

UCF Team Working Paper

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Schools and Community Development

Note: The following discussion examines the relationship between smart growth concepts and schools. It is based on experiences in communities throughout the nation, and on relevant planning literature. Many of the issues discussed are relevant for Volusia County, but this paper does not directly examine Volusia County issues and practices.

“School sprawl” is the phenomenon of building spreadout schools in unwalkable environments. Sprawling schools are difficult for kids to reach on foot or bicycle, increase automobile traffic, and are often too isolated to serve as community centers, and too large for children to feel a sense of belonging. Some school districts have turned away from the trend toward sprawling schools and have discovered that “smart growth schools” bring a range of benefits for the district, the students, and the community.

Smart growth policies have not made much of the distinction between schools and other public infrastructure. Still, some growth management programs have had considerable influence over school facility planning. Efforts against school sprawl are concentrated around three separate issues:

1. *Site size.* All states have regulations pertaining to the siting, design and construction of new schools, as well as the rehabilitation of existing schools. Under the model rules (CEFPI), an elementary school of 500 students would require at least 15 acres and a high school for 2,000 would require at least 50 acres. To satisfy the standard, school districts must often destroy nearby homes, parks and neighborhoods, or they

must move to ‘sprawl locations’ in outlying areas. Florida’s requirements are smaller than the national average.

2. *Funding formulas.* The mix of state and local funding for school construction varies considerably across the country, as do the rules that govern school district’s use of state dollars. The basic rule dictates that the local district cannot receive state funding to fix up a school if the rehabilitation cost exceeds 60 percent of the school replacement cost. Progress is being made to modify funding formulas so that they no longer favor new construction.
3. *Walkable schools.* Across the nation, medical experts warn that decreased physical exercise among school-age children is leading to unprecedented levels of obesity. So. There is a need to build new neighborhoods that are pedestrian friendly and retrofit suburban neighborhoods so that children can walk to school safely.

Many communities are discovering the benefits of using smart growth principles in creating schools that meet the needs of both parents and students. Smart growth schools are usually characterized by smaller size, and they make a good use of existing resources, such as historic school buildings. Smart growth schools are located within neighborhoods and fit into the scale and design of the neighborhood. They also act as a neighborhood anchor and community centers. Finally, the community is often involved in school facility planning. Smart growth schools have many benefits to the community and students.

1. *Inspire grater community involvement.*
2. *Improve academic achievement.* Since many smart growth schools are small, they also enjoy the academic excellence associated with smaller schools. Students in smaller schools earn higher GPA, participate more in extracurricular activities, and have better attendance records and a heightened sense of belonging.

3. *Save money.* While conventional wisdom holds that large, new schools are cost effective, studies show that they can result in unexpected expenses in transportation, security and other areas.
4. *Improve student health.* Smart growth schools help students get back to basics: back to walking and biking to school. They help children get active and create a better environment for kids. Well-planned school sites can reduce traffic around schools. This reduces air pollution and leads to a number of health benefits for children.
5. *Improve environmental quality.* Good school planning and design can yield a number of environmental benefits and maintain or even enhance the school's functionality. In addition to the potential for easing air pollution, smart growth schools can reduce the need for parking, reducing the impervious surface created by parking lots. This in turn reduces runoff and water pollution.

Just as schools going up on the periphery of a community can promote sprawl, so a decision to build or renovate in the central city can generate revitalization. School building decisions have an impact that stretches far beyond the education of community's students. Those concerned about stemming school sprawl are beginning to focus on one key consideration: not how decisions are made, but who makes them. They are questioning the freedom that school boards and administrators have had to weight their own criteria separately from the wishes of other public bodies.

Building of new schools is and important aspects of community development. New and alternative design approaches to school facilities planning are important for mixed-use developers to consider when using public schools as community-development tools. There

are some models that have been shown to be more conducive to learning, better for environment and more cost-effective. These models include the following:

1. *Small-size schools.* School districts will not be able to accommodate their need for new schools, especially in older urban neighborhoods where developed land is scarce, if they continue to use the traditional, big-box school design. Studies have shown that small-size schools are better models for learning environments than the traditional structure. At first glance, building small size schools to cope with overcrowding and need to accommodate a growing school-age population may seem counterproductive. However, building on smaller or oddly shaped parcels opens up the possibility of building more schools, and speeds up the delivery of new schools. Small-size schools create a sense of the community within the school, as well as beyond the classroom walls. They also encourage infill development, which reduces sprawl and pollution from bus transportation and encourages children to walk to school.
2. *Infill development and adaptive reuse.* The adaptive reuse of buildings, such as old strip malls, abandoned warehouses and other under-utilized properties, provides new possibilities for school-facilities design. The use of existing properties prevents the negative disruption of the neighborhood fabric. In urban areas, these properties are situated in central locations, in contrast to outlying areas where students would need to be bused. Furthermore, the recycling of land is also a strategy for neighborhood revitalization and economic development. Underutilized land and property can be regenerated by the presence of a school.
3. *Joint-use model* (co-location, collaborative planning). Joint-use changes the role of the school in the neighborhood, from an isolated institution for school-age children to a community hub. On-site services that promote intergenerational use, such as senior center or computer learning center, also give seniors and childless

professionals a vested interest in their neighborhood school. Another type of joint-use model is the sharing of resources. Combining community facilities such as libraries, parks and meeting spaces is a sound community strategy that not only saves money and space, but also unites the public school and neighborhood through shared uses.

Examples of mixed-use design and community-based schools:

1. James F Oyster Bilingual Elementary School - Washington, DC. Part of the school's land was sold to developers to get the necessary funds for the school. The new school was rebuilt, rather than renovated, to make the best use of a piece of land now only half the size of its former site. The key to the success of this public/private development was the value, size and location of Oyster's land, and also commitment perseverance of the community, particularly parents and staff.
2. Forest Lane Academy of arts and Communication - Dallas, TX. The building of the magnet school has had a big impact on the area's rental market and has attracted new residents to the area. The school has spurred revitalization in the area. School staff and parents worked together to create safe ways for children to cross the busy thoroughfare near the school and, as a result, 95 percent of students walk to school.
3. Jefferson Elementary School - Manitowoc, WI. Architects planned the building in two phases so that Jefferson students could attend school throughout the construction. To save money, the community asked the district to re-use what they could from the old school to rebuild the new one. The school district and the neighborhood now have a new, economically built, up-to-date, accessible school, which was done without relocation.
4. The Village at Indian Hill Pueblo School Complex - Pomona, CA. The Pomona Unified School District built the new Pueblo School Complex into the Plaza at

Indian Hill Mall. The redevelopment of the mall helped jump-start other neighborhood revitalization efforts. A new transit center is being built in the area as well as a performing art center. Other changes in the neighborhood include: new housing, rehabilitation of commercial properties, and investment in new public infrastructure around the mall, new commercial ventures, and an overall decrease in crime.

5. The H.H. Battle Academy of Teaching and Learning and the Tommye F. Brown Academy of Classical Studies - Chattanooga, TN. To give a new life to downtown Chattanooga, opening the schools to children whose parents work downtown was proposed. The key to enticing downtown workers to send their children to these schools – and to enticing people to move downtown – would be to offer unique educational opportunities at the schools.
6. Centennial Place Elementary School - Atlanta, GA. In 1996, a planned community replaced the nation's oldest public housing. Apartments, townhouses, a YMCA, a police station, and a new school were built to create Centennial Place, a mixed-income, and mixed-race neighborhood.
7. Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez Fundamental Intermediate School – Santa Ana, CA. School district had to find new, unlikely spaces to build schools to accommodate its growing student population. One of the most unique schools that the District built is Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez School, which was built on top of a parking garage behind a shopping mall. By using the garage parking as a base for the school, the architects were able to preserve open space on the site for playing fields.
8. Minneapolis Interdistrict Downtown School – Minneapolis, MN. School is built on top of an underground parking garage. Using public and private resources, the school was built as part of a larger effort to revitalize the downtown theater district

and to racially integrate several Minneapolis-area school districts. Nearby theaters provide students with performance space and neighborhood athletic facilities share their space with Interdistrict students.

9. Penn-Assisted School – Univercity City, PA. Created as a result of partnership between University of Pennsylvania and School District, the school is being built on the site of a former divinity school. Divinity school buildings will be remodeled and additional new facilities will be built to create the PreK-8 school.
10. Tenderloin Community School – San Francisco, CA. school is home to an elementary school, a child development center, adult education facilities, a community garden, and a community kitchen.

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