Model Policies for Preserving Historic Schools

This article is based on Constance Beaumont’s State Policies and School Facilities (www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools) and the publication Recommended Policies for Public School Facilities (www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/policies.html), researched and drafted by Ms. Stevenson and Sydney Becker, state and local policy program assistant in the Department of Public Policy.

From 1995 to 2004 approximately $253 billion was spent in the United States on public school construction and renovation. While many districts have chosen to retain and modernize their older and historic schools, some districts have demolished their schools because they believe that older school buildings cannot be brought up to modern standards or because state policies set unreasonable standards for rehabilitation. Clearly, all older schools cannot, and should not, be saved. However, there are many that are, or can become, high-performing facilities that meet the needs of students, teachers, and the community.

The source of funding and the decision-making bodies for school facilities vary widely from state to state. However, there are common policies and/or legislative approaches that appear in the states with the most successful school facility programs. These policies emphasize flexibility, decision-making based on facts and expert advice, and cooperation between and among decision-makers and community members. Key provisions include:

• Flexible acreage standards that allow communities to determine the best use of the site—whether it is an existing site or a new site.
• Policies that encourage joint planning for and joint use of community facilities, including school buildings, libraries, sports areas, etc., to maximize community investment and use.
• Policies and procedures that allow private funds, or other public funds, to be used in conjunction with school funding to maximize resources available for the facility and the site.
• Policies that require feasibility studies comparing the cost of building a new school with the cost of renovating, and perhaps expanding, an existing school.
• Policies that facilitate the sale or reuse of an older or historic school building for another purpose if the building cannot be renovated as a school.

What Works?

Coordinate Planning Efforts

Coordinating school facility planning with other community planning allows the community to evaluate the benefits of co-location or proximal location of school facilities and other public infrastructure such as libraries, recreation centers, health clinics, transportation routes, etc. Requiring consultation with city planning and other community planning agencies assures that the necessary connections between processes are made for the benefit of the community. For example, an older school might not have a large gymnasium and it might be cost effective, as well as socially beneficial, to locate a planned new playground or community center next to the school.

Since 1990 West Virginia has required each county to have a Facilities Master Plan developed with input from an architect, an educational facility professional, and a local planning committee. The state of Washington requires school districts to survey contiguous school districts to identify unused or underutilized school facilities prior to receiving state funds. Collaborative planning is required in New Jersey, Maine, and Rhode Island. Florida directs school boards and local governments to “agree on a process for assuring coordination and cooperation in the provision of educational facilities.”

Keep Schools as Centers of Community

In smaller towns and dense urban areas, schools have always been a center of community life. Today, communities and neighborhoods are reexamining their schools to maximize their public use and value. In some cases this means opening up the gymnasium after hours and on weekends. Other times it means something more...
that informs best practices for the renovation and construction of schools. They too should be disqualified from further work on the project to assure impartiality. The building program should be prepared by architects with experience in new school buildings. Individuals involved in preparing the studies would be undertaken by architects who are knowledgeable about historic landmarks through Demolition Review available from the National Trust’s law department, 202-588-6035.)

Identify and Protect Important Historic Schools

Most states have a program that identifies historic buildings and sites across the state. However, only one state, Connecticut, considers its survey (which includes historic schools) complete; no other state can, or does, make that claim. Thus, many historic schools have no formal recognition. Laws or policies that require the evaluation of significance for buildings when public funds will be spent on them assure that a thoughtful assessment of the project will be undertaken. These laws can be established at the state level (New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont) or at the community level (Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Boulder, Colo.). They usually do not require that a historic building be preserved, only that the pros and cons be seriously considered prior to action. There are also specific ordinances that delay demolition until judgments about significance can be made. (See Julia Miller, “Protecting Potential Landmarks through Demolition Review” available from the National Trust’s law department, 202-588-6035.)

Require Feasibility Studies

Feasibility studies for the continued use of older schools should be undertaken by architects who are knowledgeable about historic buildings. Individuals involved in preparing the studies would be ineligible to bid on the project. Cost estimates for any new building should be prepared by architects with experience in new school construction. They too should be disqualified from further work on the project to assure impartiality. The building program should establish that all associated costs will be considered a part of the estimate. For example, in new construction, land costs should be included as well as ongoing costs for transportation if the new school requires transporting more students because they cannot reach school by walking. Other considerations include demolition costs and materials disposal costs.

Massachusetts requires that applicants for school facility fund-
take into account the associated costs of new construction—land, demolition, disposal of hazardous materials, transportation, infrastructure expansion, etc. Second, when a school is relocated outside the neighborhood, the community loses an important part of its identity and a civic anchor. Third, if the costs are the same or very close, it makes sense to utilize existing building materials and maintain the community character provided by an older school while assuring a quality environment—often close to the housing served by the school. In Maryland, state law requires that school construction “encourage revitalization of existing facilities, neighborhoods and communities.”

Poor or Deferred Maintenance

In school districts where maintenance is a low priority, schools become candidates for replacement unnecessarily. Maintenance is a low priority in some school districts where officials like to see new construction that highlights public dollars expended. However, long-term maintenance assures the best use of tax dollars because it prolongs the useful life of buildings and reduces major repair costs. In Massachusetts, half of the state-provided dollars must be spent on maintenance. Maine requires that at least 2 percent of the operational funds be spent on maintenance. Vermont denies new state construction funds if the need for a new facility is the result of poor or deferred maintenance.

Building Codes

Some states set standards for the number of stories and for materials allowable for school buildings in general or for schools for certain grade levels, such as elementary schools. Safety of the students should be the most important factor. However, modern fire and life-safety systems and modern materials obviate the need for outdated requirements. Some states have adopted the International Building Code that assures the protection of occupants by allowing sufficient variations to address life-safety standards for historic and other buildings while allowing the historic integrity of the building to be maintained.

To Learn More

This article is meant only as a starting point for those interested in preserving historic and older schools. There are substantial public policy matters relating to planning, management, finance, and schools as centers of community that space constraints prohibited us from including here. These issues are addressed in detail in Recommended Policies for Public School Facilities. This publication, produced by the National Trust Department of Public Policy for the BEST (Building Educational Success Together) collaborative (www.21csf.org), can be downloaded from www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/policies.html.

Katherine Stevenson is a Public Policy Fellow in the Department of Public Policy.

Model School Facilities Policies by State

Arizona
Public/private use of school buildings (AZ statute Title 15-364). Annual inventory of buildings, directs funds for maintenance if found out of compliance. Established adequacy standards and a “Deficiency Correction Fund” to aid schools that don’t meet the adequacy standards. Arizona Statutes Title 15-2031 “Students First” and 15-2021 Deficiencies Correction Fund.

California

Connecticut

Florida
Inventory of school conditions every 5 years (www.firm.edu/doc/edfacil/flip/fish.htm), provides for review by the Division of Historical Resources if a historic school is receiving state funds. The state also requires that a feasibility study be undertaken to determine if there is a prudent or feasible alternative if a historic school is proposed for demolition or substantial alteration.

Hawaii
Inventory of school conditions is maintained by the State Department of Education.

Iowa
Community use of schools. Public agency cooperation. Iowa Code Title 1, Subtitle 10.
**Indiana**

Before a historic site or structure owned by the state or a historic site or structure listed in the Indiana Register of Historic Sites and Structures or the National Register of Historic Places may be altered, demolished, or removed by a project funded in whole or in part by the state, a certificate of approval must be obtained from the Historic Preservation Review Board. [www.in.gov/dnr/historic/106statereview.html](http://www.in.gov/dnr/historic/106statereview.html).

**Kentucky**

Requires broad public involvement in school facility planning. KRS 100.361 requires that “adequate information concerning [state] proposals shall be furnished to the planning commission.” KRS 100.324 provides that proposals for public facilities be “referred to the commission to be reviewed in light of its agreement the comprehensive plan,” and that permits for construction or occupancy of such facilities are delayed for a period of up to 60 days in order to allow the commission to issue a report concerning the consistency of the public facility with the comprehensive plan.

**Maine**

Inventory of school conditions on a 3-year cycle (Maine Statutes Title 20A Education, Part 7: School Finance, Chapter 609). Suggests that schools annually invest 2 percent of replacement value for future renewal (www.maine.gov/education/const/pw000.html). Assesses public involvement, the existence of a “renovation vs. new construction” analysis, and location within a locally designated growth development zone as part of the funding criteria.

**Maryland**


**Massachusetts**

Requires feasibility and cost analysis of renovation before new construction (www.doc.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr38.html?section=03). Requires applicants for state funding to have spent 50 percent of the previous year’s funds on “foundation utility and ordinary maintenance.” www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/70b-8.htm.

**New York**

School districts must consult with the state historic preservation office if state funds will affect any building over 50 years of age. [http://nysparks.state.ny.us/shpo/environ/freq_ques.htm](http://nysparks.state.ny.us/shpo/environ/freq_ques.htm).

**North Carolina**

Community use of schools (www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/ByArticle/Chapter_115C/Article_13.html). Applicants for state funds must demonstrate the cost and feasibility of new construction and of renovating the existing building.

**Ohio**

Half a million dollars levy for maintenance—schools must track the funds. Ohio Statutes Section 3318.35 O.R.C.

**Pennsylvania**

Encourages the retention (all reasonable efforts) and adaptive use of school buildings by public or nonprofit groups. www.pde.state.pa.us/k12/cwp/view.asp?Q=56801&=11.

**Rhode Island**

District must demonstrate new construction is the best alternative and must have considered renovation options if an existing building is available. The analysis must include related infrastructure costs. Incentive bonuses are awarded for repair and renovation. www.ridoe.net/funding/construction/glossary.htm.

**South Carolina**

Prohibits minimum acreage requirements. www.scstatehouse.net/code/t59c023.htm.

**Vermont**

Funding for repairs, renovations, and additions are given preference over new construction, and when a historic school is involved, the state recommends the participation of a preservation professional. The state historic preservation office is provided the opportunity to review the plans for state-assisted school renovation and construction. The state also allows an increase in the amount of state funds for a historic school. The state also encourages districts to develop adaptive use plans for school buildings that are no longer needed. www.state.vt.us/educ/new/html/pgm_construction/guide_05.html.

**Washington**


**West Virginia**


**Wisconsin**

Annual inventory of school building conditions (Wisconsin Statute 115.33(4)).