

The Link between Schools and Land Value

Cities require successful schools in order to thrive and attract families, and inner cities, especially, need improved school choices if they are to experience a true renaissance. Schools, therefore, play an important role in urban planning and development. Across the country, a variety of solutions are being tested to improve schools and their relationship to surrounding communities.

Housing developers, especially those constructing infill housing in inner-city school districts, realize that their product is far more attractive to families with children if high-quality school choices are available. Likewise, planners are recognizing that school design and placement within new neighborhoods are critical factors in building high-quality communities. Academicians and researchers are finding additional links among schools, real estate value, and economic development.

Schools are no longer being built in a vacuum separate from the real estate development community. Across the country, a movement is gaining momentum within inner-city and suburban school districts to provide better educational choices for children and to improve the health of communities. Whether the community is urban or suburban, more developers, planners, and policy makers are recognizing the link between schools and land use.

At the former Stapleton Airport in Denver, the existing and planned schools are considered integral to the project's long-term success. The schools at Stapleton are addressing numerous issues facing educational institutions today, including:

- retention of children at all income levels within a core city public school system through innovation and school choice;
- placement of schools in walkable neighborhoods with new housing, which helps to foster healthier residents and a stronger sense of community; and
- emphasis on smaller schools where students and parents know each other and have a say in children's education.

Stapleton lies within the Denver city limits and is part of the Denver Public Schools (DPS) system, which is a deterrent for some parents who perceive inner-city school districts as being substandard. As a result, with 12,000 housing units planned on the site, Forest City Enterprises, Inc., the master developer at Stapleton, became involved with school issues. "To attract families, we need schools that are just as good as in the suburbs," explains Hank Baker, senior vice president of Forest City Stapleton, located in Denver.

Forest City met with Denver Mayor Wellington Webb and DPS officials early in the development process and seized the opportunity to create new schools and educational models. The city and the school system stepped up and saw Stapleton as an opportunity to change the dynamic, Baker notes. Richard Smith, superintendent of the northeast Denver schools, agrees. "Things are happening at Stapleton, and the school is only a microcosm for the overall community."

The first two schools built at Stapleton, Westerly Creek Elementary and Odyssey School, share a site and some facilities, which they moved into for the 2003–2004 school year. The science and technology high school will relocate to Stapleton this fall, a new school for kindergarten through eighth grade will be ready for the 2006–2007 school year, and a new public high school is planned to open as early as fall 2008.

Westerly Creek is a standard Denver public school, teaching children from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. The Odyssey School is a charter school, teaching kindergarten through eighth grade, that relocated to Stapleton in 2003 and uses a curriculum based on the adventure-centered education program Outward Bound. Students take field trips that include camping, rafting, and rock climbing, while still learning classroom lessons in math, reading, and science. "We are the guinea pigs for new urbanism and the Denver schools," explains Trish Kuhn, who was principal of Westerly Creek Elementary for its first year. "The school is definitely a draw because of the community."

Westerly Creek Elementary and the Odyssey School each occupy one wing of the school building on a 12-acre site and share gymnasium and library facilities, as well as an indoor climbing wall. The two schools are unique for a number of reasons, including the fact that they occupy a smaller site than most schools; have pedestrian connections to the greater neighborhood, which enables kids to walk to school; offer a two-story design, which is unusual for newer schools; and share their facilities. Because of these schools, say supporters, the master-planned community of Stapleton is managing to attract families to Denver, enabling greater diversity of new residents to live in a walkable, mixed-use community.

Schools built in new urbanist communities such as Stapleton also raise the issue of urban design and schools. There is increasing pressure to build schools in walkable communities because the ability to walk to school is valued as a community and personal health asset. But land use policy and lack of coordination between school districts and planning departments hamper the location choices and connectivity of schools to their surroundings. David Salvesen, director of the smart growth

and new economy program at the Center for Urban and Regional Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is one of the many people researching the role of schools in neighborhoods. “Good Schools—Good Neighborhoods,” a paper he recently wrote with Philip Hervey, found that local land use regulations, suburbanization, and economics encourage super-size schools, and that walkable schools must first be located in walkable neighborhoods. The paper used research drawn from North Carolina, but the issues are relevant across the country, Salvesen says. “The real challenge here is to get the local school board, county commissioners, and planning officials to work together on the issue of school siting and design,” he says. “That is the first step.”

State and local regulations make it difficult for schools to be located on smaller campuses and in walkable communities. A report titled “Why Johnny Can’t Walk to School,” published in 2000 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, blames the decline in the number of children who walk to school on state and local regulations. Not surprisingly, the report encourages preservation of historic neighborhood schools when feasible, and reduction of the somewhat arbitrary standards that require new schools to be located on large sites in large, warehouse-style buildings.

Another example of a school playing a role in an established new urbanist development can be found at Mary Scroggs Elementary School in Southern Village, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Walking is encouraged in Southern Village, and the school is well connected to the community by sidewalks and trails. Walkable schools have proven popular in places such as Southern Village and Stapleton because parents appreciate not having to drive their children everywhere. About 200 of 280 students enrolled at Mary Scroggs Elementary who live in Southern Village walk or bike to school because of good pedestrian connections. Increasing numbers of obesity and diabetes cases among school-age children has become a major topic in the public health community. High-quality school design within walkable neighborhoods, which, it is argued, will encourage better health among young students, is one of many ways to address these health problems.

“Good Schools—Good Neighborhoods” recommends that school boards and local land use planners collaborate on selecting school sites, that cities adopt land use regulations that allow more compact development, including the use of joint facilities, and that schools be built on more compact sites. “We can design walkable schools, but they are only effective if the communities around them are walkable, which means changing zoning codes,” Salvesen and Hervey write. “We need to create a process to evaluate where schools are built instead of plunking a school down in a cornfield and shifting the center of gravity of the community.” Recommendations like these from their research paper can help create more sustainable, valuable communities.

Young, mobile urbanites have fueled much of the recent renewal of inner cities and urban places. However, perhaps the largest obstacle cities face in retaining young urbanites who are considering raising children is a lack of attractive school options. Numerous cities have begun to deal with this issue directly, including Washington, D.C., and Chicago.

This past June, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago announced the creation of an initiative to build 100 new schools by 2010. The strategy, called Renaissance 2010, will focus its energy on charter schools and facilities on small sites. A large share of schools will be located on the city’s south and west sides, and will be built in conjunction with the Chicago Housing Authority’s plan to create new mixed-income housing. One-third of the new schools will be charter schools, one-third will be independently operated, and one-third will be small schools run by the district. The aim is to provide schools that have the flexibility to be creative and deliver better results.

Tim Knowles, executive director of the University of Chicago’s newly created Center for Urban School Improvement and former deputy superintendent of Boston Public Schools, oversaw creation of the Boston system’s pilot program to create charter schools, which not only improved student performance, but also drew families back to reside within the city. Knowles says he is following the Renaissance 2010 program closely, and is excited about its prospects. “The Renaissance 2010, without a doubt, is the most ambitious reform effort in the country to revitalize schools and neighborhoods. It is an opportunity to create a 21st-century version of schools that is magnetic and that attracts talented students and staff, which is the goal at the end of the day,” he notes.

Daley’s initiative comes on the heels of a plan announced in 2003 to build housing and schools in the Mid-South neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. Mid-South is planning to add 7,000 units of subsidized and market-rate housing and overhaul 25 schools in the area bounded by 35th and 47th streets, Lake Michigan, and the Dan Ryan Expressway. The new homes will replace demolished and failing public housing.

The plan for Mid-South is an example of school districts and planning agencies working together to revitalize communities, and represents an opportunity to lure young families to city living, attract a mix of incomes to a previously impoverished area, and improve school choices.

Washington, D.C., is home to another inner-city effort to make progress in the public schools. Mayor Anthony Williams plans to add 100,000 residents to the city in the next decade, and hopes that middle- and upper-class families will be part of that growth.

If that is to happen, say critics, the city's schools must see considerable improvement.

In 1995, Washington started the D.C. Public Charter Schools Board, formed and funded by Congress under guidelines that allow considerable flexibility. Since then, a number of charter schools have been started in the city, providing additional choices for parents seeking to remain in the city.

In 1994, the city founded the 21st Century School Fund on the premise that it is up to communities to create high-quality learning environments.

Its first project was to save the dilapidated James F. Oyster Bilingual Elementary School from closure and demolition. "We are trying to set the bar higher for the school, and the bilingual program was worth saving," explains Mary Filardo, executive director of the 21st Century School Fund. The project involved selling off a portion of the Oyster school site for the construction of a 211-unit apartment building, helping to leverage reconstruction of the school itself. (See "School Shares Site with Apartments," page 33, July 2002.) Filardo describes the project as one of many possible solutions for inner-city schools. "Adding another use to a school site is not always the answer, but we are trying to get public agencies such as libraries and parks to build joint facilities with schools."

Curt Johnson, who with journalist Neal Pierce leads the Citistates Group, this past April prepared a report for CEOs for Cities, a national group of mayors, corporate executives, and other urban leaders seeking to strengthen urban economies. The report, titled "System Change Goes to School," provides possible approaches to school change and improvement. "Schools need to become buyers and marketers of education," says Johnson. "We have to create new schools but support old ones. Especially where you have bad schools, you have to start leveling the playing field with new, better options. Then it starts to resemble a market."

Among the report's recommendations for schools is that they be run more autonomously, including being given the ability to make funding allocation decisions independent of the superintendent. Increased autonomy fosters a sense of creativity and innovation at each school, giving principals and teachers a larger stake in curriculum decisions. "The best schools are ones that have the least oversight," explains Johnson. "We cannot turn our back on the system, but we have to focus our energy and resources on schools that work. We need to create a learning sector that is open to innovation and experimentation."

A recently released study by the Cincinnati-based KnowledgeWorks Foundation, written by Jonathan Weiss, a national expert on community sustainability and former Clinton Administration official, summarizes research indicating that good schools increase economic competitiveness, and that the quality and design of schools affect real estate values. The study, "Public Schools and Economic Development: What the Research Shows," affirms that public officials, school boards, planning departments, parents, and developers all must work closely together to create good schools and good communities. Referring to the report, Weiss states, "It is clear that a wide variety of interests have a stake in the quality and design of public schools, and that communities stand to benefit economically from the success of those schools."

Weiss is also the founding chair of the new Smart Schools, Smart Growth Initiative, a national effort that seeks to bridge the smart growth movement with increased education equity. Weiss explains, "A broad coalition of forces needs to be brought together to both improve public schools and promote smarter growth. Linking these issues is absolutely critical to building healthier, more sustainable communities." —**Sam Newberg**, an associate at Dahlgren, Shardlow, and Uban, Inc., a multidisciplinary planning and consulting firm in Minneapolis, Minnesota

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