HOW TO SAVE YOUR HISTORIC SCHOOL

10 Action Steps

PRESERVATION TOOL KIT

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1. Focus your preservation campaign on the **needs of school children**. Demonstrate the benefits for the children of renovating the historic school. If the School District was not investing public funds in the costly new facility, how could those funds be spent to improve the children's academic achievement? Text books? Computers? Teachers salaries? Take care not to dismiss the School District's desire to improve its facilities.

2. Instead, develop a **feasible, cost-effective alternative strategy** -- such as renovation and modernization of the existing historic structure -- that would provide a first-class educational facility. This alternative is the heart of your constructive response. Fundraise to hire an architect. Prepare your architect to serve as an expert advocate for preservation, not simply as an independent, disinterested outsider.

3. Help decision-makers to visualize the quality of the modern educational facility that can be achieved through renovation and modernization. **Visual images are king**. Create persuasive drawings of your alternative and photographs of successfully rehabilitated schools. Publish them widely in the community. If possible, host field trips to nearby renovated historic schools.

4. Be certain to **involve teachers, parents, and school children** in your preservation campaign. They will be perceived as the most critical stakeholders and persuasive voices. Also involve a broad coalition of neighbors, elected officials, alumni, retired teachers, Parent Teacher Associations, neighborhood associations, as well as preservation groups.

5. Fully analyze the School District's proposal to replace the historic school. **Isolate and answer each of the District's key issues** that are perceived as barriers to renovation (e.g., structural instability, fire safety, accessibility, parking, high-tech wiring). Gather as much hard, objective information as possible. Fundraise to hire an architect or other expert. Consult your State Historic Preservation Office.

6. After you've analyzed the School District's proposal, dig deeper. Your historic school may be threatened by **state-level administrative policies** that inadvertently preclude preservation of some historic schools. For example, some states will not reimburse a local school district' s costs of historic renovation. If so, challenge the policy. Seek a variance or a more liberal application of the policy.

7. Focus on the **"frugality argument."** Compare the costs of new construction versus rehabilitation. Put a price tag on the School District's proposal and on your alternative approach. Preservation may

appeal to certain taxpayers if you argue that your alternative approach would improve the school while protecting the public's past investment in public infrastructure (i.e., the historic school) and avoiding the extra burden of the School District's high-dollar solution. For more information on the economics of historic preservation, contact your regional office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

8. Help your neighbors **understand the community impacts** of the School District's plan. Abandonment of a historic school may lead to vandalism and a decline in neighboring property values. If a historic school is demolished, it may remain a vacant lot for years or be replaced with an undesirable new use. Consolidation of historic neighborhood schools into a larger “sprawl school” on the outskirts of town may mean that students find it more difficult to build a sense of community. Moreover, such sprawl locations often add to transportation costs that put financial pressures on families and governments alike. Time-pressed parents must act as chauffeurs for their children, who can no longer walk to school or to extracurricular activities.

9. Publicize the **benefits of preserving the historic school.** Historic neighborhood schools can enrich students’ learning experience, allowing children to walk to school, to attend a smaller, more intimate school with friends from their own neighborhood, and to grow up immersed in the historic school’s tradition and surrounded by its distinguished and often unique architecture. And, there’s considerable evidence that smaller schools improve academic achievement

10. Use every **grassroots political organizing strategy** in the book. Develop a clear, succinct message. Generate letters to the editor. Borrow mailing lists and send out flyers. Post yard signs. Place radio ads. Host town meetings. Go door-to-door. Pass a petition. Don’t hesitate to ask for donations to support the cause. Finally, school construction questions can be very sensitive, divisive issues. So, always take the high- road and make every effort to establish a cooperative working relationship with the School District.

SOURCE: *Rob Nieweg, Coordinator of the National Trust for Historic Preservations's Historic Neighborhood Schools Initiative.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Publications from the National Trust for Historic Preservation: A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools. This booklet demonstrates through case studies that older school buildings can successfully adapt to new technology and the latest educational mandates. Historic Neigborhood Schools in the Age of Sprawl: Why Johnny Can’t Walk to School. This publication highlights the problem of “school sprawl” and the impact that public policy has had on older schools in our communities. The report includes case studies illustrating how citizens in various communities have rescued and rehabilitated historic schools and steps to avoid school sprawl and to promote historic preservation. Both are available through Preservation Books, online at www.nthpbooks.org or call 202-588-6296.

Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizens Guide for Planning and Design. The publication includes design principles, examples of innovative school design, the master plan process, developing, implementing the master plan and a resource list. To order, Write— ED Pubs, Editorial Publication Center, U.S. Department of Education, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup MD 20794-1398; Fax— 301-470-1244; Online— edpubs@inet.ed.gov