everything, from site selection, to the design concept, educational programming, and how the facility will act as a center of the community.
- Emerson Elementary: site selection for the new “companion” school and planning for programs and services for new, smaller replacement school on the existing site.

The second phase of work would begin in January 2002 and conclude the following September, after eight monthly meetings. The proposal requested \$240,000 (half of Concordia’s original fee for seven projects). They were unlikely to receive that amount, as funding for the entire DCA program was only \$500,000. Osborne explained they were thinking big, and felt it could not hurt to lay out their plans.

In December the DCA informally notified the Collaborative they would be awarded a \$60,000 grant, choosing not to quibble over details, such as how this would affect the scope of work. Time was of the essence. In anticipation of the massive turnover that would accompany the new

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Brian Osborn, on behalf of the Plainfield Public Schools, the City of Plainfield, and the Neighborhood Empowerment Council, to Ellen Shoshkes, Office of State Planning, 11/13/01

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administration that would begin in January (the first Democratic governor in eight years), the agency wanted to expedite the awards process, and encumber the funds for the purposes for which they were intended. The Plainfield team had no reason to suspect that the next administration—the Governor elect had made Abbott implementation part of his platform— would not honor the grant, and driven by considerable momentum, proceeded with Phase II.

### Competing Priorities: Worries Over Test Scores

When the Planning Committee met, supposedly for the last time (according to the Concordia Model), in mid-January 2002 many members were preoccupied with Plainfield students' low test scores in math, as reported in the local paper. Because of low test scores the district had been operating on conditional certification since August 2000. Would this impede engaging the community in planning new school facilities?

“Irrespective of everything that is going on, new schools will be built,” Harley argued. “We need to advocate involvement in the SMART growth planning process as a way that community members can make an impact on the quality of education.” She asked them to focus on fund raising to pay for Phase II.

Leverett explained the Board of Education had three options: 1) match the \$60,000 DCA grant and fund Concordia to work on the middle school; 2) contribute \$180,000 and fund Concordia to work on the middle school and the new Emerson school; and 3) do not contribute funds. Phase II began with Concordia only working on the middle school, and training local facilitators to manage the high school and Clinton school projects. A few weeks later the Board of Education agreed to fund Concordia to work on the Emerson school as well.

The district's investment in the planning project registered a vote of confidence in “Larry's vision.” “The schools get blamed, when people see the test scores, and headlines about violence in the schools,” Leverett told me. “But that equation is not wholly true. Kids are not motivated. They learn ‘Being smart is acting white.’ In Plainfield we have a Black mayor, a Black superintendent of schools, Black principals, Black city council, and Black board of education. Why can't we be for something like attacking the achievement gap?” He hoped that the community school planning process would inspire this. “This is a highly unusual mix, council members, clergy, school board members, civic activists and state folks coming together to talk frankly about the need for a shared message, a coordinated effort.”

### Planning Committee Phased Out

As its final task the Planning Committee had to recruit and hire two facilitators per Steering Committee, preferably local residents. This was time consuming and the facilitators literally began their training the day before they started work in February. Concordia staff conducted the training based on their proprietary manual. (The facilitators were obligated to return it at the end of the project, and could not make copies.)

\* As cited in “Plainfield High School Renovations and Additions.” *Building New Schools in Plainfield*. Plainfield Board of Education. 1:1: pg. 5. March 2002.

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The Planning Committee now disbanded. UCC program director John Brinkley argued that they ought to continue to meet to ensure public engagement in all the projects involved in the LRF, if not regularly, then triggered by new information from the state, a need to apply for grants, or to coordinate among projects. Instead Hill urged members to integrate themselves into the Steering Committees.

At this juncture the state agency representatives on the team might have stepped in to voice support for keeping the Planning Committee, now a well seasoned leadership group intact, but Governor McGreevey had disbanded the OSP and threatened to eliminate the UCC program, so the state agency staff had either been fired or were laying low.

## Phase II: Community Steering Committees

Despite concerns about low test scores (or perhaps because of them), the public forum to kick off Phase II was well attended by around 350 people (including many elected and appointed officials). Leverett, who acknowledges using his superintendency as a “bully pulpit,” rallied the audience with one of his mantras: “If you always do what you’ve always done, you always get what you’ve always got.” At breakout sessions attendees chose which Steering Committee to join, which involved signing a contract committing three hours a month in about eight meetings and homework over the next eight months.

The **High School Committee** got off to a running start, as Johnson Jones had already begun work with funding from the bond issue. George Jones explained, “What we have decided is that the school will be divided into thematic learning academies. What those learning environments look like, in terms of both the educational program and the physical space will be largely determined by this community planning process.”\* In February a core group toured the high school, reviewed the architect’s plans and made a list of preliminary recommendations. At the March meeting the committee prioritized this list. However as facilitator Cynthia Slade noted, “every meeting there is a different group of people. It becomes a repetition of the last meeting.”

The **Clinton School Committee**, mainly parents of children in the school, began by doing what Leverett had initially envisioned: studying the Washington Community School to learn what was working and what wasn’t. They toured the school and met with faculty and staff and developed recommendations for programming.

The **Middle School Committee** had the most ambitious goals. “This offers us a critical opportunity to rethink the quality of middle school education in Plainfield,” Wieland explained.<sup>9</sup> The team consisted of a large, dedicated group of volunteers.

The **Emerson School Committee** was a small group which consisted mainly of faculty, since they got off to a late start.

The Middle School and Emerson School Committees followed the Concordia Model, which included exercises to help people think in new ways about “potential learning sites.” But as Smith recalled: “Our group was pretty savvy, and did not want to waste their time with ‘touchy



Members of the High School Steering Committee conferring.

(Photo by Ellen Shoshkes)

<sup>9</sup> As cited in “New Middle School in Plainfield.” *Building New Schools in Plainfield*. Plainfield Board of Education. 1:1: pg. 6. March 2002.



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feely’ ‘get to know yourselves’ type of activities. They were more ‘Give us the information and let us run with it.’”

The Concordia Model emphasizes mapping of community resources. Steering Committee members filled out Community Resource Cards and submitted them to Concordia staff in New Hampshire, who mapped the data using Geographic Information System (GIS) software and posted the maps (in PDF format) on the project website. Concordia’s budget included funding to hire someone to assist the city in the mapping project, but the city did not then have the right hardware. At any rate, given the political turmoil at that time—the City Council had refused to hire the Mayor’s nominees for senior managers and wanted to eliminate the position of the director of economic development—setting up a GIS system was not a priority. This may explain why Concordia’s maps did not include information on the city’s redevelopment projects.

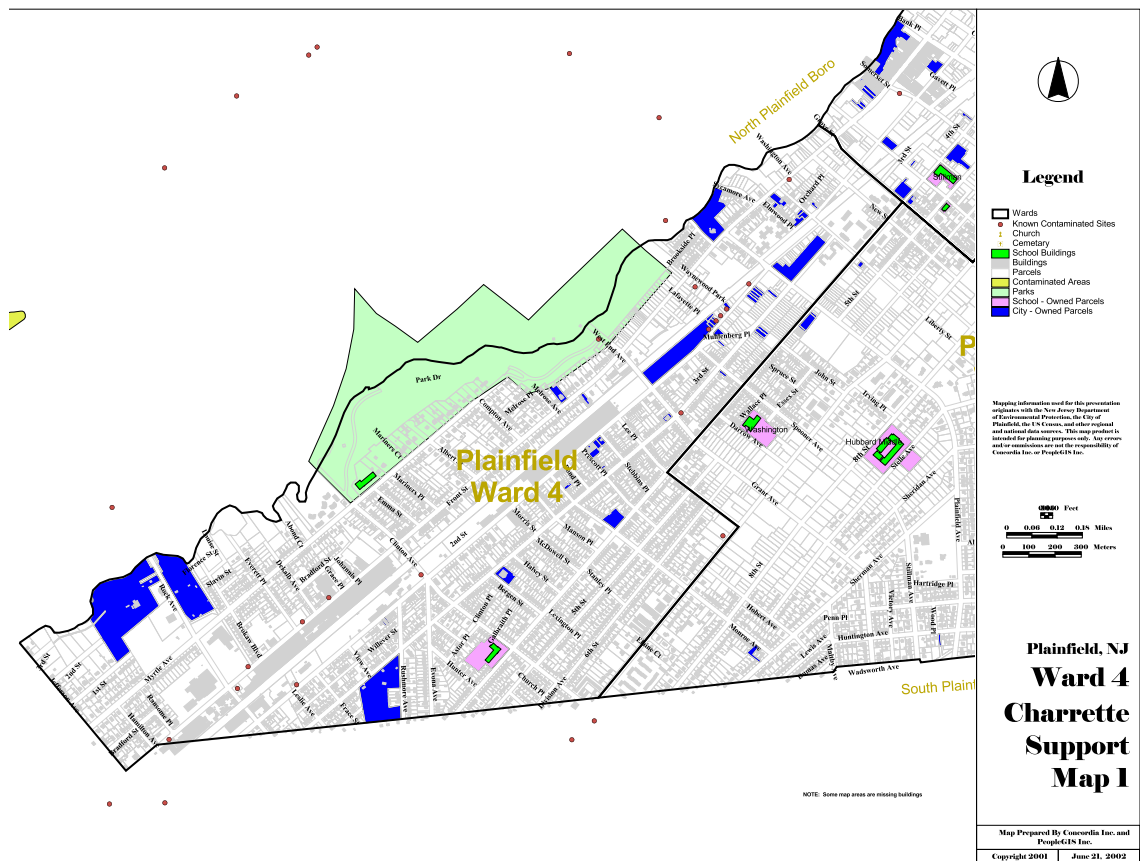
### An Emperor With No Clothes?

In mid-April Osborne commented on the planning process underway: “As a whole, everything looks great, but the city is not really there. If you look too close, the Emperor has no clothes.” Leverett added, “I’m not sure whether we are where I’d like to be, as fast as I want to get there. The [planning] process in Plainfield is too *tabla rosa*.” Osborne added: “Now we need to narrow the focus from the blue sky—the high school steering committee was asking for bowling alleys and retractable roofs over the pool—to teaching and learning.”

However a month later Osborne was optimistic. At a packed special meeting to discuss the use of a former factory as a “swing” site for the Clinton school, he remarked: “Leadership is well distributed now. I’m no longer running the show. For this meeting, I just did the agenda.” The meeting was to discuss whether the district should authorize the EDA to study the feasibility of acquiring the building instead of leasing it, which was not cost effective, due to the extensive renovation required. Leverett, Jones, and Donald Moore, the EDA’s director of School Design (and a Plainfield resident) spoke in favor of the feasibility study, and the potential benefits of a mixed-use development that might include another community school after the swing school was no longer needed.

The Mayor, on the other hand, wanted to minimize the loss of ratables. Wayne Awald, the city’s economic development officer, explained that the former factory was part of the corridor his office was studying for commercial and industrial use, with a DCA “cyber-district” planning grant. The city’s consultants said a school was an incompatible use for that site, which was critical for the redevelopment plan. “We should marry the schools and Cyber district plan, we are competing for the same land!” he said, with some exasperation.

Leverett was thrilled. “This is the conversation we need to have in Plainfield all the time,” he told the group. “Some communities would be having an in your face fight. Never lose the opportunity to celebrate that this is a good dialogue. If we can keep this communication going on, we can solve these problems.”



## Reorganization

Then in July Governor McGreevey issued the Executive Order creating the New Jersey School Construction Corporation (SCC), within the EDA as well as calling for community input in the site selection and design of community schools. Meanwhile, acknowledging the difficulty of meeting in the summer, the Steering Committees took a three-month break. In the interim, Osborne's internship ended in June, and although he took a job in the district, he was no longer involved in this project. Ray McCoy, the district's director of Community Relations, took over as project coordinator, in addition to his regular duties.



## Steering Committee Meetings: September - November

After reconvening in September, the **High School Committee** soon agreed on recommended changes to the program model, working closely with the architect's staff (another Plainfield resident). They would continue to remain involved throughout December in the process of justifying these requests to the DOE.

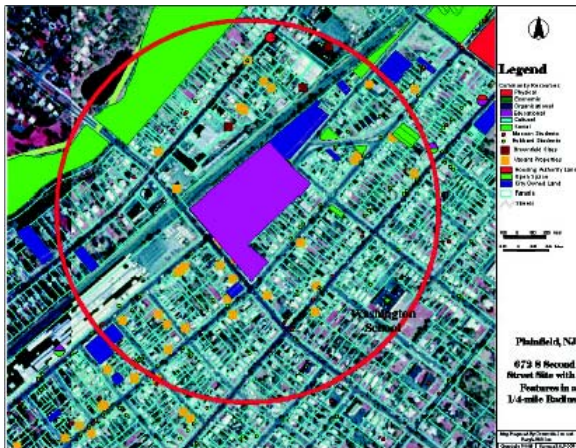
In October the **Emerson and Middle School Committees** began to work together, since they were investigating the same sites. The combined teams compiled an inventory of 23 potential sites. Awald attended their joint meeting, and for the first time offered the city's perspective on sites also being considered for economic development. In November each team selected their top three choices, based on review

Top: Concordia staff mapped resources recorded by Steering Committee members to aid in site selection. Below: Members of the Middle School Steering Committee evaluating sites.

(Map and Photo by Concordia)

of several criteria including the number of children, community resources, brownfields, vacant properties, open space and public land within a quarter mile radius, estimated land value and cost (although cost was not a determining factor in this case).

The **Emerson School Committee**'s first choice was a parcel that included twelve occupied lots and one acre of protected parkland. The **Middle School Committee**'s first choice was city-owned property, a former chemical factory that had burned to the ground. This pleasantly surprised Neirstadt, the city's director of planning who explained: "Four years ago the Mayor had suggested that site for a school, and the community almost ran him out of town. At that time we could not consider doing the environmental clean up, because there were no resources. Now there are. [The city had received a grant for clean up]."



Maps prepared by Concordia display community resources and other features within a quarter mile radius of the sites selected for the new middle school (left) and elementary school (right),

### Leverett Resigns

Then, to everyone's surprise, in mid-December, Leverett announced his resignation, to accept a new job out of state. He had been having some difficulties with the Board of Education but nothing out of the ordinary. The other district simply made an offer he could not refuse. But where would this leave the Community School Planning project? One avenue to ensure some continuity lay with a team of planners from Rutgers University with expertise in brownfields who had foundation funding to build on the community's engagement in the middle school project to develop a plan of for the redevelopment of the surrounding neighborhood. Leverett hoped to link the Rutgers project with the uncompleted work of the middle school Steering Committee.

So it was that when the Steering Committees made their final presentations in January 2003 the future of the project was not at all clear. Yet a beaming Leverett, turned to me and said, "This is what it's all about. Empowerment." Members of the High School Committee Following the Steering Committee presentations, Barbara Bohi,

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representing the SCC addressed the audience: “You don’t know how rare this is. You do not find this kind of coming together, this kind of collaboration and this kind of tough decision-making.”

## **Conclusion**

The Board of Education accepted the recommendation for the middle school site but rejected the site for the Emerson school and later dropped plans for the school altogether due to the difficulty of finding a site, thus reversing course on the previous plan to cap enrollments to create small learning communities. While the Board expressed their continued commitment to the concept of community schools, during the seven months the district remained with an interim superintendent that commitment waned. The interim superintendent did not feel he had the mandate to work with the Rutgers team in their effort to continue community based planning around the new middle school. Meanwhile the SCC expedited the procurement process, hiring Johnson Jones as the architect, under whom the design process proceeded without any organized community input, despite the strong desire of Liz Smith, who was working for the Rutgers planning team, to be involved. Without the district as a partner, the Rutgers effort came to nought and they lost their foundation funding. When the new superintendent came on board, she removed information about the SMART community school planning process from the district website—a symbolic gesture of the end of the Leverett era. For better or for worse, the community engagement process was not enough to rally the district behind Leverett’s vision after he left Plainfield.

## Findings and Lessons

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The cases studied here are both complex projects, each embedded its own set of issues. This section presents a distillation of general findings and lessons from these particular projects as well as the statewide Communities of Learners campaign that served as an impetus and incubator for them. What worked? What did not? What are the impediments to change?

### **Communities of Learning: Schools and Smart Growth**

Although I am admittedly biased in favor of this initiative, it is fair to say that it succeeded in its aim of sparking a statewide conversation about a larger vision for schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how they fit into New Jersey cities and towns. The terms “smart growth” and “community schools” provided the neutral language (less charged than “state plan” and “Abbott implementation”) for this conversation. The Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program succeeded in encouraging a select group of Abbott districts, including Perth Amboy and Plainfield, to think broadly about linking school reform, facility design and community building.

Internal and external circumstances converged to create the right time and place for this multi-agency team effort to leverage the state’s investment in urban schools to spur urban renewal, by encouraging the planning and design of schools as centers of community. Widespread support for community schools inside and outside state government marked the convergence of trends in school finance and land use reform that had been evolving for practically a century, along paths that became increasingly interactive starting in the 1970s. Decades of social activism and reform experimentation cultivated a particularly fertile seedbed for innovation in several agencies of state government, and cities such as Perth Amboy and Plainfield, among others.

Interagency  
Cooperation

While the new spirit of support for the State Plan and the Abbott reforms that prevailed at the end of the Whitman Administration set the appropriate stage and climate for the Communities of Learning campaign, a set of internal circumstances led to its success. Among these was the ability of departments of Community Affairs, Education, and the Economic Development Authority, to work together and at least try to overcome “silo thinking.”

Role of state  
agencies: Partner

The Communities of Learners campaign models how a team of state agencies can provide an incentive and encouragement for holistic planning for schools and communities by: providing seed money to create and sustain partnerships at all levels of government; organizing technical and educational resources; and crafting opportunities for networking and exchange. Any evaluation of the two cases studied here must consider them as integral components of this larger system of support and learning, which in turn helped improve the functioning of the system as a whole. The case studies show how local initiatives and the state program evolved in a mutually transformative way. By dismantling this system of support for planning community schools, state agencies lost a valuable feed back loop.

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## Perth Amboy High School Design Competition

Strategic investment by federal and state agencies and foundations brought design to the fore in this effort to engage the public in a conversation to crystallize a vision for the new high school. The prestige associated with the National Endowment for the Arts grant to support the competition helped give the community a voice it otherwise would not have had in the Abbott school procurement process—and also helped give state agencies permission to do things in new ways, as long as the program goals were met. As a “special case” this project benefited from a high level of cooperation both between the Department of Education (DOE) and the Economic Development Authority (EDA)/School Construction Corporation (SCC), as well as between those state agencies and the partnership formed by the city and the school district. This type of collaborative partnership should be standard practice.

State planning agency as an active partner

The Office of State Planning (OSP) played an atypical role by not only brokering the joint venture between the city and the school district to sponsor the competition, but also by participating as an active partner, and ally in negotiating the support of sister agencies. This suggests how a state planning agency can serve as an intermediary to facilitate collaboration between state and local entities accustomed to a high degree of autonomy; and to set a higher standard for school planning and design. OSP staff brought a skill set and expertise to the partnership that neither district nor municipal personnel had, which proved valuable in marshalling resources and guiding the process forward. While a consultant could provide similar technical expertise for a fee, the value of partnering with a state agency in calling for increased collaboration and creative solutions is priceless.

Leadership and Cooperation

Savvy leadership by the Mayor, Superintendent, president of the Board of Education and high school principal provided a necessary but not sufficient ingredient for the success of this project. The cooperative relationship between the district and municipality and among civic groups and service agencies also helped. This is not to say there were no tensions among the various players involved. Sometimes the tensions were healthy and other times they slowed the process down. But the unwavering commitment of school and city leaders to the project helped the team overcome the obstacles that arose along the way, and in the words of Pablo Clausell, “keep on trucking.”

“Inside-Out” School Design Process

The “inside-out” school -redesign process allowed for participatory planning for educational and support programs and school design criteria to proceed in tandem with site evaluation and selection. In doing so the “inside-out” planning process garnered public and faculty buy-in for the restructuring of the school as small themed academies in advance of knowing where the site would be. The prospect of the competition provided a clear goal for the community and faculty committees to work towards, despite uncertainties concerning the site. In turn, the growing momentum of planning for the new school, and growing number of stakeholders in the process, arguably expedited negotiations over site acquisition by keeping the issue in the public eye.

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Community Profile  
Research

The Community Profile Research Report provided the faculty with the synthesis of information necessary to plan the academies as well as prepare short-term operational plans. By providing useful information the planners won the faculty's respect, which facilitated further collaboration in the development of the educational program model. The research also provided the justifications required for to gain DOE approval of features in the model that did not conform to the Facilities Efficiency Standards. Good planning requires good information. .

Design  
Competition

The design competition exceeded the sponsors' expectations in eliciting response from such a large number of architects, including some of the most prominent in the field. While the scale of the project attracted attention, all of the finalists commented that they decided to compete because of the program. A competition is only as good as its program. The community based planning that guided development of the program was an essential ingredient in the success of this model for procurement of an architect.

Procurement  
Process

The community planning process and design competition did not prolong and arguably expedited the school procurement process—which as of this writing hinges on site acquisition. Moreover, the significant amount of pre-design planning to prepare the competition program would not otherwise have taken place at this stage in the standard state procurement process, yet added tremendous value to the final product—aside from the high quality of designs elicited by the competition. . To compare this method relative to standard procedures will require use of both qualitative as well quantitative methods.

Sustainability

One goal of the high school planning process was to ensure the sustainability of the community-school partnership by building on existing initiatives such as the School Based Youth Services (SBYS) program, to help institutionalize it. The Community School Collaborative for Adolescent Health—a direct spin-off of one of the planning process—now under the direction of SBYS has great potential. But the sustainability of that partnership will depend on the continued availability of strategic resources: time, money, and expertise.

### **Plainfield Community School Master Plan**

This project aspired for the democratic ideal of education—*Paideia*—and achieved it in mobilizing so many people in the community school planning exercise, which we must see as a continuation of the participatory planning process that Leverett launched in 1996. In this case a superintendent in the vanguard of the community school movement blazed the path that others, including state agencies, followed. However the concrete achievements of this community school partnership fell short of their state goals and, for now at least, the initiative appears to not have survived the loss of Leverett's leadership.

State planning  
agency as a  
supportive partner

Here the role of state agencies was to support and try not to get in the way of a farsighted superintendent's efforts to realize his vision of full service community schools as part of a framework for district-wide reform. However as the community school planning process played

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out, it lost focus and became too broad. And state support, while sufficient to bring the city to the table, was not enough to elicit the Mayor's full buy-in to the community-school master planning concept. Just as the planning process was getting off-track, state agencies withdrew their financial and technical support. It is impossible to know whether the strategic intervention of OSP staff could have affected the outcome of this project, which ultimately achieved relatively little in terms of the amount of time, money and civic resources invested. Part of the problem derived from too literal reliance on the consultant's model for the participatory planning process. But OSP and other state agencies encouraged confidence in this high profile consultant, Concordia, and were eager to see their model tested locally.

### The Concordia Model

This case study suggests that Concordia's model should have been adapted to suit Plainfield's particular needs and political culture. The Planning Committee wasted time trying to identify seven neighborhoods and recruit seven hundred volunteers, for naught. This left little time to recruit and train facilitators before the planning process began. Then following the Concordia Model, the leadership team disbanded and dispersed among the four committees, further dividing attention and talent. The formation of two separate committees to focus on site selection following the full Concordia model, fragmented the efforts of the modest group of volunteers even further, and cost twice as much. By steadfastly adhering to the eight meeting schedule, and allowing for a summer break, the committees took a full year to complete their evaluation of the same group of sites, and never engaged in design issues or the teaching and learning that would take place in the schools.

### Leadership and Decentralization

The Concordia Model offered the community-school partnership the added value of capacity building by training the cadre of paid local facilitators to lead the volunteer steering committees. With more time to incubate, the organic, decentralized community school planning system might have worked as intended, enduring regardless of who the superintendent was, and if the facilitators would still be paid for their work. (Those who continued to work for the Rutgers team of planners were paid.) But in the prolonged vacuum of leadership that followed the unexpected resignation of the superintendent, without an influential champion the ideal was quickly set-aside by the experts left in charge of capital improvements in favor of efficiency. Decentralization must be balanced with the need for progressive pragmatic leadership.

### Learning By Doing

The district deserves credit for being willing to take a risk and invest in the Concordia Model, covering costs that exceeded the state planning grant. In creating a community of learners, it is important to give people permission to fail when taking a calculated risk, and learn from the mistakes made. "If you always do what you've always done you'll always get what you've already have," as Leverett likes to repeat. And other districts, notably Perth Amboy, learned valuable lessons from observing the implementation of the Concordia Model in Plainfield, and adapting selected practices, such as the Community Research Profile, and elements of the high school academy program model.



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## Impediments to Change

School facilities provide a unique opportunity to organize collective action to improve education and build stronger healthier communities. There are numerous paths school and community groups might take toward this goal. The rules of the game, such as facilities efficiency standards, the state school construction procurement guidelines, and school finance formulas may present obstacles along the way, but these rules are not in fact an impediment to change, as they are constantly evolving. The real obstacle to change is what Don Schon referred to as the “dynamic conservatism” of institutions: “a tendency to fight to remain the same,” a condition he refers to as “the stable state,” which in today’s constantly changing world is no longer possible to maintain. Schon (1971, p.30) advises:

“The loss of the stable state means that our society , all of its institutions, are in *continuing* processes of transformation. ... We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations. ... We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are ‘learning systems,’ that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation. ... The task which the loss of the stable state makes imperative, for the person, for our institutions, for our society as a whole, is to learn about learning.”

Institutional change is hard but carefully crafted school facility planning projects undertaken in the context of an effort to create a systemwide community of learning, can provide the impetus for state and local agencies, with other school and civic stakeholder groups, to take the small steps that can add up to larger moves.

Schon, D. (1971).  
*Beyond the Stable  
State*. New York.  
Random House.

***“We must become able not only to transform  
our institutions, in response to changing  
situations and requirements; we must invent  
and develop institutions which are ‘learning  
systems,’ that is to say, systems capable of  
bringing about their own continuing  
transformation” Don Schon***

## Recommendations

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Community of Learning and Community School Planning Grants	<p>The principle recommendation based on the findings of this research is to follow Dr. Leverett’s lead in promoting a vision of community schools as part of a framework for district-wide reform, and seize the opportunity of massive public investment in school construction to realize that vision in concrete form. The short-lived Communities of Learning campaign and Community School Smart Growth Planning Grant program proved to be effective way to encourage collaborative experimentation with various ways to achieve this goal. It is only through such a program, operating at many levels of government and at the grassroots, that we can change the system by which we plan and design and continually improve schools and communities. Quite simply, a program along these lines should be reinstated in New Jersey and replicated in other major cities and states undergoing similar school construction initiatives. It works, but it takes time and effort.</p>
Incentives for Innovation and Design Quality	<p>In addition to a general program of support for comprehensive planning, there needs to be an incentive for innovation, and to set a higher standard for school planning and design, not simply replace what has been built in the past. As Austin Gumbs so eloquently stated, “We want to take advantage of the Abbott money to create a new kind of educational plan in Perth Amboy.” The NEA school design competition program provided such an incentive, and should be continued and expanded. There is a need for both qualitative as well as quantitative measures to determine the effectiveness of the competition model for the procurement of school design.</p>
Applied Research	<p>For innovative projects such as those studied here to benefit the functioning of the system as a whole there is a need for continued feed back through case study reports, action research and forums for the exchange of research results and best practices. Ideally such a research program would be linked to teaching and outreach, to train the next generation of architects, planners, policy makers and educators in the new interdisciplinary skill sets required to link school reform with facility design and community building.</p>