

STATE POLICIES AND SCHOOL FACILITIES

HOW STATES CAN SUPPORT OR UNDERMINE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY PRESERVATION



A Report by
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May 2003

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**A Report by the
National Trust for Historic Preservation
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In 2002, with funding from the Ford Foundation, the 21CSF formed a constituency building, research, and communications collaboration aimed at improving public school facilities. Known as the BEST Collaborative (“BEST” stands for Building Educational Success Together), the initiative’s policy reform agenda promotes four outcomes:

- broad public involvement in decisions regarding school facilities;
- schools as centers of community;
- effective school facility management and oversight; and
- adequate funding for school building repairs and construction.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation joined the Collaborative because it offered a way to work with education-focused groups who share the Trust’s belief that healthy neighborhoods provide better support for schools, and that good schools are important to the health of older neighborhoods, where historic schools and lower-income households often come together. In addition to the 21CSF and the National Trust, the Collaborative includes five other partners:

- Educational Law Center, a Newark-N.J.-based group whose legal advocacy led to intensified state efforts to improve school facilities in New Jersey’s poorest school districts;
- KnowledgeWorks Foundation, a Cincinnati-based foundation that advocates community engagement in school facility planning, especially in Ohio;
- National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that gathers, organizes, and distributes information about educational facilities through its web site, publications, and reference service;
- Neighborhood Capital Budget Group, a Chicago-based coalition of 200-plus neighborhood groups that champion more – and more equitable – public investment in city neighborhoods; and
- Mark Schneider, a professor of political science at the State University of New York in Stony Brook. Professor Schneider has written extensively about education.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation provides leadership, education, and advocacy to save America’s diverse historic places and revitalize its communities. The Trust is a nonprofit membership organization chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1949.

STATE POLICIES AND SCHOOL FACILITIES: How States Can Support or Undermine Neighborhood Schools And Community Preservation

Introduction

The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed historic neighborhood schools on its Year 2000 list of “America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places” because these community anchors were widely threatened. In taking this action, the National Trust launched its Historic Neighborhood Schools Initiative, an organization-wide effort that has since produced a variety of reports aimed at helping communities preserve treasured schools while bringing them up to 21st-century standards.² Meanwhile, the Trust’s network of regional offices has provided important technical assistance to community groups throughout the country on this issue.

Through this report, the National Trust seeks not only to reaffirm the contribution made by historic neighborhood schools to their communities, but also to provide policy direction for state policy makers – and for community preservation advocates who help shape state policies – who are working to:

- maintain healthy neighborhoods that provide a good support system for young people before and after school;
- maintain – or build new – well-designed, successful schools that function as community centers;
- preserve and renovate historic neighborhood schools capable of being brought up to 21st-century educational and safety standards; and
- involve the broader community in planning for school facilities.

Schools have served as centers of community for over a hundred years. Indeed, it is precisely because historic neighborhood schools have filled this function for so long that community residents protest vehemently when school districts announce plans to close or demolish these schools. While these protests sometimes reflect a lamentation over the loss of beautiful, architecturally distinctive school buildings, more often and more fundamentally, they are a protest against the destruction of community anchors – of public social institutions that have inspired civic pride and held neighborhoods together for decades. For this reason, the continued use of a school site for school purposes is

often considered as important as preserving a historic school building. The existence of a good school in the middle of an old or historic neighborhood, even if the school is brand new, can, and often does, help to preserve the entire neighborhood, including its historic housing stock.

To anyone entering many of our cities' oldest public schools, it is clear that those who built these institutions held public education in high esteem. Fine design and craftsmanship characterize most school buildings constructed before World War II. For example, the National School Board Journal described Washington, D.C.'s Eastern Senior High School, built in 1923, as the "last word in eastern school architecture." With its turreted towers and Gothic arch entrances, the imposing four-story structure makes a strong statement about the commitment of citizens in the early 1900s to children, education, and civil society. Similar statements could be made about countless historic schools throughout the country.

Backdrop for This Research

The research for this report took place against a backdrop of growing national concern over poor physical conditions in America's public schools and growing national interest in schools as centers of community.

In 1996 the U. S. General Accounting Office (GAO) declared that almost one-third of all public school buildings are in a serious state of disrepair. A follow-up study by the GAO and the National Center for Education Statistics announced that over \$112 billion is needed to repair schools in poor conditions. The National Education Association subsequently pegged the cost to repair existing school facilities – and to build needed new ones – at an even higher figure: \$322 billion. To those familiar with conditions in many public schools, these numbers reinforce what they already know: that too many older schools suffer from faulty heating systems, leaky roofs, bad air and a host of other problems.

Besides advocating for improvements in the physical condition of public school buildings, parents and educators are becoming increasingly interested in the idea of using schools as centers of community. One reason: Research shows the value of strong, cohesive neighborhoods to students as well as to schools. "Studies make it clear that

students achieve best in environments...where the school facility is central to the life and learning of the community, accessible not only during traditional school hours but at night and on weekends,” observed a 2000 report published by the U.S. Department of Education.³

As the Coalition for Community Schools has pointed out, “For more than 100 years...every community school has promoted the simple, fundamentally American value that school, community and family are inextricably bound together and must work closely together to help children learn and succeed.”⁴

No two community-centered schools are alike, but all such schools foster strong relationships between school and community and differ sharply from the many “stand-alone” schools that have only tenuous physical and social connections with the communities they serve. A community-centered school can offer one – or several – of the following benefits:

- ball fields, basketball courts, and other athletic facilities that double as community parks, sites for pick-up games, or other assets;
- school auditoriums that host community concerts, recitals, and other public events;
- proximity to governmental, business, civic, or other institutions that provide good venues for educational field trips (this is especially true of schools that are located close to downtowns);
- opportunities for senior citizens and other adults to tutor students in need of extra help.

FBI statistics show that juvenile crime rises significantly between the hours of 3:00 and 7:00 p.m. The juvenile crime rate triples during the first full hour after school, and 47 percent of violent juvenile crimes take place on weekdays during after-school hours.⁵ But personal connections with family members, neighbors, teachers and other stable adults living in the neighborhood can help to fortify young people against destructive influences, observes Delton W. Young, a Seattle-based clinical psychologist specializing in adolescence.⁶

The relationship between healthy neighborhoods and good schools – and vice-versa – is well-stated in *For Generations to Come*, a report by the 21st Century School Fund:

Schools in poor condition – with graffiti, yellowed windows, peeling paint, falling fences, and unkempt grounds – signal a neighborhood in decline. Conversely, good neighborhood schools can be beacons that attract families and raise property values. A revitalized school can help turn a neighborhood in decline into a neighborhood in transition.⁷

Groups ranging from the Coalition for Community Schools to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to the National Association of Realtors have advocated community-centered schools. But as the Cincinnati-based KnowledgeWorks Foundation points out, “While success [in promoting such schools] has been achieved thematically...missing is a fundamental change in policy at the state and local level.” This report identifies aspects of state school facility policies that relate directly to the goal of preserving – or building new – schools that serve as centers of community.

STATE SCHOOL FACILITY POLICIES

The rules governing the design, location, and character of public school facilities can seem arcane and inaccessible. As a resident of Mansfield, Ohio, commented after his entire neighborhood was demolished, urban-renewal-style, so that the school district could meet acreage standards for schools, “We asked for a copy of the rules, but no one would give them to us.”

This report seeks to demystify state school facility policies for those who are concerned about maintaining the cohesiveness and viability of neighborhoods in older cities. The National Trust for Historic Preservation believes it is time to review state school facility policies to identify those that undermine as well as advance local efforts to improve education while preserving (or creating) strong, cohesive neighborhoods. This report is not an exhaustive analysis of such policies, but rather an examination of state policies and practices related to:

- responsible planning
- school site size standards
- preservation and renovation of historic schools
- funding new construction versus modernization
- community use of school buildings, and
- maintenance of school buildings

The information for this report came from several sources: telephone interviews and correspondence with state school facility officials; a review of Internet-based and printed school facility standards; and interviews with school architects and other school facility experts. (The survey questions can be found at Appendix A.)

State school facility policies have generally been developed by architects, trade group representatives, and others to ensure life safety, define educational space standards, control construction costs, and ensure equity for students. While each of these objectives is justifiable, there is sometimes tension among them and with other important public objectives.

For example, school site size standards have sometimes promoted urban sprawl and undercut community efforts to preserve and revitalize older urban neighborhoods.

Policies intended to ensure cost-effectiveness in capital spending for school facilities have sometimes had the opposite effect. Moreover, the genesis of some widespread policies is little understood. Even school facility experts cannot explain how or why certain policies came into existence.

There is also tension between state policies calling for minimum school enrollments, which often force the consolidation of several smaller schools, and local efforts to preserve schools as community centers. Besides eliminating many small, community-centered, consolidation can increase student travel time and student transportation costs to state and local agencies.

Maine is one of the few states to have examined the relationships between land-use patterns, student transportation costs, and student enrollments. According to the Maine State Planning Office, the number of students statewide declined by 27,000 between 1970 and 1995, and yet school busing costs rose from \$8.7 million to over \$54 million during that same period.⁸ As these numbers suggest, by paying more attention to land-use patterns, community design, and the location of schools, school districts could help states control costs significantly.

Few states can say how many students walk or bicycle to school, but most maintain data on the cost of providing bus transportation for students to and from school. These data show that the amount of money spent by states on student transportation is significant: Not only does student transportation take a big bite out of state budgets, but these transportation costs are also rapidly increasing. Consider these numbers.

- Pennsylvania spent \$775.1 million on student transportation in 2000-01, with expenditures for this budget item having risen by sixteen percent since 1996-97;
- Oklahoma spent \$145.6 million on student transportation in 2000-01, with expenditures for this budget item having risen by \$41 million in five years;
- California spent \$1.035 billion for student transportation in 2000-01, up \$250.8 million from 1996-97;
- Tennessee spent \$169.7 million on student transportation in 2001-02, up \$27.9 million from 1998-99.

Responsible Planning

Even though inclusive, well-coordinated, and long-range planning for school facilities can help to save money and ensure high-quality, well-maintained schools, such planning is often undervalued, poorly supported, or both. One sign of the inattention to responsible planning is the dearth of information on the age, characteristics, and condition of public schools in each state. Only a handful of states maintain full-fledged, ongoing databases on the condition and characteristics of their public schools.⁹

Several states have tried to develop central databases but have had to abandon them, usually for budget reasons.

Few states require school districts to involve the broader community – i.e., not just school officials, parents of students, and educators, but also civic and business leaders, neighborhood residents, and others – in planning for the construction or renovation of school facilities. But the political realities of getting school bonds approved often require school districts to do so. As Vermont’s school construction guide points out: “The broader the participation in the development of a school construction proposal, the better will be the school board’s presentation of the project to the voters for funding.”

Among the states with specific policies to encourage inclusive planning are:

- Kentucky, which promotes broad community involvement in school facility planning as well as public forums and public hearings on school building projects;
- Mississippi, which asks school districts whether any organized opposition to a proposed school site exists and, if so, why; and
- Wyoming, which requires school districts to involve the public through public hearings and other means in school facility planning.

Ideally, school facilities are planned by a representative group of people who will use them. Not just educators, parents, and students, but also neighborhood residents, senior citizens, and civic and business leaders should be included in the planning process.¹⁰

A related planning issue is whether states encourage school districts to coordinate their school facility plans with land-use plans developed by local governments for their communities’ future growth and conservation. Very often, school boards and local

governments fail to coordinate their respective plans, despite the fact that the location (and continued maintenance, or lack thereof) of schools can exert a profound effect on a community's future vitality and land-use patterns. Too often, school site decisions promote urban sprawl and trigger the withdrawal of investment in older city and town neighborhoods.

Many states are silent on the issue of planning coordination, while others require collaborative planning. Examples of the latter include New Jersey, Maine and Rhode Island fall into this group. New Jersey requires school districts to file long-range school facility plans with local planning boards. In a January 2002 executive order, New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey established a Smart Growth Policy Council charged with “ensur[ing] that school construction initiatives promote smart growth, open space, and revitalization of communities.”

Maine's State Planning Office and Department of Education have strengthened communication between each other and promoted coordinated planning by local school districts and local governments. Maine also requires the construction subcommittee of the State Board of Education to provide written justification whenever it recommends funding approval for a school that is not located in an area designated by the local municipality for growth.

Florida requires school boards and local governments to “agree on a process for assuring coordination and cooperation in the provision of educational facilities.” Tennessee's state growth management law discourages the construction of new schools outside areas designated for growth. Vermont's Act 250 requires local school districts to comply with land-use policies intended to preserve compact communities and discourage urban sprawl. Washington's State Environmental Protection Act calls on school districts to demonstrate compliance with relevant environmental and historic preservation laws, while Washington's Growth Management Act requires districts to comply with local planning and zoning laws. Maryland requires that proposed school construction projects be consistent with local planning policies.

In a handful of states, gubernatorial or state legislative task forces have urged state education departments to pay more attention to the relationships between school locations, urban sprawl, and community preservation. In Delaware, a Governor's

Cabinet Committee on State Planning Issues recommended that the state “promote locations for schools...that would enhance community integrity and encourage the use of more than one transportation option.” In New Hampshire, an Office of State Planning report to former Governor Jeanne Shaheen noted that state expenditures for schools “help limit sprawl and its effects when they focus on maintaining and enhancing urban and village centers.”

In California, school districts may overrule local zoning and planning requirements if two-thirds of a school board’s members vote to do so. Under legislation approved in 2001, however, school board members must agree to meet with local government officials – or vice versa – if either party requests such a meeting. Colorado law requires school boards to consult with local planning or municipal officials regarding school sites, but it also states that nothing shall limit a school board’s authority to determine the location of public schools.

Site Standards

Another issue of concern to the historic preservation and smart growth communities is the extent to which school policies affect the location of schools and the size of school sites.

Despite a growing national interest in the use of schools as centers of community, state acreage standards for schools often make this concept hard to implement. When schools – and school grounds – are physically small, they fit easily and gracefully into residential neighborhoods. They are easy for parents, students, and area residents to get to. School playgrounds or ball fields can serve as neighborhood parks on weekends or after school. Students too young to drive – or whose families cannot afford or do not wish to buy extra cars for their teen-age children – can reach school grounds by foot, bicycle, or bus.

But when school sites are very large, they require sites that do not fit easily or gracefully into existing neighborhoods. Large school sites tend to be accompanied by large volumes of vehicular traffic because few students can easily walk or bike to schools whose large sites require that they stand apart from the community they serve. This, in turn, means the schools must be surrounded by large, off-putting parking lots for cars and

buses. Thus, in contrast to the small, community-centered schools that many neighborhoods welcome, these large facilities are sometimes considered LULUs – Locally Undesirable Land Uses.

State site size standards¹¹ – as well as private consultant recommendations – often force or pressure school districts to make one of two undesirable choices:

- destroy the community they are trying to educate by demolishing existing homes near a school in order to meet site standards; or
- abandon existing schools on easily reached, small sites in favor of new facilities in outlying areas that are inaccessible to students except by car or bus.

A number of states have adopted acreage standards for schools recommended by the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI). These standards are:

- 10 acres for an elementary school plus one acre for each 100 students;
- 20 acres for a middle school plus one acre for each 100 students; and
- 30 acres for a high school plus one acre for each 100 students.¹²

Examples of states that require or recommend the CEFPI site standards include Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Iowa, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Utah. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, Virginia, Washington also recommend (or require) that schools meet certain site size requirements, but these are less stringent than those recommended by CEFPI. School districts in large cities typically obtain exemptions from site standards because land is unavailable, too expensive, or both, but many smaller communities continue to struggle with the standards.

Colorado, Connecticut, Kansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Vermont do not impose site size requirements at all. Arkansas and Indiana impose such requirements on new schools but not on existing schools. In Indiana, the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana campaigned successfully for an exemption for historic schools from the site size requirements.

Maine and Pennsylvania have established *maximum* site size standards for purposes of state reimbursement. If a school district builds a school on a site that exceeds

these maximums, the district must pay for the excess land entirely on its own. The state will not subsidize the purchase of excess land.

Maryland rejected site size standards back in the 1970s, when the state recognized that the application of such standards would force older cities like Baltimore to close almost all their schools. Although Maryland could have waived the standards for Baltimore and still applied them to smaller cities, state officials decided it did not make sense to have two sets of standards – one for big cities, another for small and mid-sized cities.

Minnesota has the strictest site size requirements in the country:

- 10 to 15 acres – plus one for each 100 students – for an elementary school;
- 25 to 35 acres – plus one for each 100 students – for a middle school; and
- 60 acres – plus one for each 100 students – for a high school with more than 2,000 students.

Waivers from the Minnesota standards can be, and have been, granted under certain circumstances, however.

In his 2003 state-of-the-state message, Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina recognized the conflict between school site standards and efforts to preserve or build community-centered schools. South Carolina policies “encourage the construction of massive, isolated schools that are inaccessible to the communities they serve,” said the governor. Sanford called on the state department of education to eliminate minimum acreage standards so that school boards would enjoy greater flexibility in selecting school sites.

Preservation and Renovation of Historic Schools

State policies affecting the preservation and renovation of historic schools vary widely. Some are strong. Some are non-existent. Still others are downright detrimental. Florida and Vermont arguably have the strongest policies – at least on paper.

In Florida, local school boards are required to notify and give the Florida Division of Historical Resources a “reasonable opportunity” to comment on school construction or renovation projects assisted with state funds before such funds are approved or spent. When historic schools are slated for demolition or substantial alteration, school boards

must “initiate measures in consultation with design professionals *having preservation expertise* [emphasis added] and with the Division...to assure that...timely steps are taken to determine that no feasible and prudent alternative to the proposed demolition or alteration exists...” Florida’s emphasis on consulting with design professionals with experience in historic buildings is helpful because many school architects are unfamiliar with renovation options and building code provisions that can make rehabilitation more feasible and less expensive. It is not uncommon for architects with no experience in rehabilitating older buildings to effectively condemn historic schools that could be turned into state-of-the-art educational facilities. This often occurs when such architects present inflated renovation cost estimates to schools boards.

In Vermont, the state historic preservation office must be given an opportunity to comment on and approve any plans for state-assisted school construction and renovation projects affecting historic resources. When renovations are proposed for historic schools, the state has the discretion to increase the amount of state financial assistance available for the project. As a practical matter, this policy has been rarely used, but it exists and could be invoked. Vermont’s guidelines state: “The historic character of existing buildings should be respected in rehabilitation projects. Attention to the visual character of new construction will contribute greatly to the community’s pride and sense of accomplishment with the final product.” And as in Florida, if a proposed renovation or addition involves a historic school, Vermont school districts are urged to consult with architects who have expertise and experience in historic preservation.

California gives school districts mixed signals regarding the preservation of historic schools. On the one hand, historic schools receive some protection under the California Environmental Quality Act, which obligates school districts to analyze and, where feasible, minimize damage to environmental resources, including historic schools listed on state or national historic registers. In addition, the State Architect has initiated a service for school districts that wish to use the State Historical Building Code, which is intended to make the rehabilitation of historic structures easier and more economical without compromising public safety. On the other hand, California’s School Facility Hardship Grant Program, which provides grants to correct safety problems, discourages school districts from considering renovation options for historic schools. Under this

program, the state will not reimburse school districts for renovation projects if the cost of renovation exceeds 50% of the cost of building a new school. This state funding bias against renovation played a role in the San Mateo School District's recent decision to demolish San Mateo High School, one of the Bay Area's most distinctive and beautiful landmarks. Although California faces a massive budget deficit, little interest was shown by the local school district in the possibility of producing an equally good and modernized facility through renovation at less cost than new construction.

In Washington, the State Environmental Protection Act requires environmental impact statements for all major actions that significantly affect the quality of the environment. Historic and cultural resources, including historic schools, are part of the "environment." Washington is considering revising its school building evaluation form so that historic schools would no longer be penalized, but this revision has not been incorporated as of this writing.

In Massachusetts, new school construction projects may be funded only after the feasibility and cost of renovating an existing school building has been studied and the school district has demonstrated that new construction is the best alternative.

On the other hand, many states offer nothing to help community groups preserve and renovate historic schools – for continued use as schools or for other purposes.

Funding and Funding Preferences

Not surprisingly, the more money a state invests in school construction and renovation, the more the state regulates these activities, particularly when state funding for school facilities has resulted from court action. In Ohio, where the state will infuse \$12 billion in school facilities over a ten-year period, a thick manual governs school construction and renovation. In Tennessee, where education funds come almost entirely from local sources, school districts determine for themselves the size, location, and design of school facilities.

An issue of great importance to the historic preservation and smart growth communities is whether a state favors the construction of new schools over the renovation of existing schools when all other things are equal. If an existing school can be upgraded to meet current standards for life safety, accessibility, technology and

educational quality for less money than it costs to build a new school (or for an equal amount of money), does the state allow the local school district to choose freely between the two options without suffering a financial penalty?

Some state policies are neutral – at least on paper – with respect to new construction versus renovation. That is, they neither encourage nor discourage either option. Examples of neutral states include New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Texas. At least six states favor new construction over the renovation of existing schools through their policies, even when it costs less to renovate an existing school than to build a new one. This preference is usually expressed through a “two-thirds rule” or some variation of it. In other words, if the cost of renovating an existing school exceeds a certain percentage – 2/3, 50%, 60%, or some other percentage – the state requires (or encourages) the local school district to build a new school or forfeit state financial aid. These “percentage rules” generally do not consider the costs frequently incurred by state or local governments, such as the costs of demolishing an existing school, abating hazardous materials, or installing or extending water and sewer lines. Nor do the rules typically examine student transportation or road-building expenses incurred in serving new schools in outlying areas.

Examples of states with preferences for new construction include Ohio, which enforces a “two-thirds rule,” and Minnesota, which applies a “60 percent rule.” In 1999, the Ohio School Facilities Commission amended its policy to allow waivers from the two-thirds rule in the case of historic schools “or for other good cause shown,” but many communities appear to be unaware of the possibility of obtaining waivers. Moreover, Ohio’s *Urban Design Manual Memorandum* explicitly discourages renovation: “The Commission does not view [school] renovation projects costing in excess of two-thirds of the cost of new construction to be a good investment. Approval of such projects should be viewed as an exception, rather than a rule.” Thus Ohio’s waiver policy and its design manual send mixed signals.

As noted earlier, California enforces a 50 percent rule in its Facility Hardship Grant Program, which provides grants for school districts to correct health and safety flaws in public schools. A handful of states apply policies akin to the “two-thirds rule” as

an informal rule-of-thumb but not as a hard requirement. Delaware, Virginia, Mississippi, and Virginia and Kentucky fall into this category.

Although waivers from these rules may be granted, community residents often complain that they are hard to get and that some local school districts hide behind the rules when they do not wish to seriously explore school renovation options.

One state that recently eliminated its funding preference for new school construction is Pennsylvania, which rescinded its “60% rule” in 1998 and reaffirmed that decision in 2002. At the same time, Pennsylvania rescinded a policy that had prohibited multi-level schools made out of wood-frame construction. These policy changes followed a campaign for parity between new construction and renovation conducted by Preservation Pennsylvania, Inc., and the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation. As a part of this campaign, the Foundation commissioned an expert analysis that found wood-frame construction, when coupled with appropriate life-safety measures, to be as safe as non-wood-frame construction.

Two states affirmatively encourage the renovation of existing schools over the construction of new ones whenever possible. One is Maryland, where about 80 percent of all state school construction funds have gone into the renovation of existing schools in recent years. Under Maryland’s Smart Growth Policy, the state takes the position that it should:

- maintain – and not waste – prior public investments by failing to maintain existing facilities already built with taxpayer dollars; and
- avoid fueling urban sprawl by building new schools in undeveloped, outlying areas that are neither designated for growth nor equipped with the infrastructure to support it.

When school districts apply for state capital funds in Maryland, therefore, they must indicate whether proposed projects:

- are consistent with the local government’s plans for growth, revitalization, and preservation;
- will encourage sprawl development; and
- will encourage the revitalization of existing facilities, neighborhoods, and communities.

The other state to affirmatively encourage renovation whenever possible is Vermont. In 1997, the State Board of Education adopted this statement as part of a broader pronouncement on school facility policies:

It is therefore in the public interest to protect Vermont's historic schools for future generations and it shall be the policy of the Vermont State Board of Education that:

1. School districts be encouraged to use the existing infrastructure to meet the needs of Vermont's students, and therefore funding for renovations, including major repairs, and additions to existing school buildings shall be given preference over new school development taking into consideration the educational needs of students and that the costs of rehabilitation do not unreasonably exceed the costs of such new development...

Schools as Community Centers

Despite the popularity of the concept of schools as centers of community, few state school facility policies affirmatively promote it. That said, few states discourage this concept either. It should also be recognized that other units of state education departments – i.e., units other than those responsible for school facilities – may promote schools as centers of community.

Among the states with special programs that promote schools as centers of community is California, which in November 2002 approved \$50 million for the joint use of school facilities as part of an \$11.4 billion bond contained in Proposition 47. Although \$50 million in an economy as big as California's is akin to petty cash, the earmark represents an important endorsement of the idea of schools as centers of community. Under this new program, the cost of additional space needed for jointly used libraries housing both school and community library collections could be recovered by a school district.

Vermont's policies are among the most explicit in articulating the value of schools that serve as centers of community. The State Board of Education's 1997 policy statement noted that "schools traditionally have been located within the physical centers of Vermont's communities and have been a major contributing factor to the sense of community in Vermont."

Massachusetts gives “incentive percentage points” for innovative community uses of school facilities when it considers applications for state funds. The Mississippi State University Design Institute provides advice and assistance to school districts on schools as centers of community. North Carolina’s *Community Schools Act* promotes “greater community involvement in the public schools and greater community use of school facilities.” This Act encourages the use of school facilities by charitable and civic organizations, the use of volunteers in the community for tutoring, counseling, and cultural programs, and better communication between school faculty and citizens in the community.

Although local zoning policies fall outside the scope of this report, such policies clearly affect the ability of school districts to use schools as centers of community. If zoning laws prohibit certain uses in residential zones, for example, they may indirectly rule out the possibility of providing health, social, and other services in school facilities.

Maintenance

Deferred maintenance on existing schools can very well set the stage for unnecessary and costly expenses, demolition of historic schools, the loss of schools as neighborhood anchors, or all of the above. Sometimes the failure to maintain schools properly reflects the simple lack of funds for maintenance; often it reflects a deliberate strategy to let buildings deteriorate and then to use their deterioration as the justification for demolishing a school and replacing it with a new one. This is called “demolition by neglect.”

Several states’ school facility policies affirmatively address the importance of maintaining existing schools. In Massachusetts, for example, school districts must spend at least half of their maintenance budgets each fiscal year. School districts that fail to do so may not receive state funding for capital projects in the future. Massachusetts also offers “incentive percentage points” to school districts with excellent or good maintenance ratings. Districts with poor track records for maintaining existing schools receive no points in this area. Massachusetts’ policies for improving the maintenance of schools were adopted following a policy advocacy campaign led by Historic Massachusetts, Inc. (now called Preservation Mass) in 2000.

Vermont’s policies, too, guard against deferred maintenance. “No state construction shall be available for any proposed project or construction which has arisen in whole or in part from significant deferred maintenance,” say the rules. Deferred maintenance is defined as “costs for construction repairs or other improvements necessitated by the lack of reasonable and timely maintenance, including periodic minor repairs of school buildings and mechanical systems.”

Washington State requires schools to spend at least two percent of their operational funds on school facility maintenance in the case of schools built after January 1993. (This requirement does not apply to schools built prior to that date.) Maine has a similar requirement, but it applies to all schools. Moreover, school districts in Maine must establish facility operation and maintenance plans for school buildings and report the results of both to the State Department of Education.

Although older schools are sometimes equated with inferior schools – and new schools with superior schools – a more relevant factor is the maintenance and care given to a school. As Mark Schneider, an education expert at the State University of New York, has pointed out, “Building age is an amorphous concept and should not itself be used as an indicator of a facility’s impact on student performance. Many schools built as civic monuments in the 1920s and 1930s still provide, with some modernization, excellent learning environments; many newer schools built in the cost-conscious 1960s and 1970s do not.”¹³

In short, maintenance matters.

Final Thoughts

As noted at the outset of this report, many of this nation’s old and historic public schools were built at a time when public education was revered. The public school was seen as a temple to democracy and learning. Although many historic schools have suffered from deferred maintenance and other problems, they were generally solidly built, often with great craftsmanship and architectural distinction. With the help of creative architects and sensible state policies, many school districts have demonstrated that historic schools can be brought up to 21st-century standards and continue to serve the neighborhoods they anchored 50, 75, or even 100 years ago. The Bonham Elementary

School in San Antonio, Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane, East Boston High School in Boston, and the Carl Schurz School in Chicago are just a few of many examples of this.

When updated to meet the demands of a 21st-century education, a historic school building provides a place in which children not only learn about, but also experience history. An older school that has anchored a neighborhood for generations represents tradition and continuity. These are important assets to a child. Perhaps it is the same building where a student's parent or grandparent went to school.

Several years ago, the Janney Elementary School in Washington, D. C., celebrated its 75th anniversary. In the Janney library, members of the Parent-Teacher Association found carefully preserved scrapbooks maintained by previous parent groups. The books contained photographs and news clips from long forgotten events. From the books, the PTA was able to reconstruct the history not only of the school but also of the neighborhood. Not all communities are fortunate enough to have such records, but a community with a historic school building embodies the essence of its neighborhood. It is as though voices and footsteps from previous generations become part of the bricks and mortar. As Washington, D.C., City Council Member Sharon Ambrose has observed, "The value [of historic buildings] is their contribution to the fabric of the community...[they] help to generate a sense of community and continuity."

A STRATEGY FOR POLICY REFORM

- Identify state school facility policies that make it difficult for communities to preserve – or build new – schools that are small and community-centered.
- Determine whether harmful policies can be rectified through administrative measures or whether they require legislation.
- Develop a policy reform agenda for school facilities and share it with potential allies who can work through the political process.
- Identify areas in which there are policy vacuums.
- Find model policies and adapt them to your state.
- Monitor policies to make sure they are properly implemented.
- Educate the public about its rights under the new policies.

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire on State School Facility Policies

1. Funding: Does the state provide capital funds for K-12 school construction and renovation? If so, how much did it budget for this purpose in Fiscal Year 2002? How much has been budgeted for FY 2003?
2. Number of Students & Schools: How many students are currently enrolled in the state's public schools, grades K through 12? What is the total number of public schools, K-12, in the state?
3. New Construction vs. Renovation: Some states have a policy whereby, if the costs of renovating an existing school exceed a certain percentage – e.g., 60% -- of the cost of replacing that school with a new school, the state recommends (or requires) that the school district build new. Does your state have such a policy? If so, what is it?
4. Site Size: Does your state recommend/require that school sites have a certain number of acres? If so, what are the recommendations/requirements? If the state does set acreage standards, can school districts obtain waivers to them?
5. Urban Schools: If your state does provide funding for school construction/renovation, can funds be used to provide structured or underground parking for schools located in dense urban areas where land for parking is scarce and/or expensive?
6. Multi-level/Wood-frame Schools: Are multi-level schools allowed in your state? Wood frame schools, provided they meet relevant life safety codes?
7. Planning: Does the state require school districts to involve the public – or the broader community -- in school facility planning? If so, how? Does the state exempt school districts from local planning, zoning, and other growth management policies? Or must school districts comply with such policies?
8. Maintenance: Does the state require that school districts devote a certain percentage of their operating budgets to school facility maintenance? If so, what is that percentage? Does the state offer any special incentives for good maintenance of school facilities? If so, what are they?
9. Oversight: Does the state have any policies requiring or encouraging oversight of capital spending projects by citizens groups? If so, what are they (or can they be found on the web)?
10. Preservation: Does the state do anything to make the preservation or renovation of historic schools easier? Any special funding benefits for preserving schools?

11. Generic School Designs (Prototypes): Does the state promote the use of generic, or “prototype” schools? If so, are there financial incentives to using generic/prototypical such designs?
12. Disposition: What is the state policy on disposition of schools taken out of service?
13. Schools as Community Centers/Shared Use: Does the state have any special programs to promote the role of schools as community anchors? Any special policies to promote – or discourage – shared/joint use of schools? Use of schools for community purposes? Relationships between schools & park districts?
14. Student transportation: How much does the state spend annually to transport students to school by bus? Does the state have any data showing how many students walk to school vs. being bused? Have student transportation costs paid by the state risen in recent years?
15. Litigation on Capital Spending: Has there been litigation in your state during the last 10 years affecting capital funding for public school facilities?
16. Database: Does the state maintain a central database on school age, size, condition, or other characteristics? If so, who is responsible for maintaining the database? Are the data updated periodically? If so, how often? Are the data available electronically? If so, what is the web site?
17. Inspections: Does your state conduct school facility assessments? Inspections?
18. Contact Information/Web: What/who is the best contact for information regarding your state’s school facilities policies? Is there a web address for the state’s school facility guidelines? If so, what is it?

A MENU OF MODEL STATE POLICY FOR SCHOOL FACILITIES

What follows is a compilation of state policy options aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- Making it easier for citizens to preserve and renovate (to 21st-century standards, whenever possible) existing schools that have served as community centers for decades, while allowing new schools being built today to serve as **centers of community**
- Putting renovation and new construction options on a **level playing field**
- Ensuring **broad and well-informed public involvement** in decisions regarding school facilities so that they inspire a sense of ownership and pride by communities served by the schools
- **Coordinating** and integrating school facility planning with general community and land-use **planning** so that these types of planning support each other, rather than working at cross-purposes, and promote community revitalization and preservation goals
- Ensuring that schools are **adequately maintained** and kept in good condition
- Ensuring that **historic schools are protected and preserved**, whenever possible, preferably for continued use as schools, when these buildings can reasonably and economically be updated to meet contemporary education needs, but when that is not possible, for other contemporary purposes

For the most part, these options are drawn from good ideas already in place in various states. In some cases, however, they reflect ideas suggested by architects, school officials, and everyday citizens whom the National Trust for Historic Preservation has interviewed as part of its research into school facility policies.

Schools As Centers of Community

- [Note: Excessive acreage standards sometimes preclude, albeit unintentionally, the possibility of building – or keeping – schools in or near the center of a community. Other times that put pressure on school districts to destroy older homes in neighborhoods surrounding long-standing schools.] Maryland leaves school site size decisions up to local school districts, and Indiana exempts historic schools from acreage requirements applied to new schools. Such policies help to eliminate (or reduce) arbitrary or excessive acreage requirements that often destroy schools that have functioned as centers of community for many decades. The policies also allow new schools to fit gracefully into new or existing

residential neighborhoods. Such an “easy fit” can make schools seem more accessible to local community residents.

- Under its recently approved Proposition 47, California permits state funds to be used to cover costs associated with facilities – e.g., libraries – jointly used by schools and community residents.
- Colorado’s “Great Outdoors Colorado” program encourages – and provides funds for – collaborative efforts involving schools and communities to create playgrounds, outdoor athletic facilities, and parks on school grounds.
- Iowa law encourages the use of schools as centers of community and allows political subdivisions to cooperate in a variety of ways with school districts to provide space for community libraries, meals-on-wheels programs for senior citizens, etc.
- Minnesota encourages school/community partnerships and sometimes provides grants to carry out such partnerships.
- North Carolina’s *Community Schools Act* promotes “greater community involvement in the public schools and greater community use of school facilities.”
- Texas is considering legislation that would permit school boards to transfer older schools being taken out of service to nonprofit organizations for use as community centers without having to charge fair market value for the schools. This would allow former school buildings to continue to serve community purposes.

A Level Playing Field for New Construction and Renovation Options

Examples of states whose policies help to ensure that renovation options, and not just new construction, are considered include:

- New Jersey, whose policy states in part: “All school facilities shall be deemed suitable for rehabilitation unless a pre-construction evaluation undertaken by the [school] district demonstrates to the satisfaction of the commissioner that the structure might pose a risk to the safety of the occupants even after rehabilitation, or that rehabilitation is not cost-effective.” New Jersey has also adopted a Rehabilitation Sub-code that makes the rehabilitation of older buildings, including schools, easier and more economical. This code is akin to “smart codes” that are being adopted by a growing number of states, including Maryland, North Carolina, and Rhode Island.

- Connecticut law (Public Act 96-270) makes comprehensive, “like new” renovations to existing schools eligible for the same percentage of reimbursement from the state as new schools.
- In Massachusetts, the School Building Assistance Program provides “incentive percentage points” for school renovation/reuse proposals. Such points enhance a proposed project’s prospects for state aid. School districts seeking state funds must fully consider all available options for school facility needs, including rehabilitation of existing buildings. “Projects calling for new school construction shall be approved and funded only where the feasibility and cost of renovating an existing school building, or of acquiring an existing building...which [is] structurally sound, available within the community, and adaptable for school purposes, has been studied and the applicant demonstrates that the proposed new [school] construction is the best available alternative to meet the projected need...”
- In North Carolina, a state law states: “If a board of education is considering building a new school building to replace an older school building, the board shall not invest any construction money in any new building unless [it] submit[s] to the State Superintendent and the North Carolina Historical Commission an analysis that compares the costs and feasibility of building the new building and of renovating the existing building and that indicates the desirability of building the new building.”
- In Rhode Island, if new school construction is proposed, the school district must demonstrate that such construction is the best alternative and must have considered renovation options if an existing building is available. The district must also consider indirect costs associated with new construction, such as the need for new sewers, roads, transportation facilities or extended utilities. Four percent incentive bonuses are awarded for school repair and/or renovation projects when school districts seek state funding.
- Vermont policy states that “funding for renovations, including major repairs, and additions to existing school buildings, shall be given preference over new school development taking into consideration the educational needs of students and the costs of rehabilitation do not unreasonably exceed the costs of such new development.”

Broad and Well-Informed Public Involvement in School Facility Planning

- Kentucky policy calls for broad community involvement in school facility planning as well as public forums and public hearings to give citizens a voice in school facility decisions.

- In Minnesota, school districts are required to present balanced and objective information to voters on proposed school bonds.
- In Vermont, if a state-assisted project involves a renovation to a historic school, school districts are urged to include professionals with expertise and experience in historic preservation. Vermont's School Construction Guide states: "The broader the participation in the development of a school construction proposal, the better will be the school board's presentation of the project to the voters for funding."

Coordinated and Integrated School Facility and Land-Use Planning

- A policy recommended by the Delaware Governor's Cabinet Committee on State Planning Issues (December 1999) states in part: "State investments in public facilities, such as schools...would be strategically located to foster community identity and vitality, in a manner than complements the historic character of these communities. In communities, the state will renovate, reconstruct or replace existing educational facilities that have community support and fit into sensible development patterns..."
- In Maine, among the factors that the State Board of Education must consider when it reviews school district requests for site approval for new schools are: the extent to which the community was involved in the site selection process, whether a "renovation vs. new construction analysis" was performed, and the impact of the site on student transportation, vehicular traffic and student safety. The Board also considers whether a proposed school site falls within a locally designated growth area identified in the municipality's comprehensive plan. Maine's "*ABC's of School Site Selection*" urges school districts to avoid school sprawl, consider school renovations or expansions in central locations whenever possible, and to analyze school sites for their proximity to village centers and established neighborhoods.
- In Maryland, school construction projects must: be consistent with the local government's plans for growth and community revitalization. They should also encourage revitalization of existing neighborhoods and communities.
- The Rhode Island Department of Education has developed an addendum to its application for financial assistance that explains the concept of "smart growth schools."
- Washington State's Growth Management Act requires schools, as well as other public facilities, to be located within designated urban growth areas whenever possible.

Proper and Adequate Maintenance of School Facilities

- In Alaska, school districts are encouraged to develop maintenance management plans and maintenance training programs.
- In Florida, school boards are required to develop school facility maintenance policies that include a timetable and funding for the correction of deficiencies found during annual safety inspections.
- In Maine, the state operates a School Revolving Renovation Fund to support small-scale renovation projects that, when carried out, can help to avoid problems resulting from deferred maintenance.
- In Massachusetts, school districts receive “incentive percentage points,” which enhance prospects for state financial aid, when they receive excellent or good school “maintenance ratings.” Districts with poor track records in this area receive zero points.
- Vermont may deny applications for state financial assistance for new schools if school maintenance has been deferred. State guidelines state: “No state construction aid shall be available for any proposed project or construction which has arisen in whole or in part from significant deferred maintenance.” “Deferred maintenance” is defined as “costs for construction repairs or other improvements necessitated by the lack of reasonable and timely maintenance including periodic minor repairs of school buildings and mechanical systems.”

Protection for Historic Schools

- In Florida, when new construction or renovation projects involve a historic resource, the local school board must notify the state Division of Historical Resources and give it an opportunity to comment on state-assisted projects *prior to the approval or expenditure of any state funds*. In addition, school boards “shall initiate measures in consultation with design professionals *having preservation expertise* [emphasis added] and with the Division...to assure that where a historic property is to be demolished or substantially altered, timely steps are taken to determine that no feasible and prudent alternative to the proposed demolition or alteration exists, and where no alternative is determined to exist, to assure that timely steps are taken either to avoid or mitigate the adverse effects...” School rehabilitation projects assisted with state funds must comply with special standards intended to ensure that character-defining features of historic schools are preserved.
- In Indiana, school boards are expected to consider the impact of their decisions on the economic and other interests of the community. School facility feasibility and

impact studies should compare the cost of new vs. renovated schools when the latter are eligible for listing on the State or National Register of Historic Places. Preliminary plans and feasibility studies submitted by local school boards to the state Department of Education “should include...an attempt to renovate and/or remodel schools determined...to be eligible for the State or National Registers...”

- Mississippi has established a Community Heritage Preservation Grant Program that provides grants to rehabilitate historic school buildings throughout the state.
- In New York, school districts must contact the State Historic Preservation office to seek its advice as to whether historic resources may be affected by a state-assisted project and, if so, how any substantial adverse effects can be avoided or mitigated. The policy applies to renovations involving any school over 50 years.
- Pennsylvania policy states: “School districts should take all reasonable efforts to preserve and protect school buildings that are on or eligible for local or National historic registers. If for safety, educational, economic, or other reasons, it is not feasible to renovate an existing school building, school districts are encouraged to develop an adaptive reuse plan for the building that incorporates an historic easement or covenant to avoid the building’s abandonment or demolition.” Historic schools taken out of service may be conveyed by school districts to nonprofit organizations and used for historical purposes for no remuneration. [Note: Some states require school districts to obtain fair market value for schools taken out of service, thereby making it difficult for nonprofit organizations to adaptively reuse these structures.]
- In Vermont, the state historic preservation officer is provided with copies of plans for state-assisted school construction and renovation projects and given an opportunity to comment on and approve the plans. State policy also allows an increase in the amount of state financial assistance provided for a school project if a historic school is involved. Vermont guidelines state: “The historic character of existing buildings should be respected in rehabilitation projects. Attention to the visual character of new construction will contribute greatly to the community’s pride and sense of accomplishment with the final project.” Vermont also encourages school districts to develop an adaptive reuse plan that incorporates a historic preservation easement to protect historic schools being taken out of service from being abandoned or demolished.

In its Year 2000 report, *Why Johnny Can't Walk to School: Historic Neighborhood Schools in the Age of Sprawl*, the National Trust for Historic Preservation made 12 policy recommendations aimed at preserving – and properly maintaining – community-centered historic schools that have served neighborhoods for decades. While some of these recommendations are implicitly incorporated into options noted above, the original list of recommendations is repeated here as a point of reference.

1. Put historic neighborhood schools on a level playing field with new schools. Eliminate funding biases that favor new construction over school renovation and good stewardship.
2. Eliminate arbitrary acreage standards that undermine the ability of established communities to retain and upgrade (or replace on the same site, when necessary) historic and older schools that could continue to serve as centers of community.
3. Avoid “mega-school sprawl” – massive schools in remote locations that stimulate sprawl development and are accessible only by car or bus.
4. Develop procedures for accepting land donated by developers for new schools. Land in “sprawl locations” that are inappropriate for schools should be rejected.
5. Encourage school districts to cooperate with other institutions – e.g., government agencies, nonprofits, churches, and private businesses – to share playgrounds, ball fields, and parking as well as to provide transit services, when appropriate.
6. Establish guidelines, training programs, and funding mechanisms to ensure adequate school building maintenance. Create disincentives for school districts to defer needed maintenance and allow buildings to fall into disrepair.
7. Require feasibility studies comparing the costs of new schools with those of renovating existing schools before new schools are built and existing ones abandoned. Hire only architects with experience in rehabilitation work to conduct such studies. These studies should also consider the impact of a school’s closing on existing neighborhoods, long-term transportation costs, and municipal service burdens. Finally, these studies must be presented to the public for comment before projects move forward. If they are presented only to the superintendent and school facilities committee, their use is limited.
8. Re-examine exemptions given to local school districts from local planning, zoning, and growth management laws.
9. Work to ensure that minimum of 50% of the students can walk or bike to school in cities, towns, and suburbs. Promote safe-routes-to-school legislation in the states.
10. When a historic school cannot be preserved and reused, school districts and/or local governments should implement plans for the building’s adaptive use or replacement so that it does not become a source of blight in the neighborhood.
11. Promote “smart codes” legislation to encourage the rehabilitation and modernization of historic schools as well as other serviceable buildings.

12. Provide education and training in school renovation techniques and options for school facility planners, contractors, private consultants, architects, school board members, municipal officials and others.

¹ Thirty-eight percent of all historic districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places are located in census tracts whose poverty rate exceeds 20 percent.

² Among these reports are the following: *A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools*, by Kerri Rubman (www.preservationbooks.org); *Saving Ohio's Historic Schools*, a web-based citizens guide developed in partnership with Heritage Ohio, Inc. (www.heritageohio.org); *Why Johnny Can't Walk to School: Historic Neighborhood Schools in the Age of Sprawl*, by Constance E. Beaumont with Elizabeth G. Pianca (www.nationaltrust.org/issues/historic_schools.html); and Case Stories on Successfully Renovated Historic Schools (www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/studies.html).

³ *Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizen's Guide for Planning and Design*, p. 2. U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. 2000. Visit www.ed.gov/inits/construction/ctty-centers.html.

⁴ See *Making the Difference: Research and Practices in Community Schools*, by the Coalition for Community Schools. (Forthcoming: May 2003)

⁵ "Out of School and Out of Trouble," by Jenna Davis. See *State Legislatures* magazine, May 2001, p. 29.

⁶ See "Suburban Disconnect: Human Needs Overlooked When Growth is Unplanned," by Delton W. Young, in the November 21, 1995 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. See also *Wayward Kids: The Psychology of Antisocial Youth*, by Delton W. Young. (Jason Aronson, Inc.)

⁷ *For Generations to Come: A Community Leadership Guide to Renew Public School Buildings*, by Mary Filardo and Pat Bryant (2002), p. 7. Washington, D.C.: 21st Century School Fund.

⁸ See p. 8, *The Cost of Sprawl*, Maine State Planning Office. May 1997.

⁹ These states include: Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, and North Carolina.

¹⁰ For helpful ideas concerning school facility planning, see *Schools as Centers of Community* and *For Generations to Come*, both of which are cited above.

¹¹ The term "standards," rather than "requirements," is used advisedly here. Although many states draw a distinction between the two – i.e., the former is a recommendation; the latter, a regulation – at the local community level, this is often a distinction without a difference. That's because it can be very difficult to citizens groups to penetrate bureaucracies and find out what the rules really say.

¹² The CEFPI *Planning Guide*, in which these site standards are found, is undergoing a review at this writing. It is not known at this time whether the recommended standards will be changed.

¹³ See "Do School Facilities Affect Academic Outcomes?" by Mark Schneider, p. 16. November 2002. National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (www.edfacilities.org)